

**Dawn of Discovery: Margaret Atwood's  
*Morning in the Burned House***

**A Thesis  
presented to the  
Department of English  
Lakehead University  
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**by  
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In memory of  
my dear grandfather,  
Valde Järvinäki  
(1921-1996)

*"This World is not Conclusion.  
A Species stands beyond --  
Invisible, as Music --  
But positive, as Sound --  
It beckons, and it baffles --  
Philosophy -- don't know,  
And through a Riddle, at the last --  
Sagacity, must go --  
To guess it, puzzles scholars --  
To gain it, Men have borne  
Contempt of Generations  
And Crucifixion, shown --"*

-- Emily Dickinson

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## Abstract

*Morning in the Burned House*, Margaret Atwood's new collection of lyric poetry, is a carefully structured exploration of the spiritual dimension of selfhood. The volume is divided into five sections which each serve as "stages" of awareness, and the poetry is ordered in such a way that the sections themselves and the volume as a whole both convey a sense of progressive development. This thesis examines the interdependent structure of Atwood's volume, tracing the gradual increase in perception which ultimately leads to a conscious recognition of spirituality.

Chapter one, "Now there are more of me," is an exploration of the first two sections of the collection. These poems initially focus on the individual self, and present a series of recollected losses. The loss of an individual spiritual self, however, moves the poems to a questioning of morals, thereby transferring the focus away from self to the other. My analysis involves the perceived relationship between self and other, and also the function of these opening sections as a structural foundation in the volume.

Chapter two, "Now look objectively," examines the transitional nature of the third section. I evaluate physical existence as the focal point through which these poems first explore the social and mortal aspects of self through the other, thereby leading to a consideration of the possibility of a spiritual existence.

Chapter three, "Now see," is a study of the series of elegiac poems which form the volume's fourth section. I trace the process of internalization which accompanies this personal confrontation with death, and examine the consequent search for continuity of life beyond the physical realm.

Chapter four, "(I can almost see)," explores the final section as a focusing of increased perception. My analysis follows the movement of these poems from apparent confusion, through physicality, to a conscious recognition of spiritual existence.

Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* follows a phoenix-like progression from loss to discovery. This thesis is an exploration of the sharpening perception accompanying that progression, a study of the duality of vision which ultimately sees selfhood as individual and collective, and recognizes the co-existence of physical and spiritual dimensions of the self.

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Margaret Atwood

for creating the poetry that inspired these thoughts, and for the "inside perspective" generously provided by the Margaret Atwood Papers housed at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room, Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

## Introduction

"There is always more than you know"

"There are, in my view, a number of criteria of poetic excellence that apply, especially in our time, in addition to a compulsive devotion to expression in verse: intense visual awareness; sharp verbal accuracy that makes, to adapt Orwell's metaphor, verse like a windowpane; deep moral sensitivity; the intuitive wisdom that in the last resort will accept the irrational as truer than the rational. Atwood . . . has all these qualities in abundance. She has also the over-reaching vision without which such qualities would in isolation be ineffective."

-- George Woodcock

After hovering in the background for a decade, Margaret Atwood's "compulsive devotion to expression in verse" bursts forth with remarkable strength and diversity in *Morning in the Burned House*. The emergence of this new volume confirms that, despite the critical assumptions that she has abandoned poetry for prose--or, less drastically, has transcended traditional genre distinctions and "worked toward a mélange of poetry and prose . . . in the prose poem form" (Wagner-Martin 78)--Atwood continues to find voice through the medium of the lyric. Her "over-reaching vision" remains a defining feature of this

collection, now extending to new horizons through poems which possess not only the clarity of "a windowpane," but also the telescopic acuity of binoculars. Perception itself is a consistent focal point of *Morning in the Burned House*, existing in the poetry both as subject and in technique. Atwood examines human perception by relentlessly probing the actual degree of self-perception, and challenging the conceived boundaries used to define the self. Simultaneously, the variable nature of perception is evident in the multiplicity of voices and shifting perspectives from which the poems seem to originate. Most importantly, however, Atwood undertakes a re-definition of perception, one which moves beyond physical limitations and coincides with, or perhaps results from, the volume's conscious recognition of a spiritual dimension of selfhood.

A key aspect of this re-definition is the newly-attributed duality of vision. Atwood by no means advocates turning a blind eye to physical surroundings in favour of some ethereal dimension. Conversely, she acknowledges the very real physical world, and insists on the grounding of perception in this physical dimension. Though natural or biological vision is necessarily directed toward the tangible realm of human existence, Atwood's re-definition of perception makes it equally necessary to envision the simultaneous existence of an intangible realm. In *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood examines the lack of perception that characterizes a vision focused only on physicality, and by exploring the limitations of this single

vision, she emphasizes the need for sharpening perception. This re-focusing of perception involves expanding the range of vision to include both the physical dimension and also the possibility of a spiritual dimension. Perhaps the most convincing aspect of the volume is that it does not simply identify the limitations of physical vision, but it actually is a manifestation of increasing perception. The poems trace the development of perception from the strictly physical through to a conscious recognition of physical evidence of the spiritual. This discovery, the conscious awareness of spirituality, is the distinctive feature of *Morning in the Burned House*, and it is the gradual progression toward this discovery that unifies the volume.

This unity of Atwood's volume is neither coincidental nor insignificant, and to dismiss the collection as a whole--even if valuing the individual poems--is to deem inconsequential that which, in fact, is fundamental. The pervading sense of continual progression is one of the most striking characteristics of *Morning in the Burned House*, and this development is the result of careful internal ordering of the poetry. Structure has always been a prominent issue for Atwood, who, in a personal letter of 1962, cites the arrangement of sections and poems within sections as her "primary concern with the new poetry" which was eventually to become *The Circle Game* (Letter to Cancallen). That Atwood continues to employ this two-tiered structure effectively is evident in her newest collection. *Morning in the Burned House* is divided into five distinct sections intricately arranged to

demonstrate progressive development both within each individual unit and also in relation to one another. This elaborate sequencing of the poetry creates a sense of five identifiable stages of development that, nevertheless, are inextricably intertwined. These sections are characterized by interdependence not only in the macrocosmic sequencing of the five units, but also in the microcosmic sequencing of the poetry within these units, and so within the volume as a whole.

Despite the pervasive tendency of critics, readers, and editors of anthologies to remove individual poems from collections--an activity in which Atwood herself has engaged, even with her own work by compiling *Selected Poems* and *Selected Poems II*--this type of extraction preserves the poem, but most often strips it of some meaning. Such a removal from context is not necessarily "fatal," but it does demand that the orphaned poem, left naked and vulnerable, survives on its own. Without doubt, the poetry of *Morning in the Burned House* will also be subjected to this test of survival, and in all likelihood, the strength of voice in poems such as "Half-Hanged Mary" and the eponymous concluding poem will continue to speak convincingly even outside of the collection. Nevertheless, the strength of this voice will be diminished to some extent since the richness of resonance and contrast provided by the surroundings of the volume will be lost. Atwood seems to concede that such removal is often necessary, as her involvement in various editing projects indicates, yet she values the overall structure and sequencing of

poetry collections as an essential aspect both of the individual poems which comprise the whole and of the collection itself. Following her first "real" publication, *The Circle Game* in 1966, Atwood's letter of response to a colleague's praise of structural integrity reveals this mindset in her now-characteristic blend of sarcastic insight and defiant opinion: "you're one of the few who really 'got' the total structure. Of course I've always felt that I never write single poems; always poems in the context of other poems. But don't tell 'them,' they won't like it" (Letter to Cancallen, 1967). This time, however, Atwood's "assessment" proved to be wrong.

The unity of form characterizing *The Circle Game* was not limited to a single instance, but has resurfaced time and again in Atwood's work so that it has been virtually impossible to ignore. Consequently, she has been unable to preserve this delicious and satirical sense of secrecy surrounding the significance of structure; "they" have found out. If not admitted possibly to be Atwood's ironic intention, one must imagine that this "discovery" has not been too disquieting, for even without being told, those critics who recognize the importance of context in her work do, in fact, "like it." One such critic is Sherrill Grace, who both appreciates this invariable attention to form, and perceptively notes that it is characteristic Atwood, already existing in her self-published poetry collection of 1961:

it is obvious that each of her books of poetry from *Double Persephone* on, has an inner logic and unity,

especially thematic, but to some degree structural. The poems do not appear in a haphazard order. Indeed, I think that one of Atwood's major contributions to our poetry is that . . . she offers us 'books' of poems instead of miscellanies. This said, however, it is unnecessary and unjustified to force a Procrustean cookie cutter onto any given collection.  
(*Violent Duality* 14)

This same "inner logic and unity," both thematic and structural, is evident in *Morning in the Burned House*. Likewise, this same degree of prudent caution must be exercised in an analysis of the volume. The inherent danger of the collection's strong sense of unity and progression is the temptation for the reader to "force" poems to fit a perceived form, simply to speed blindly along and leave them drowning in a wake of misinterpretation. In order to avoid such a catastrophic, forced reading, analyzing any specific theme or aspect of the volume necessitates both selection among the poems and attention to context. The significance of perception, then, extends beyond the volume itself to apply directly to the reader.

That the collection both demands a perceptive reader and compels her/him to sharpen this focus still further seems to derive from Atwood's view of poetry. An untitled manuscript copy of some informal comments on poetry, recorded by Atwood circa 1970, reveals an early, and apparently enduring, conviction of poetry's active and affective role:

-- I don't believe poetry is or should be 'self-expression,' in any narrow personal sense. Rather I see it as a condensing lens through which the human

universe can see itself, an aural focusing through  
which human languages can hear themselves.  
(Misc. Prose 1970/71)

That is, Atwood sees poetry both as a manifestation of perception, "a condensing lens" and "an aural focusing," and also as an opportunity for perception: through poetry "the human universe can see itself, . . . human languages can hear themselves." It is significant that Atwood avoids claiming humanity "does" see and "does" hear itself through poetry, for she is aware that perception is conditional upon the reader. In fact, Atwood views the poet and the reader as co-creators: "A poem is completed not by the writer but by the reader; which is to say, it is never fully completed, since each reader is different. A poem is a system of verbal energy; but is, I believe individual words whose energy changes" (Misc. Prose 1970/71). Thus recognizing Atwood's assertion that humanity "can see" and "can hear" itself through poetry is not just a trivial matter of semantics. She emphasizes that although poetry does allow the poet to share a perspective, perhaps more importantly, it enables the discerning reader to gain insight for her/himself; that is, poetry actively engages the reader in the act of perceiving. This definition of poetry, then, attributes perception both to the poet via the speaker or persona, and to the reader, who represents humanity in general--a humanity to which the poet also admittedly belongs.

This very duality between the reader and the poet existing

as identifiable individuals and, simultaneously, as part of collective humanity is a foundational aspect of *Morning in the Burned House*. Atwood's volume works toward an increased recognition not only of the self, but of the inextricable connection to the other. Rather than attempting to offer simplistic categorical separation between self and other, the volume's five sections trace the complex interdependence of this gradual development of perception, ultimately recognizing self in other. Atwood accentuates the complexity which characterizes this progressively increasing range of vision by extending the recognition of self in other beyond the volume itself. Since Atwood herself possesses what George Woodcock has identified as an "over-reaching vision," she does not limit the need for sharpening perception to the speaker alone, but involves the reader as well. This inclusiveness reflects and intensifies the effect of the volume's movement toward collectivity. The recognition of collectivity, however, is neither a negation nor a denial of individuality. Conversely, Atwood emphasizes the complexity of the interconnection between these two seemingly oppositional aspects of selfhood.

In fact, *Morning in the Burned House* can be regarded as a celebration of this complexity, a growing recognition of an unexplored aspect of humanity. The gradual development of awareness which characterizes the collection draws attention to Atwood's fascination with the process of exploration. That Atwood values exploration is evident in the volume's progression beyond

her earlier work. As a writer, she is constantly probing the unknown, and as a result, her work is also exploratory in content, investigating boundaries and pushing past familiar limits. Nevertheless, this exploration is not an attempt to eliminate the mystery in life; it is, rather, an appreciation of the mysterious element. Atwood's speaker implicates the reader as a willing accomplice by claiming, "[n]ot that anyone here / but you would understand," and disdains those who would "[c]rush out the mystery" (*Morning* 35). Not surprisingly, then, the volume is characterized by diversity: diversity of speakers and subjects. That Atwood values these three elements--exploration, mystery, and diversity--is clearly evident in the candid acknowledgement later in the volume that "[t]here is always more than you know" (90). This recognition of the pervasive existence of the unknown expresses neither futility nor discouragement; instead, it seems to intrigue Atwood further.

The presence of exploration, mystery, and diversity in the volume also increases the need for perception in the reader. To avoid crashing on the rocks of hasty interpretation, the reader must proceed through the volume with caution, ready to steer through those unfamiliar rapids of contrast which create unexpected changes in course. Recognition and acceptance of these three elements--exploration, mystery, and diversity--as inherent features of the volume sharpen the reader's perception by awakening a latent sense of expectation. This awareness allows the reader to focus on an aspect of the poetry without feeling

compelled to "force" readings on the basis of implausible or unjustifiable connections. On the contrary, s/he experiences a sense of freedom in the capacity to view the collection from a certain perspective while acknowledging and appreciating the existence of other perspectives: "There is always more than you know." As a result, an analysis of the volume is an act of selection. By focusing on the exploration of the spiritual dimension of selfhood, the present analysis necessitates both inclusion and exclusion not only of aspects of the poetry, but also of the poems themselves. Yet, due to the intensity of Atwood's exploration of spirituality, very few of the poems (only four of forty-five) are completely omitted from this study. Moreover, this narrowing of vision is counterbalanced by a broadening of vision reflective of Atwood's adamant stance regarding structural significance. Though my analysis does require selective omission, it also pays particular attention to the order, interconnections, and progressive development of the volume. Both similarities and contrasts among the sections are noted, as is the collection's two-tiered sequencing which creates an interdependence among the individual poems and also among the groupings that form the five sections. This study neither overlooks nor underestimates the significance of context in Atwood's newest poetry collection, but, rather, examines the poetry within its context. Each poem is recognized to possess merit not only on its own, but also as an important part of the whole.

Notably, this duality of existence characterizing the poetry in *Morning in the Burned House* mirrors the human condition of "individual collectivity." Atwood recognizes that these two states of existence are not mutually exclusive, and so she explores the complex interconnection between them. The volume progresses from a consideration of self to other, moving away from simple individuality to a recognition of human collectivity. Simultaneously, the poems revert from other to self as the volume shifts from examining societal application of ethics to considering spirituality on a less tangible, but more personal level. This ironic, paradoxical connection between self and other intensifies Atwood's focus on perception. As the volume gradually progresses toward the conscious recognition of both collectivity and spirituality, focus shifts outward from self to other only to find that the inner exists in the outer--finally discovering self in other through this expanding vision.

In order to preserve the integrity of the collection, my analysis of *Morning in the Burned House* follows Atwood's sequencing and internal division of the poetry. The volume's sense of progressive development is similarly maintained by chronologically examining the five sections as well as the relevant poems within each grouping. Consequently, the structure of this study corresponds to the structure of Atwood's volume, varying only slightly in the opening chapter by combining the successive exploration of the first two sections before allotting an entire chapter to each remaining section. Interestingly, each

of these four chapters corresponds to one of George Woodcock's criteria of poetic excellence. This assessment of Atwood's poetic qualities, then, is particularly relevant to *Morning in the Burned House*. All of the poems in this collection attest to Atwood's "sharp verbal accuracy," and each of the sections demonstrates that she continues to possess those qualities already recognized by Woodcock in 1983. Of course, none of these qualities exists only in a single section--the progressively developing sections are characterized by overlap--but each seems most prominent within a certain grouping of poems due to Atwood's creation of identifiable "stages" of awareness in the volume.

The first two sections of *Morning in the Burned House* reveal Atwood's "deep moral sensitivity," and together, depict the movement outward from self to other. Though successively examining each of these sections as a unit, chapter one of my thesis, "Now there are more of me," groups the two opening sections in order to reinforce their strong connecting links. Of particular significance is the transition from the individual self in the first section to a consideration of social and moral dimensions in the second section. The volume's opening section bears a close resemblance to Atwood's earlier poetry, and explores physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of self through a series of recollected losses. Yet it is the conscious acknowledgement of a fourth dimension of selfhood, spirituality, that distinguishes this new collection. In the very first section, the recognized loss of the individual spiritual self is

what leads to a questioning of morals, and so from self to other. Iris Murdoch's recent study of morality, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, is particularly helpful in understanding this transition, and also provides insightful perceptions of spirituality, religion, and morality which I have found useful elsewhere in my analysis. The poems which comprise the second section of Atwood's volume, then, consciously turn their focus outward to an examination of the other. Ironically, this study of the other is simultaneously an unconscious examination of the social and moral dimensions of the self. Since this duality is unrecognized, however, confusion between self and other invariably characterizes both opening sections.

Nevertheless, the challenging of boundaries which occurs throughout *Morning in the Burned House* is evident amidst this confusion, and exists in the second section as a preoccupation with immorality. By exploring the evidence of moral boundaries, or lack of them, and the respective consequences, the poems of this section actually draw attention to the continuing need for moral standards in the present age. Iris Murdoch's philosophical remark acknowledging the significance of mystery and morality in life coincides neatly with Atwood's poetry: "We live in the present, this strange familiar yet mysterious continuum which is so difficult to describe. This is what is nearest and it matters what kind of place it is" (495). Notably, Atwood's attempt to describe this mystery becomes an examination of morality, clearly connecting the two in her work. She not only recognizes mystery

and morality as characteristic features of life, but also sees them specifically as features of the self. Consequently, Atwood explores both of these aspects as well as the connection between self and other in the opening two sections of the new collection.

These first two sections prove to be foundational to the structure of *Morning in the Burned House*, introducing Atwood's key concerns and establishing connections for subsequent exploration. It is not surprising, then, that the "deep moral sensitivity" evident in the opening sections carries over into the third section as well. By examining morality in the social realm of the other, these poems move toward a recognition that the moral self exists in the social self. Yet, the distinctive feature of this third section is unquestionably Atwood's focus on physicality, or, to use Woodcock's terminology, her "intense visual awareness." Boundaries of perception are not only measured against physical surroundings, but also challenged by them. In this group of poems, physical existence gains prominence as a means of exploring the social, mortal, and spiritual dimensions of selfhood. It is this influential, multi-faceted role of physicality which chapter two of my thesis, "Now look objectively," ultimately explores. Atwood examines physicality as a basis for human collectivity and specifically in relation to death or mortality. Ironically, this insistent focus on the physical actually leads to questioning an existence beyond the visible realm. As the poems shift toward the intangible, they appear to acquire a more tentative, questioning tone. Seeking to

perceive that which is physically imperceptible, rather than focusing solely on the tangible, is a hesitant exploratory process, but one that seems to be driven by intuitive awareness. The poems in this section draw attention to the very real possibility of a spiritual realm, and suggest that its mysterious nature merits further investigation. Moreover, it is this movement from morality to spirituality via physicality that marks the third section as a transitional one, thereby securing its significance in the overall structure of the collection.

Though made in reference to the early poetry and the recent prose, Sandra Djwa's claim that Atwood is "an archaeologist of contemporary society . . . attempting to discern meaning" (42) is equally true of the poetry in *Morning in the Burned House*, and is most evident in its latter sections. Atwood's dual focus on physicality and spirituality, as well as the retrospective examination of the past, strongly connect this new volume to archaeological and metaphysical exploration. Yet, the collection is not an exercise in abstraction; it is Atwood's consistent return to self that endows the poetry with power. Consequently, this movement from looking objectively to personalizing the "external," or recognizing the relation to self, is the subject of my analysis in chapter three, "Now see." The volume's fourth section consists of a series of elegiac poems, transforming the general consideration of mortality in the third section into a specific, personal confrontation with death in the family. Atwood takes this internalization one step further, moving the poems

toward an acceptance of death in direct relation to the self. Recognition of one's own mortality intensifies the search for continuity of life since, otherwise, the transience of physical existence would create despair and a sense of meaninglessness in life. Djwa quite rightly admires the insistent refusal in Atwood's work to embrace emptiness as the characteristic trait of life: "it is Atwood's search for articulated meaning and her belief that even the so-called meaninglessness of contemporary life can be intelligently and wittily explored that I find most impressive" (43). This same persistent exploration is evident in *Morning in the Burned House*, and the sense of expectancy preceding discovery heightens as the volume progresses.

Though the entire collection is exploratory in nature, the poetry of the final two sections most strongly conveys Atwood's reliance on what Woodcock terms "intuitive wisdom." This willingness ultimately to "accept the irrational as truer than the rational" endows the search for meaning with an accompanying sense of expectancy; this expectation of discovery becomes a positive replacement for that negative sense of regret which was associated with loss earlier in the volume. In the fourth section, the undeniable physical and emotional loss caused by the father's death is ameliorated by this "intuitive wisdom" in the form of an unconscious awareness of a spiritual dimension. Although death is still associated with loss, these poems perceive the element of mystery in the life cycle. Atwood seems to be well aware of this mystery; she identified the inherent

duality of the life cycle in an undergraduate essay written circa 1960: "in nature death follows life . . . [but] on the divine level, death must precede life" ("Water Symbolism" 3). It is this duality which she now explores. Yet, recognition of a continuing spiritual existence beyond the physical realm--of that divine level where death must precede life--remains limited to the sphere of the unconscious in the volume's fourth section.

Perception comes to the fore in the final section of *Morning in the Burned House*, and Atwood's "over-reaching vision" stretches beyond the tangible finally to "see" the spiritual dimension. Chapter four of my thesis, "(I can almost see)," examines the gradual focusing of perception which becomes a conscious recognition of spirituality and human collectivity in these final poems. Significantly, the section opens with an attempt to place the self, a search characterized by wandering vision. The first half of the final section makes various connections to poems occurring earlier in the volume, but the overriding result of this flitting glance is a disturbing inability to focus. Midpoint in the section, however, the poems seem to redirect their attention to that ambivalent relationship between life and death. Through this re-focusing, perception then moves beyond the physical through the physical; that is, continuity of life is perceived in the tangible life cycle of nature. A conscious recognition of human spirituality follows this acknowledgement of the continuity of natural life, and so alters the perception of death as a final end into a stage of

transformation. Thus the volume's final section moves toward an awareness of the co-existence of the physical and spiritual dimensions of self, and examines a complementary duality of self as both individual and collective. It is this complexity of a selfhood inextricably connected to the other that Atwood explores, a self which can only be found by looking outward with a broadening perception of humanity.

In *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood's "over-reaching vision" challenges the reader to acknowledge the interdependence of loss and discovery toward which the sections ultimately progress. Yet, ever aware of the mystery in life, she readily confesses that "[t]here is always more than you know." Perhaps it is this admittedly shared ignorance of the extensive unknown and the sense of complicity in exploration, enhanced by the volume's progressive structure, which combine to create such an inviting--though demanding and, at times, confrontational--experience for the reader. Still, there is a pervasive sense of freedom characterizing the poetry, which insists on the reader exercising perception without dictating the "correct" perspective for approaching the material. In fact, Atwood not only acknowledges this diversity of perception, but employs it within the volume. Near the middle of the collection, she follows a description of "Sad marble angels" on the site of a historical battlefield with the sudden contradictory, though parenthetical, declaration: "(The angels could just as well be described as *vulgar* / or *pitiless*, depending on camera angle)" (53). This awareness, or

more specifically, this appreciation of multiplicity complements the diversity of Atwood's poetry and seems to encourage a variety of perspectives in both poet and reader.

An analysis of the poetry, then, is but a description of that which fills the lens from any given "camera angle." It is one perception of Atwood's work, but never the only view. Yet, this conscious recognition of being only one of many possible perspectives in no way negates or diminishes the validity of an assessment. On the contrary, a willingness to face potential challenge arguably strengthens a perspective. Atwood herself certainly seems to invite, and even prompt, multiple readings of the poetry as indicated by her frequent, effective use of irony and ambiguity in particular. She challenges the reader to sharpen her/his perception, and so encourages active discernment in lieu of passive acceptance. Elsewhere, Atwood has confidently asserted that perception is always possible, but she implies that, at times, one must be willing to look beyond the obvious:

Everything has a shape. An amoeba has a shape, though it's rather malleable. There is no such thing as a thing with no shape. It may be a more contained or less contained shape, or an awkward shape, or a graceful shape. It may be sprawling or rectilinear, but there's a shape of some kind which can be described.  
(Hancock 269)

This thesis is an attempt to describe the shape of *Morning in the Burned House* from one angle of perception. What follows is the shape that I "see."

## Chapter 1

"Now there are more of me"

*"In a peculiarly Canadian way Atwood is a staunch moralist, essentially a writer of ideas--coldly often brutally, insisting that modern man must reinvent himself. Her work challenges us to become human."*

*-- Rosemary Sullivan*

That Margaret Atwood is characterized as a "staunch moralist" whose work issues a challenge to the reader will not surprise those familiar with her newest collection of poetry. Yet, one may find it rather remarkable that Rosemary Sullivan's insightful and still-accurate assessment was actually made in 1983, more than a decade before the publication of *Morning in the Burned House*. Atwood's interest in morals and human potential remains a primary feature of her new volume, but what strikes the reader is the expansion of territory explored within the poems. The very first section of *Morning in the Burned House* introduces spirituality as an influential dimension of the individual, which Atwood subsequently examines in the form of morality. Perhaps her belief that humanity is not to be found in an "essence," but rather is essentially illusive, leads Atwood to continue

exploring different dimensions; as she says, "the ideal thing would be a whole human being. . . . If you define human beings as necessarily flawed, then anybody can be one. But if you define them as something which is potentially better, then it's always something that is just out of reach" (Gibson 26). Far from leaving Atwood in futility and despair, this illusiveness seems to be the driving force behind her poetry. Though the volume begins with recollections of loss, the poems move progressively toward discovery, and Atwood's fascination seems to lie with the process. Echoes of earlier university studies in Victorian literature, mysticism and philosophy reverberate throughout her poetry. Like Robert Browning in "Andrea Del Sarto," Atwood also longs to reach for the unattainable: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?" (216). Her recognition that human potential can only be developed by straining to reach new heights accounts for Atwood's interest in the process of exploration; it is the attempt to move beyond existing limits that leads to discovery.

If *Morning in the Burned House* "challenges us to become human," and Atwood considers life a quest for ideal humanity, then it is not surprising that the poems move beyond an exploration of self to others. Through this broader lens, Atwood is able to focus on what is "human," including the spiritual dimension of the self in various aspects. She seems to recognize that human potential is inextricably, though mysteriously, bound to spirituality, and seeks to examine this connection; the

"heaven" one strains to reach is both the sky and the spiritual realm. In the first two sections of the volume, Atwood examines the individual self, the social self, and the moral self, always emphasizing the process of exploration in the quest for what is "human." The tentative, questioning tone of the poems corresponds to their exploratory nature. As the boundaries separating self from other and defining morality become fluid, the sense of uncertainty in the poems increases. This uncertainty does not intimidate Atwood to restrict her view to the familiar; conversely, the scope of vision in the poems progressively widens. In fact, Atwood regards exploration and a broad perspective as undeniable characteristics of a writer: "The writer is, among other things, a messenger, a traveller between worlds, an interpreter, an intermediary. Writers tell what they see, though their range of vision is not limited to the football field" ("English Teachers" 13). This expanded vision, then, continually enlarges the realm of the unknown, revealing unrecognized possibilities which become new venues to explore.

This constant movement toward discovery in *Morning in the Burned House* results in an increased significance of the volume's structure. Not only the arrangement of the poems within the sections but also the order of the five sections themselves exhibits structural interdependence; the poems, singly and in groups, are inextricably related to one another. This interconnection can be seen in the progressive movement outward from the individual self in the first section to a broader

consideration of the social and the moral in the second section. As Atwood has recently remarked, "everything in a book should be organically related to everything else in the book, I mean, structurally related. . . . A favourite part is a favourite because you know what comes before it" (Garron 34). Consequently, the importance of these first two sections of *Morning in the Burned House* should not be overlooked. Though they may appear to be less relevant to Atwood's exploration of spirituality, these early poems actually establish foundational connections upon which her explorations of the moral, the social, and the spiritual self are based. Due to this progressive structural development, the greatest possibility for gaining insight to the volume seems to lie in a sequential study of the five sections which also recognizes the careful internal ordering of the poems.

The first section of *Morning in the Burned House* focuses on the individual self and has strong connections to Atwood's earlier poetry which examined the self as physical, emotional and intellectual. In fact, the poems are not simply reminiscent of her earlier poetry, but they actually consist of a series of reminiscences. These recollections of the past are largely comprised of retrospective recognition of various losses. More importantly, the acknowledgement of these losses seems to be the impetus for the speaker's expanding range of vision. It is as though s/he is seeking a replacement to fill the void--whether physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual--which has been left by these losses.

The concept of loss is strikingly prominent in "You Come Back," the opening poem of *Morning in the Burned House*. The extent of loss experienced, however, is not immediately obvious, but is deceptively masked by other concerns. The apparent concern of the subject, that unnamed "you," is for rationalizing both a lapse in time and the fact that there are "no more grapefruit" (3). Domestic details, such as the grapefruit and dirty sheets, coupled with the suggestion of intellectual, emotional and perhaps even physical struggle, link this poem to Atwood's earlier poetry collections, most strongly to the 1971 volume, *Power Politics*. In fact, Frank Davey's comment on the role of the speaker in Atwood's poems of the 1970s remains applicable to "You Come Back": "The speaker appears to be a spectator of her own life, standing outside both this life and its temporal context" (41). Barring any hasty assumptions that the speaker is in fact Atwood herself, and any sweeping generalizations that, typically, it is females who eat grapefruit--or at least recognizing the sharp wit that very well could be using such assumptions either ironically or to create intentional ambiguity--Atwood does not assign a gender to the speaker in "You Come Back."

Notwithstanding this discrepancy, Davey's assessment of the speaker as "spectator" is remarkably apt since the real issue of the poem is a loss of identity and the accompanying sense of detachment. In "You Come Back," Atwood specifies the gender neither of the speaker nor of the "you" described by the speaker. This lack of gender reinforces the loss of identity; each persona

is so distanced from the self that s/he is unable to relate even gender specificity to her/himself. Atwood seems to open the volume by emphasizing this sense of detachment in order to indicate the degree of self-exploration which is to be undertaken.

Both the loss of self and the sense of detachment are two-fold in this first poem. The confusion between self and other, which the unnamed "you" experiences, is reflected in the speaker; neither is able to identify the self with certainty because both lack identity. "You," the subject, immediately associates the environment with other rather than with self: "Who / got those sheets dirty, and why / are there no more grapefruit?" However, the speaker reveals that this verbalization is actually an attempt to connect with other people. The subject is trying to overcome the detachment s/he feels. Recognizing this attempt, the speaker challenges the subject to acknowledge the self: "You know it was you / who slept, who ate here, though you don't / believe it." Yet, when the subject's subsequent attempt to rationalize the situation and to assimilate self with environment fails, the speaker is forced to conclude: "no, / now you're certain, someone else / has been here." Ironically, this so-called "certainty" has been reached only because the subject's rationalization is based on her/his own false premise of the passage of time, and so the speaker's initial assertion that "You come back into the room / where you've been living / all along" is never retracted (3). The speaker's conflicting perspective makes the subject's "certainty"

seem far from reliable. According to the speaker, the subject's disbelief and detachment are the only reasons s/he fails to recognize her/himself and posits, instead, the presence of the other. To discredit the subject, however, the speaker must be perceived as a reliable source.

Atwood includes the possibility that the reliability of the speaker is also questionable. That the speaker criticizes "you" for a loss of identity and detachment from the self becomes ironic when applied to her/himself. Since the speaker's omniscience suggests more than an intimate knowledge of the subject, the relationship between speaker and subject is indeterminate. The impossibility of knowing the unexpressed thoughts and beliefs of another person makes it quite conceivable that the speaker's references to "you" could be references to self rather than to other. If the speaker is using the second person pronoun to refer to self, then this substitution indicates a distancing of the self, and that the subject's confusion between self and other applies to the speaker as well. Similarly, the detachment of self from environment becomes a double removal since the speaker would be turning her/himself first into the subject, not self but other, who also turns self into other. This ambiguity reinforces Atwood's focus on the issue of identity by clouding the boundaries of definition between the speaker and the subject so that even the reader is unable to distinguish between them with certainty. Yet, the poem clearly provides insight into the unnamed subject, even if this is accomplished indirectly

through the speaker. Whether or not the speaker and the subject are, in fact, the same person, Atwood conveys a sense of being removed from life, of being a "spectator" of self.

The lapse of time and memory which the subject struggles to understand in "You Come Back" becomes a point of connection to the other poems in the first section of the volume. Atwood's exploration of self seems to require a backward peddling in time, a re-examination of the past. That these re-creations of the past are consistently memories of losses suggests a human tendency to recognize formative influences only in retrospect. Atwood freely admits that her interest is not limited to identifying these pivotal points but, rather, that it extends to an examination of their effects: "I'm interested in exploring the consequences of situations" (Meyer N. pag.). In order to allow this exploration of both event and consequence, Atwood combines the past and the present in these poems through the speaker's conscious appraisal of recollections.

"A Sad Child" re-creates the memory of a little girl's partial loss of innocence, and demonstrates the value of this experience recognized in retrospect. The past event which is now recalled by an overwhelming feeling of sadness reveals the child's dismay upon discovering that the world is unfair and can make her feel slighted: "*I am not the favourite child*" (4). Perhaps surprisingly, this loss of childish egocentrism is neither lamented nor praised, but graciously accepted by the speaker:

My darling, when it comes  
 right down to it  
 . . . . .  
 none of us is;  
 or else we all are. (5)

No note of harshness or sarcasm exists in the speaker's admission that the little girl's emotional loss is a collective experience since the blurring of distinction between speaker and subject is now completely intentional. In fact, the poem seems to be uncharacteristically devoid of any Atwoodian twist of irony or satire. Sherrill Grace's assessment of *Two-Headed Poems* seems easily transferable to "A Sad Child": "There is less immediate, private anger . . . and a strong mood of reflection, almost musing, upon past and future. Atwood emerges here with a gentler, more mellow, wisdom" (*Violent Duality* 131). Yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss the poem only as a gentle, soothing verse meant simply to console "a sad child."

These "consoling" words actually consist of an assurance that the child will encounter many future situations which will remind her that she is not "the favourite." More jarringly, the speaker uses a death image for those retrospective moments of recognition of loss that will occur when the child is "trapped in your overturned body / under a blanket or burning car // and the red flame is seeping out of you" (5). These graphic images both provide a foundational basis for the exploration of death later in the volume and, more generally, indicate Atwood's interest in the concept. Atwood herself traces this fascination with death

all the way back to her childhood: "the real appeal [of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*] was the magic--the sense that God, Death and the Devil were walking around in disguise out there . . ." ("New York" 2). Though she is aware of the radical change that a childhood concept of death necessarily undergoes as the individual's understanding of and exposure to death increase, Atwood also recognizes similarities or continuity between childhood and adult stages of awareness.

Since a child's grasp of death provides the basis for further understanding, Atwood juxtaposes an adult and childhood perspective in the poem "Waiting" to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences. The nature of coming to terms with death is such a gradual process that this type of comparison is possible. The development in understanding is preceded by a awareness of mortality, and results partially from the recognition that death is not only related to other but also to self. In "Waiting," both the child and adult "you" are facing the recognition of mortality. The childhood recollections are first of "listening to the radio, news of disasters / that made you feel safe" in which death is regarded as belonging only to the realm of the other. These memories are swiftly replaced by ones which span the distance between self and other: "you realized for the first time / in your life that you would be old // some day." Suddenly, the notion of loss becomes a reality for the child, who recognizes her/his own mortality and that of others: "the home . . . / would be gone / with all the people in it, even you" (9).

These pending losses are a form of death; although the child has not yet fully realized the finality of physical death, s/he is contemplating death as a loss of the familiar.

Loss of familiarity is the concept linking the realizations of the child to those of the adult. The child's recognition that time will bring loss through aging and through change is, from the adult's perspective, "the dark thing you have waited for so long" (8). Those losses foreseen by the child become realities for the adult. The child's anticipation of losing the self s/he knows is connected to pending changes in the physical body. The tangible proof of loss would be the possession of "a stranger's body you could not even imagine," but the real loss would be an emotional one. This loss of self to the unfamiliar means unquestionably, for the child, that s/he will be "lost and alone" (10). Conversely, the adult has already gone through many selves; physical changes have occurred, and s/he has a closetful of "fabricated skins" and "discarded / cloth lives" (8). The losses which accompany aging and time are no longer speculations but have already taken place: "now it is now / and the dark thing is here, / and after all it is nothing new." Those inevitable changes of self and environment which comprised the unknown, "the dark thing," have become "a memory of a fear" (10), suggesting that they are now ineffectual.

This fear of loss is not simply relegated to the past, but has been rediscovered in the present. The forgotten childhood fear "has now come true" (10); that is, the adult subject has

undergone the child's anticipated loss of self. The extent of loss experienced by the subject is both physical and emotional, but the death is symbolic. "Waiting" deals with the ideas of aging and change, but not of physical death. This is an important distinction since Atwood employs this stage of recognition to compare the child and adult figures. Both are in the process of gradually recognizing human mortality; however, only the adult has undergone these changes of self which the child sees as tangible proof of the process. Similarly, the loss of self is only a premonition of future changes for the child, whereas the adult has already experienced a loss of that self, emotionally and physically. In both cases, the detachment from self is reflected again in the speaker's use of second person. Whether the "you" described is actually someone else or the speaker's indirect reference to her/himself, the second person pronoun signifies a distancing from the self through a reference to the other. Thus the poem "Waiting" combines the concept of loss of identity with the gradual recognition of mortality in connection to self.

Atwood employs the developing recognition of mortality as a prerequisite to dealing directly with the subject of death. Developing a concept of death is, in turn, a key facet of Atwood's definition of humanity. She insists that coming to terms with death is "essential to everyone as a human being" (Twigg 126). If Rosemary Sullivan's claim that Atwood's poetry challenges the reader to "become human" applies to *Morning in the*

*Burned House*, then the presence of this death motif is self-explanatory. Physical death is a necessary part of humanity, and it is one that Atwood explores throughout the volume. In the first two sections, however, death remains a concept associated strictly with the other. Since the recognition of mortality in relation to the self occurs gradually, Atwood introduces death gradually through subtle references early in the volume.

In *Morning in the Burned House*, the transference of mortality from the other to the self occurs through the exploration of human spirituality. Ironically, this transference from other to self is possible only when the individual spiritual self is lost and is replaced by examination of the other. Despite the apparent contradiction, this process of recognition is completely logical. In order to understand an unfamiliar concept, it must be studied, and so the self explores the other. Only when aspects of the unfamiliar are understood, can they be assimilated and internalized by the self. A key poem of the first section, "In the Secular Night," uses the loss of spirituality to introduce the concept of morals, which becomes the means of exploring the other. In her recent study of morality, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Iris Murdoch maintains that such exploration is essentially exploration of the self: "much of our self-awareness is other-awareness, and in this area we exercise ourselves as moral beings in our use of many various skills as we direct our modes of attention" (495). It is significant to note that this growing recognition of the connection between self and

other is specifically connected to the moral, and so to the spiritual, self. The process of studying morality in the other, then, is a simultaneous examination and development of morality in the self.

Atwood examines the spiritual condition of society and the loss of individual spirituality in the subsequent poem, "In the Secular Night." This exploration continues to take place at a distance from the self, as the speaker persists in using second person to describe the events. Yet, the subject has acquired some degree of self-recognition not apparent in the earlier poems. Although no gender is specified in the poem, several details strongly suggest that the "you" is female. This time, the memory of the past is that of a typical teenage girl's tragedy: "being [sweet?] sixteen" and stuck babysitting "when the others were out somewhere, having a good / time" (6). The remedy for this sadness is to indulge in forbidden pleasures by eating ice-cream, sneaking a cigarette, crying in despair, and, finally, dancing alone to a Glenn Miller album. Moreover, in the present, the subject strongly resembles the figure of Emily Dickinson:

You say, I have too much white clothing.  
 You start to hum.  
 Several hundred years ago  
 this could have been mysticism  
 or heresy. (7)

In spite of these suggestions, Atwood refrains from specifically stating the gender of the subject. Similarly, the speaker of the

poem maintains a distant role; s/he remains only an anonymous narrative presence, an observer, providing insight to the subject. This persistent detachment from the self emphasizes the sense of isolation in the poem.

The subject of "In the Secular Night" regards the self as isolated both on a personal level and in relation to society. S/he feels "lost and alone," but unlike the poem "Waiting," this isolation is described both as a memory of past experience and as a feature of the present. In fact, the present seems to be a recurrence of the subject's past. Like the shared sadness in "A Sad Child," it is "wander[ing] around / alone in your house" in the middle of the night that sparks the memory from forty years before. In both past and present, the subject feels abandoned and isolated from society: "Everyone has deserted you, / or this is your story" (6). This separation from society extends further than a lack of personal contact; the subject seems to consider self and other completely separate. S/he connects society only to other and also to death: "Outside there are sirens. / Someone's been run over" (7). Notably, the sirens do not signal the possibility of rescue, but immediately signify death. This automatic association indicates that the subject continues to relate death to other; no connection to self has yet been established.

Ironically, the subject of "In the Secular Night" has already experienced a form of death which s/he does not recognize. This death is the loss of the individual spiritual

self, and it is this loss which brings the subject to an examination of morality. Rationalization is what leads her/him to a rejection of religion:

You say, The sensed absence  
of God and the sensed presence  
amount to much the same thing,  
only in reverse. (7)

Significantly, this rationalization is heavily dependent on environmental influence. Though the subject views her/himself as isolated, this loss of spirituality clearly links the subject to society. Her/his loss of the spiritual self not only reflects society, but actually results from the connection to society. The phrase "in the secular night" signifies darkness and a loss of faith, thereby describing both a society devoid of a unifying religion, and also the condition of the subject. Similarly, the speaker uses the qualification, "or this is your story" to describe the subject's perceived desertion, and so implies a degree of unreliability. This phrase suggests that the subject's interpretation of events lacks objectivity, and contains the very real possibility that the "story" is fictional. As a result, the subject's sense of isolation seems not only to be self-imposed, but also to be false. That loss of spirituality s/he experiences "in the secular night" is, in fact, completely reflective of society. Ironically enough, this parallelism between "you" and society, which should unify, ultimately results in further isolation.

Though the subject is moving away from self and toward other through the loss of individual spirituality, the nature of this change first confirms the perceived sense of isolation. The connection between the unnamed "you" and society is based on mutual spiritual erosion. In the final line of "In the Secular Night," Atwood describes the unrelenting passage of time and suggests the continuing spiritual erosion in society: "The century grinds on" (7). Likewise, the subject's questioning and rejection of religion indicate her/his own spiritual erosion. This condition of spiritual darkness is directly connected to morality. Murdoch observes that the loss of spirituality, either individual or collective, suggests a complementary erosion of morals: "with the decline of religious observance and religious 'consciousness' ( . . . the fear of God for instance), some aspects of moral conduct may decline also" (488). Far from unifying the subject with society, moral erosion actually leads to isolation. Since there is no longer a common moral ground on which to stand, the sense of isolation experienced by the subject may even intensify in degree.

Atwood recognizes both this moral erosion and its isolating effect, but ultimately inverts them to justify the necessity of examining morals. In a speech given in 1985, Atwood offers a hypothetical argument against creating "responsible citizens with moral standards" in order to draw attention to the urgent need to do so: "there's now no general agreement on what proper moral standards are, . . . [so] how can you devise a system that will

educate all comers without offending some?" ("Public Education" 18). Likewise, she claims of Western society that "[w]e are also destroying ourselves by destroying our sp[i]ritual diversity" ("Armenian" 7). This awareness of the complexity of morality and spirituality clearly indicates that Atwood is not advocating a single "universal" spirituality or religion, though she does seem to favour the preservation of moral standards. The subject of "In the Secular Night" finds that because the present age has lost a unifying religion, her/his idiosyncrasies are no longer spiritually deviant; what "could have been mysticism / or heresy" in the past, "isn't now" (7). This recognition provides a foundation for Atwood's consideration of morality since the loss of spiritual unity means that morality must also be redefined. Murdoch notes that spirituality and morality are strongly interdependent: "Religion (even if 'primitive') is generally assumed to be in some sense moral. Mysticism is also assumed to be, by definition, moral" (487). Morality seems to be an aspect of spirituality that is more readily perceived, perhaps because morals manifest themselves in social behaviour visible in others. The loss of spirituality by Atwood's subject necessarily results in a corresponding questioning of morals.

This questioning of morality leads the subject to move from self to other, and Atwood begins the transition as the volume's first section draws to a close. Simultaneously, the detachment from the self begins to fade as the poems explore morality. The last three poems of the section signify this increasing

recognition of the self through a focus on the other. The speaker and the subject merge into one, and the poems now begin to use first person. This change in voice reflects the decreasing distance from the self. The significance of Atwood's use of first person has been recognized in connection to work as early as *The Circle Game* which is generally regarded as her first "real" publication. Sherrill Grace astutely remarks that Atwood

locates her point of view within the subject itself. This discovery of voice is Atwood's great strength. It was a bold and dangerous discovery, however, because it has led to facile confusions of the woman with the writer and consequent--often wilful--misreading of the work. (*Violent Duality* 13)

The speaker's detachment from the self may be the result of the poet's distancing herself to create the illusion of an anonymous narrative voice. Notably, Atwood delays the use of first person in *Morning in the Burned House* until the poems begin to examine morality. This deliberate shift in voice reinforces the connections between self-awareness, other-awareness and morality. The speaker's increasing recognition of self results from an examination of morality in the other, a gradual step forward in the exploration of spirituality.

Although the speaker still remains a "spectator" as the first section draws to a close, this role of observer is essential to the examination of morality. Since the exploration of morals occurs through a study of the other, and not consciously of the self, the speaker must necessarily be detached

to some degree. However, the poems also contain references which suggest that the speaker does recognize some degree of complicity. In "Asparagus," the speaker listens somewhat distractedly to a man confiding his moral dilemma of being in love with two women. The speaker's subsequent reply suggests an increasing realization of self in other: "You're not crazy, I tell him. / Others have done this. Me too" (13). Yet, the speaker also recognizes the absence of firm morals on which to base an opinion: "Messy love is better than none, / I guess. I'm no authority / on sane living" (14). The poem both depicts the speaker's acknowledgement of personal complicity, and also provides a foundation for Atwood's extensive examination, later in the volume, of morality in connection to love relationships.

Conversely, "Red Fox" suggests a more general, human complicity which the speaker recognizes as well. While standing in a cemetery, observing a scrawny fox in the wintertime, the speaker suddenly draws a human connection to the starving animal:

Why encourage the notion  
of virtuous poverty?  
It's only an excuse  
for zero charity. (16-17)

This blunt recognition reflects Atwood's own aversion to human apathy, a belief which George Woodcock identifies as "that monstrous indifference to the suffering of other living beings which echoes through Atwood's poems as the greatest of human crimes" ("Margaret Atwood" 326). Moreover, this connection offers

further justification for Atwood's exploration of morality. Just as the speaker in "Asparagus" recognizes the lack of morals in contemporary society, the speaker in "Red Fox" realizes that without morality, even repugnant, selfish behaviour can be rationalized to seem acceptable. This awareness of the possible danger of rationalization is suggested earlier in the section by the loss of religion in "In the Secular Night." Now, in "Red Fox," the negative effect is a lack of social responsibility or human compassion, which rationalization seems to justify. Anne G. Jones observes that "words have the power to heal or to harm. Because language has such power, it becomes, for Margaret Atwood, a question for ethics" (6). Indeed, by tracing the negative consequences of rationalization without a moral basis, Atwood draws attention to the importance of moral standards.

Over two decades ago, Gloria Onley perceptively noted that through her work, "Atwood satirizes a general tendency to rationalize . . . conformity to unsatisfactory behaviour patterns" ("Power Politics" 78). In *Morning in the Burned House*, this biting sarcasm is directed against the dismissal of moral standards. At the end of "Red Fox," the voice of sarcasm is particularly effective since it belongs not to the speaker but to the fox. In an ironic reversal of roles, the (notably female) fox who has symbolized the victim becomes the one justifying immorality. She claims that life is strictly a matter of survival and that this instinct for survival will always take precedence over moral standards: "To survive / we'd all turn thief // and

rascal." This declaration completely inverts the speaker's view of the fox so that she becomes both an embodiment of the human tendency to rationalize immoral behaviour and also a connection to death:

[the fox] knows just where she's going:

to steal something  
that doesn't belong to her--  
some chicken, or one more chance,  
or other life. (17)

This dramatic shift in the speaker's perspective of the fox, from victim to victimizer, links Atwood's concern with morals to mortality. By connecting the survival instinct to the fox, rather than to the speaker, the poem also suggests that Atwood advocates human morality and objects to the use of rationalization to justify inhumane behaviour. The first section of *Morning in the Burned House* establishes Atwood's concerns with both morality and mortality, and provides a basis from which the volume develops.

The exploration of morality is essential to Atwood's process of understanding humanity. Her interest in defining what is "human" includes not only tracing the gradual recognition of mortality, but also examining human morality. This connection of morality to humanity demonstrates Atwood's depth of insight. She recognizes both the illusive nature of "ideal humanity" and the significance of morals to human existence. Murdoch is equally insistent on this connection, and contends that morality is an essential, inextricable aspect of humanity:

Morality is and ought to be connected with the whole of our being. . . . The moral life is not intermittent or specialised, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence. It is into ourselves that we must look: advice which may now be felt, in and out of philosophy, to be out of date. The proof that every little thing matters is to be found there. (495)

The exploration of morality, then, is actually an exploration of humanity, an attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of what it means to be "human." Atwood's examination of morals does not necessarily mean that she always agrees with the moral standards depicted in her work; by extension, the reader need not agree either. In fact, she often seems to be challenging the boundaries which her work identifies and examines. Recalling Atwood's comment advocating spiritual diversity is helpful in maintaining perspective. She is not attempting to establish moral standards that must be universally applied, but is examining different concepts of morality. Despite various interpretations of morality, Atwood contends that the existence of morals, in some form, is generally agreed upon:

The [moral] axioms are about how we should be behaving. . . . You may question the axioms; you may say that they favour those in power (which they almost invariably do), or that they rest on shaky metaphysical premises, which is also usual; but you are unlikely to deny that they exist. ("Laying Down" 3)

Clearly, Atwood has no delusions about the existence of a universal morality, nor is she advocating the establishment of

one. Rather, the mere existence of morals justifies their exploration; they are part of humanity and, more specifically, of human spirituality.

Atwood views morality as an inseparable part, not only of humanity in general, but of the writer in particular. She claims that, "whether the artist tries to be or not," art itself is moral, but also realizes that "if something is only that, then we feel we're being preached to and we resent it" (Hancock 271). This ability to view morality simultaneously from the perspective of an author and that of a reader is, perhaps, what enables Atwood to examine morals without allowing her work to degenerate into propaganda. She seems ever aware of the need for spiritual diversity, and always to be intrigued by its existence. Though a "spectator," the speaker in Atwood's poetry is not simply an objective narrator. That person, object or situation to which the speaker pays attention defines her/his subjectivity and, Murdoch would argue, morality. This focus on the subject enables the voice in *Morning in the Burned House* to seem, by turns, to remain non-committal or to be critical of its surroundings. Barbara Hill Rigney claims that because Atwood recognizes that art is moral, she considers it the writer's responsibility "not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures--perhaps even to redeem" (1). Certainly, Atwood's work demonstrates her commitment as a writer to convey even the brutalities of humanity, particularly in the series of poems,

"Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written." Writer as "witness" and writer as "redeemer" are, however, two very different roles.

Though Atwood believes in the connection between art and morality and in the role of the writer, her views are characteristically both well-defined and kept in perspective. She is strongly against any view of the writer as saviour or healer of society, and bluntly dismisses those who hold that opinion: "I think anybody who does is deluding himself. Books don't save the world" (Gibson 8). This healthy dose of logic prevents Atwood from removing the writer from society, and allows her to examine society as a member. Through the figure of the speaker, the writer examines society from within. Although the voice may appear detached, the speaker is unquestionably intimately familiar with what s/he describes. The poems are not the voice of an outsider, but an attempt to move beyond subjectivity to "objective" analysis. Still, Atwood seems aware that "objectivity" remains an unattainable ideal since it is unavoidably "tainted" by subjectivity. Yet, this very self-involvement is also crucial for preserving the sensibility of a writer. Atwood is quick to correct those who misinterpret her position: "Far from thinking of writers as totally isolated individuals, I see them as inescapably connected with their society." Moreover, she adds that this connection "will increase in intensity as the society . . . becomes the 'subject' of the writer" (*Second Words* 148). By focusing on society, the writer

experiences a growing sense of complicity, recognizing the human connection between self and other. Atwood's work reflects this causal relationship between self and society.

As the poems in *Morning in the Burned House* shift focus from the individual to society, Atwood's speaker experiences an increasing recognition of self in other. The speaker's examination of the other results in a corresponding awareness of complicity, a growing understanding of collective humanity. Just as the writer exists, for Atwood, both as an individual and as a member of society, the speaker in the poems gradually moves toward this discovery of duality. Since morality is "connected with the whole of our being . . . not a peculiar separate area of our existence" (Murdoch 495), the exploration of morality is the exploration of humanity. Atwood's speaker achieves the recognition that the self exists simultaneously as an individual and as part of society only through moral exploration. This is an important distinction, for Atwood's work does not provide a prescription of moral standards; rather, it offers exploration as the means of discovery. Though she does not believe in the role of writer as redeemer, Atwood does believe that literature should cause the reader to re-think and to explore the boundaries of existence: "my belief [is] that one of the things writing . . . actually does in society is to force a constant re-examination of the values we think we're living by . . ." ("Justice" 8). That is, the writing calls into question moral standards--both real socially accepted boundaries and also idealized values--and so

demands that they be strong enough to withstand challenge. The moral value of literature, then, extends beyond the writer to the reader as well.

Not only does the speaker within Atwood's volume explore morality, but ideally the volume causes the reader to engage in a parallel exploration of her/his own. This exploration of morality is essentially attempting to gain understanding of humanity, striving to realize full human potential. Since ideal humanity is unattainable, neither the speaker nor the reader will ever finish the process of exploration. Further exploration uncovers more of the unknown, and the possibility of making new discoveries always exists; hence, Atwood's work focuses on the value of the process itself. Her distinction between the moral value of literature and writer as redeemer, however, remains applicable. Even though literature may cause re-evaluation of morality, discovery can only be made through exploration, and so the reader will be her/his own means of moral redemption. Like the speaker, the reader's exploration of morals and discovery of self can only occur through an examination of the other. This self-discovery occurs unconsciously through a conscious examination of the other, and the study of humanity necessarily involves studying morality.

As the speaker looks "outward into the self," the second section of the volume also turns its focus outward. Rather than describing an ambiguous figure suspiciously like the self but called "you," the poems now depict various figures who are

distinctly other. With only one exception, the subject of each poem is a named female figure. Atwood balances this shift to the realm of the other by a complementary, though opposite, shift in voice. While the subject of the poems is a conscious exploration of morality in the other, the voice of the speaker moves proportionately closer to self by using first person. The fact that the poems are written almost exclusively in first person signifies the presence of self in other; however, this connection between self and other is only an unconscious recognition at this point in the volume. Atwood's focus on the individual self in the first section becomes, in the second section, an examination of the social self and the moral self. This transition marks the volume's gradual movement toward the discovery of self in other. The study of morality in others leads into the study of personal spirituality, and the second section continues to emphasize the process of exploration since this is the means of discovery. The loss of the individual spiritual self, seen in the first section, is the cause of both the questioning and the challenging of moral boundaries which now takes place.

The brief foundational connection of morality to love relationships, in the poem "Asparagus" of the first section, becomes significant to the development of *Morning in the Burned House*. The second section uses this specific connection to examine moral boundaries within various female figures. Similarly, the concept of rationalization versus morality, introduced in "Red Fox," is now examined in more depth. "Cressida

to Troilus: A Gift" portrays the rationalization of twisted morals. The poem opens with Cressida passing the blame to Troilus for her actions: "You forced me to give you poisonous gifts. / I can put this no other way." This refusal to accept responsibility for the "deathly" consequences of her "poisonous" actions indicates that the speaker, Cressida, still views herself as an object acted upon, rather than a subject who acts. She views Troilus, the other, as the cause of her actions, and refuses to see that how she acts is a conscious decision for which she must accept responsibility. Atwood has summarized this perspective in connection to her novel, *Surfacing*:

If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault--it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. It will always be somebody else's fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life. (Gibson 22)

In this particular case, not only does Cressida refuse to accept full responsibility for her involvement with Troilus, but she will not even admit her complicity. She simply projects the responsibility onto others, viewing her actions as the inevitable result caused by Troilus: "The first time, the first sentence even / was in answer to your silent clamour / and not for love." Her participation is regarded as involuntary and so she seems to dismiss it.

Despite the speaker's recognition that she has acted--she

does not pretend to be ignorant of her involvement--Cressida will not acknowledge any accountability even for her acquiescence. Instead, she justifies herself by projecting the blame onto a personified emotion:

How did all of this start?  
 With Pity, that flimsy angel,  
 with her wet pink eyes and slippery wings  
 of mucous membrane.  
 She causes so much trouble. (28)

This conscious removal of responsibility indicates the distancing of self still experienced by Atwood's speaker, and juxtaposes rationalization with morality. Cressida's passing of blame becomes a justification for twisted morals; her behaviour was unavoidable so it need not be evaluated. By shirking responsibility, she also sidesteps any moral confrontation. These elements are recognizable in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as well, which, Anne Barton observes, is characterized by "the stubborn relativism of the work, its presentation of a society in which fixed or objective values no longer operate. . . . [A]bsolutes of good or evil are grotesquely out of place in this world" (445). Thus, through the figure of Cressida, Atwood reinforces the disintegration of personal and societal standards caused by replacing morality with rationalization.

As in the volume's first section, the lack of moral standards is linked to mortality in this poem. Though Cressida does not attempt to discern the moral value of her actions, she

does seem to realize the gravity of the consequences. Ironically enough, she admits, "nothing I ever gave was good for you [Troilus]," but never follows through to a deeper evaluation of her own actions. The consideration of "good" is limited to the physical realm, not the philosophical or moral distinction of good and evil. In the physical realm, Cressida compares her actions and their consequence to the fatal image of feeding white bread to goldfish: "They cram and cram, and it kills them." Even then, she refuses to be held accountable. Though the feeder is fully aware of the consequences of overfeeding, Cressida transfers the blame to the dead fish, their glassy stare "playing on our guilt / as if their own toxic gluttony / was not their fault." Her description of Troilus as "still / pallid and fishy-eyed, still acting / stupidly innocent and starved," demonstrates that she applies the same rationalization to this situation; consequences will be fatal in their severity, but she will bear no responsibility. This being the case, Cressida feels fully justified in enacting the role of the feeder, fulfilling Troilus' inexcusably gluttonous appetite: "Well, take this then. Have some more body. / Drink and eat" (29). Her apparent knowledge of the inevitable consequences still does not cause Cressida to accept responsibility because she connects the creation of boundaries to other rather than to self.

Cressida fails to recognize that if Troilus, like the goldfish, is unable to set limits, she has the power to do so. The establishment of boundaries is distanced from self to

something that must be applied by an outside force. As a result, Cressida seems to believe that she must perpetuate the cycle of behaviour until prevented by some external force, a *deus ex machina* of some kind, even death. This distancing of self enables Cressida both to offer her body and simultaneously acknowledge that, "You'll just make yourself sick. Sicker. / You won't be cured" (29). Her admission that the relationship will not cure Troilus not only compares him to the fish, but also suggests the recognition of a deeper need left unfulfilled. This implication draws attention to Cressida's earlier words claiming that her involvement was "not for love" but, rather, that "[e]verything I gave was to get rid of you / as one gives to a beggar: *There. Go away*" (28). Atwood seems to be suggesting the distinction between love, which satisfies, and lust, which ultimately always leaves one hungry.

Atwood's recognition of a lack of love is not simply an issue of measuring the degree of involvement, but identifies an essential component of humanity. As *Morning in the Burned House* explores humanity, it also examines the inherent need for human contact, the need for love. The connection of morality to love relationships is not merely a means of surveying acceptable limits of behaviour; rather, it is directly linked to Atwood's examination of human spirituality. Notably, Murdoch outlines a progressive movement from the loss of spirituality to the consequent lack of love:

Loving is an orientation, a direction of energy, not just a state of mind. Emptiness: absence of God, absence of Good. This may be felt as the senselessness of everything, the loss of any discrimination or sense of value, a giddy feeling of total relativism, even a cynical hatred of virtue and the virtuous: a total absence of love. (503)

The development of *Morning in the Burned House* runs parallel to this progression. The absence of God noted in "In the Secular Night" of section one leads into a consideration of morals, the absence of moral standards, and the absence of love.

"Ava Gardner Reincarnated as a Magnolia," the poem immediately following "Cressida to Troilus," takes the distinction between love and lust to the extreme. No suggestion of love remains, only the indulgence of lust. Physical existence is recalled as a struggle of the flesh: "The men wanted to nail / me in the trophy room, on the pool- / table if possible, the women simply to poke / my eyes out" (30). But even in the present, the speaker exhibits a complete lack of morals, dismissing society's standards and choosing physical "love." Ava Gardner, the magnolia, expresses the overwhelming desire for physical intimacy:

oh I'd give anything  
to have it back again, in  
the flesh, the flesh,  
which was all the time  
I ever had for anything. The joy. (32)

Significantly, what Cressida really longs for is the emotional

effect, the joy, which indicates a sense of temporary satisfaction. The existence of this desire suggests that reincarnation is ultimately unfulfilling. Since physical reincarnation is presented as the only type of "spiritual" existence, then choosing to return to the original state of physicality necessarily means losing spirituality.

In this section of the volume, Atwood seems to intensify the connection between spirituality and loss of morals. "Ava Gardner" depicts the desire to lose spirituality, not the actual absence of it, in tandem with the absence of morals. This connection suggests that the mindset of the individual, the conscious choice, sets the successive events in motion. By pointing to the individual as the causal factor, Atwood opposes the stance taken by Cressida in the preceding poem, and draws attention to the culpability of self. The self-chosen lack of moral standards precedes the absence of love. Atwood's work coincides with Murdoch's contention that loss of spirituality leads to loss of love. Ironically, it is this disregard for others and narrow focus on self-gratification that sabotages the quest for love since the real desire will remain unfulfilled by this lustful attitude. Atwood recognizes the connection between morals and unsatisfying love relationships. In fact, she claims that the sexual immorality of the 1960s, "free love," was instrumental in the breakdown of moral standards, both individual and societal:

"Morality" is your relationship with yourself. "Ethics" is your relationship with other people. The '60s

confused people. They tried to enjoy themselves and not worry about restricting their lives in artificial, puritanical ways. The problem was, once you enter into social relationships, ethics has to come in. When they stomped on morality, ethics got thrown out too. I'm not a social predictor, but I do think that "morality" is going to come back in now. Unfortunately, most people still aren't too equipped to think ethically!  
(Twigg 123)

This distinction between morality and ethics is significant to Atwood's exploration of human spirituality. Since morality is individual, she suggests that moral standards will necessarily be diverse and fluctuate with the self. Conversely, ethics are societal, so they require recognition of, and consideration for, the other; when this does not occur, the individual relies solely on personal moral standards. If s/he lacks personal morals, then relativism results.

In *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood examines the movement toward relativism, or the absence of moral standards, in conjunction with the exploration of self. As the volume traces the connections between self and other, increasingly recognizing their inextricable nature, morality and ethics meld. Consequently, Atwood's interest in moral standards involves not only the self, but the effect on the other. She consistently examines the connection between society and the individual, and so exploring morals in the other is actually a study of ethics. Atwood admits that this focus has been a long-time interest: "My early background in university was philosophy. . . . I kept philosophy as what you would call a 'minor,' my principal areas

of interest being aesthetics and ethics. I keep my hand in it to a certain extent . . . " (Meese 187). Paradoxically, the use of first person and the variety of female speakers identified in the second section of the volume actually turn ethics back into morals. Examining the relationships these figures have with others becomes, through the use of first person, an examination of the relationship each speaker has with the self. These moral and ethical standards manifest themselves in the form of visible social behaviour. Perhaps due to the causal relationship between the loss of spirituality, the lack of morals, and the absence of love, Atwood portrays this social behaviour specifically as moral boundaries applied to love relationships.

A preoccupation with immorality characterizes the second section of the volume. Despite the apparent contradiction, Atwood's focus on immorality serves to accentuate rather than detract from her emphasis on morality. This paradoxical emphasis through opposition is possible because immorality and morality are inversely proportional; the more a lack of morals is recognized, the more evident the importance of moral standards becomes. Murdoch argues that morality is dependent on opposition for its existence: "If there is to be morality, there cannot altogether be an end to evil. Discord is essential to goodness. Moral evil exists only in moral experience and that experience is essentially inconsistent" (488). This is undeniably correct, for behaviour cannot be classified as immoral without the existence and knowledge of moral standards. Atwood herself is well aware of

this oppositional interdependence; during an interview in 1972, she explained its importance specifically in relation to the structural unity of writing:

most of one's negative structures are there for the same reasons Hell is in *Paradise Lost*: they are examples of what you don't want--of the bad thing. Unless you know what the bad thing is you sure aren't going to be able to escape or avoid it. You have to identify what is bad, acknowledge that it is bad and that it is indispensable. (Levenson 22)

The inclusion of immorality in *Morning in the Burned House*, then, seems to be a means of exploring and supporting Atwood's belief in the pending re-emergence of morality.

Recognition of this oppositional interdependence clarifies the function of immorality in the volume, and permits an evaluation of those poems which initially appear to be "misfits." Poems of the second section brusquely introduce immorality in the form of promiscuity. In "Miss July Grows Older," the opening poem, Atwood uses an abrupt shift in voice to capture the reader's attention. She identifies the speaker as a former calendar girl who voices a cynical and pessimistic view of life. The rather startling, sudden use of a profanity in the form of an interrogative jars the reader out of the sense of reminiscence that characterizes the first section. Atwood has used this technique before. Her poetry collection, *Power Politics*, intentionally employs shock value to unsettle the reader from complacency; in this connection, Sherrill Grace notes that "Until

we [readers] recognize . . . exactly what we are doing, we will be powerless to change. And this is the profoundly moral purpose of these poems--to shock us with recognition" (*Violent Duality* 63). Nearly a quarter of a century later, Atwood is still trying to shock the complacent reader in order to spark both recognition and change.

Miss July, representing Atwood's use of extremes, speaks of promiscuity not only with a sense of acceptance, but with a twinge of regret for its inevitable deceleration. As in the poem "Waiting" of the first section, aging is viewed negatively as a physical manifestation of loss:

After a while you forget  
 what you really look like.  
 You think your mouth is the size it was.  
 You pretend not to care. (21)

Following an extensive monologue of triviality, Atwood abruptly connects this seemingly materialistic, shallow speaker to the serious issue of human mortality. Miss July becomes the unlikely voice through which Atwood expresses the increasing recognition of a spiritual existence, a link to other living things: "You grow out / of sex like a shrunk dress / into your common senses, those you share / with whatever's listening." The voice is believable because it does not gloss over reality. Nature is not presented as pristine and untouched, but the destructive influence of humankind is readily recognized. Because the speaker accepts this dichotomy, she is able to say that "[t]he way the

sun / moves through the hours becomes important, / the smeared raindrops on the window." As Miss July continues her description, Atwood inverts all expectations of beauty and replaces them with images of destruction: "buds" belong not to blossoming flowers but to "the roadside weeds," and "the sheen" is not that of a glistening lake but that "of spilled oil on a raw ditch / filling with muddy water" (23). These polar images reflect the opposition between the reader's expectations and the insights actually conveyed by the speaker, an opposition which intensifies the effectiveness of those observations.

This surprising perception of the speaker is attributable to her movement beyond physicality. Unlike the poem "Ava Gardner" in which the speaker longs for a return to physical existence, Miss July acknowledges that existence is comprised of more than physical and emotional states: "When I was all body I was lazy. / I had an easy life, and was not grateful." The changes brought about by time and aging are no longer simply considered losses, for along with age has come a fuller sense of self. Atwood's speaker has achieved this fuller sense of self through the recognition that she consists of "selves," identities beyond the physical dimension:

Now there are more of me.  
 Don't confuse me with my hen-leg elbows:  
 what you get is no longer  
 what you see. (23)

This recognition of the multiplicity of identity marks a pivotal

stage in the speaker's self-awareness. The conscious acknowledgement that "[n]ow there are more of me" coincides with Atwood's concept of selfhood, evident in her exploration of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of self. Atwood's awareness and exploration of the multiplicity of self has long been a recognized feature of her poetry as Stephen Chesley's insightful observation attests:

Beginning with *The Animals in that Country* [published in 1968], Atwood's main concern is her search for an identity; not simply who she is, for she recognizes that there is no single definable "she", but who she is in relation to others, or at certain times, or especially what her position is in the landscape. (25)

For Atwood, neither identity nor humanity consists of an "essence." Rather, both are mysterious and elusive, which explains her fascination with that process of exploration viewed as an endless quest with unlimited potential for discovery.

The direct contrast between the reader's expectation of shallowness and the speaker's insight in "Miss July Grows Older" also establishes a foundation for "Manet's Olympia," which immediately follows. In this poem, Atwood continues to employ promiscuity as the social indicator of immorality. However, promiscuity is both mocked and inverted by the speaker, who steps back into the role of spectator. As observer, s/he offers insight to the subject, Olympia, and addresses the description to a second person. By reverting to a distancing of speaker and subject, Atwood is able to mock the staged image of promiscuity

in a voice of cool, sarcastic observation:

She reclines, more or less.  
 Try that posture, it's hardly languor.  
 Her right arm sharp angles.  
 . . . . .  
 Shoes but not stockings,  
 how sinister. (24)

Once Atwood has established this tone of derision, the descriptions of attempts at discretion become, instead, signs of prudery and deception: "The windows (if any) are shut. / This is indoor sin." As well, the maid's "prudent" reaction is not conveyed with any sense of approval for upholding moral standards, but rather is presented with disdain as judgmental self-righteousness: "Above the head of the (clothed) maid / is an invisible voice balloon: *Slut*" (24). Ironically, Atwood seems to be championing those who perpetuate immoral behaviour though she is advocating morality.

Immorality is, in fact, a necessity since it serves to challenge and re-define moral boundaries. Atwood considers such challenges a vital component of society: "A society lacking in people willing to stir things up a little or even a lot is either a dead society or an oppressed one" ("Calgary Speech" 1). Not surprisingly, then, Atwood depicts just such a situation in "Manet's Olympia." That her intention is not to advocate the perpetuation of immorality is indicated by the ironic inversion of perspectives wherein expectations and actualities clash. The maid's quick condemnation of Olympia is negated by the speaker's

insight: "The body's on offer, / but the neck's as far as it goes" (24). This distinction is reinforced by the inverted perspectives at the end of the poem. That person who is addressed by the speaker, conceivably the reader, becomes part of the scenario: "There's someone else in this room. / You, Monsieur Voyeur." The appellation of "voyeur" signifies that he has become the immoral one, rather than Olympia, as does the dismissive comment: "As for that object of yours / she's seen those before, and better." Seemingly established positions are further inverted by the final stanza of the poem. That unacknowledged part of Olympia asserts itself, and she becomes the one who speaks with disdain and intellectual superiority:

*I, the head, am the only subject  
of this picture.  
You, Sir, are furniture.  
Get stuffed. (25)*

Significantly, she addresses neither the speaker nor the maid but "Monsieur Voyeur." This direction of voice indicates Atwood's disapproval of exercising a judgmental attitude toward others. By focusing on the individual who was unknowingly judgmental, rather than the maid who was consciously judgmental, Atwood expresses a complete lack of tolerance for this attitude. In addition to suggesting that judgmentalism is always inexcusable, Olympia's unexpected remark enables Atwood to take advantage of its shock value to jar the reader into recognition.

This emphasis on judgmentalism is needed to clarify the role

of morality. Atwood both depicts and inverts judgmentalism to indicate that it is neither the reason for morals, nor should it be the result of applying moral standards. Like the speaker in "Ava Gardner," Atwood seems to dismiss those who are judgmental: "Well, to hell with them" (31). This perspective is particularly evident in "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing." Not only is the speaker aware of judgmentalism, but she responds to it with a sarcastic dismissal:

The world is full of women  
 who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself  
 if they had the chance. Quit dancing.  
 Get some self-respect  
 and a day job.  
 Right. And minimum wage,  
 and varicose veins. . . . (33)

Similarly, she is not unaware of morality, but simply chooses materialism over morals: "*Exploited*, they'd say. Yes, any way / you cut it, but I've a choice / of how, and I'll take the money" (33). By the conclusion of the poem, the speaker's elaborate justification culminates in an inverted judgmentalism. She becomes condescending, and challenges the person being addressed: "You think I'm not a goddess? / Try me." The speaker goes so far as to threaten the listener and, in so doing, depicts the extreme result of judgmentalism: "Touch me and you'll burn" (36). This role reversal suggests why the existence of morals is not an excuse for judgmentalism: humanity is inclusive.

Atwood seems to agree with the Biblical adage of judgment

returning upon oneself: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (*Matt. 7:1-2*). Atwood makes a strikingly similar claim that "being human inevitably involves being guilty" (Gibson 22). This belief allows no one the luxury of finger-pointing at another without simultaneously judging the self. If human culpability is all-inclusive, then even the writer is prohibited from exercising judgmentalism of the other without an acknowledgement that the self is always "guilty by association." As a writer, Atwood recognizes and abides by this limitation, but is also aware that retaining objectivity requires a conscious effort: "It takes a lot to see what is there, both without flinching or turning away and without bitterness. The world exists [sic]; the writer testifies. She cannot deny anything human" (*Second Words* 349). Yet, this "objectivity" is partially illusory, for the writer does evaluate what s/he sees.

This evaluation, however, need not be overt to be effective; in *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood presents both moral and immoral behaviour, but she surely does not advocate both. The writer must describe what is seen without being "judgmental," but Atwood insists that s/he must still judge or evaluate what is seen; the difference is that the self must be invariably and consciously included. In fact, Atwood contends that writing

is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its

typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves. (*Second Words* 346)

In *Morning in the Burned House*, she accomplishes this "objective" evaluation without "deny[ing] anything human" by utilizing a variety of speakers in diverse situations. The poems depict different aspects of morality, including immorality, and by inverting judgmentalism, demonstrate that Atwood's interest is not moral condemnation but exploration.

Atwood's exploration has a dual purpose; it is the attempt to understand the existence and interdependence both of the individual and of society. She seeks not to "[c]rush out the mystery" (35), but appreciates and is intrigued by the unknown aspects of the self and of life. John Wilson Foster notes that Atwood's poetry explores the psychological understanding of human existence, "the psychic hazards . . . of making sense of our lives and the world around us, and of creating fulfilling relationships" (159). This attempt to make sense not only of individual existence, to find a reason for living, but also of society and one's connection to it incorporates Atwood's interests in spirituality and philosophy. Her third and most extensive area of university study, Victorian literature, is also connected to this search for meaning. Atwood seems to be the contemporary voice previously heard in Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi": "This world's no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat and

drink" (134). Discovering the meaning of life necessarily involves spirituality through the acknowledgement of human mortality. Death is an indisputable component of life and an end to physical existence, so it must be taken into account when seeking the meaning of life. This philosophical quest is often undertaken through religion, and Atwood's method is no exception.

In the final poem of the second section, Atwood introduces religion in connection to spirituality and mortality. "Sekhmet, the Lion-Headed Goddess of War, Violent Storms, Pestilence, and Recovery from Illness, Contemplates the Desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" retains the cynicism and sarcasm evident throughout this section. Atwood's speaker, the Goddess Sekhmet, describes religion as insincere and self-seeking:

*Favour me and give me riches,  
destroy my enemies.  
That seems to be the gist.  
Oh yes: And save me from death.  
In return we're given blood  
and bread, flowers and prayer,  
and lip service. (40)*

This view of religion makes it an unlikely source for discovery of any kind, and gives the impression of empty ritual. According to Murdoch, such a perception is prevalent: "Many people hate religion, with its terrible history and its irrationality, and would regard resort to religious rituals as a false substitute for real morals and genuine amendment of life" (487). Though Atwood is fully aware of both religious history and

irrationality--George Woodcock's recognition of Atwood's "intuitive wisdom that in the last resort will accept the irrational as truer than the rational" seems particularly relevant here ("Metamorphosis" 141)--she does not completely dismiss it. On the contrary, Atwood distinguishes between religion and spirituality. While Atwood admits that she "can't say the established religions have a terribly good track record," she simultaneously agrees that "characters in a natural environment [tend to be] more religious or spiritual," and so it is in nature that she finds "the gods, or the goddesses, or the God" (Hancock 285). Clearly, Atwood is not dismissing either religion or spirituality, but she seems to be advocating a union of the moral, that is, spiritual and physical realms. The suggestion of moving outward from confined religious ritual to exploring spirituality as it is visible in nature is a concept of which Atwood delays her examination to the volume's final sections.

Conversely, Atwood also uses "Sekhmet" to introduce the concept of immortality with which she becomes increasingly preoccupied throughout the remainder of *Morning in the Burned House*. The haunting image of "the wooden boats / in which the dead sail endlessly / in no direction" depicts aimless immortality (40). Through a gradual recognition of the life-death continuum, Atwood unites the spiritual and physical dimensions. The Goddess Sekhmet describes physical death as "your nightmare, / the final one," but also suggests that existence does not fully

cease at the moment physical existence does. She wishes that "a kind lion" would come at the moment of death "and pick your soul up gently by the nape of the neck / and caress you into darkness and paradise" (41). The juxtaposition of "darkness and paradise" reinforces the concept of aimless immortality by suggesting that blissful immortality may be desired but is unlikely. The expectation of anything more than aimless immortality, Sekhmet chides, is irrational: "What did you expect from gods / with animal heads?" This Goddess, at least, is unlikely to be able to provide meaningful and blissful immortality, and recognizes her limitations: "I just sit where I'm put, composed / of stone and wishful thinking" (40). Nevertheless, the mere suggestion of a spiritual afterlife is most significant to the development of succeeding sections. Atwood herself tends to believe in an afterlife, though her awareness that the intangible cannot be scientifically proven tempers her response to Philip Marchand's direct query, "But do the dead exist objectively? In another realm?" Atwood diplomatically replies, "'Nobody knows that. . . . Although many people have had experiences that would indicate that they do'" (D4). This belief in the existence of the soul, paired with the awareness of human mortality, complicates Atwood's exploration of humanity. With the possibility of existence in another realm, both identity and the meaning of life become harder to pinpoint: "If the living are not only inescapably connected to the dead but also . . . inexorably moving towards their own death, what is identity, and how can it

be maintained?" (Papp Carrington 231). For Atwood, the complication arises because death must first be understood. Consequently, she focuses more on exploring the concept of death as the volume progresses.

Atwood is not concerned, however, with how identity can be maintained, for she does not attempt to establish a fixed identity. In fact, her volume does quite the opposite. Identity, in *Morning in the Burned House*, is remarkably fluid despite Atwood's interest in the connections between self and society. Feminist critics, like Sherrill Grace, convincingly argue that the identity Atwood presents is categorically female:

the female concept of identity, stresses interdependence, community, multiplicity and a capacity for identification *with* rather than *against*. Fixed categories and distinctions tend to break down; private and public blurr [sic], as do Subject and Object. . . . ("Gender as Genre" 191)

Once a gender is attributed in section two, Atwood's speaker certainly is female, but she is not always the same figure; interestingly, the voice changes. Atwood is careful to depict a variety of figures, clearly identifying each one. This diversity parallels Atwood's interest in metamorphosis and change. As Eleonora Rao notes, "The ego is not conceived of as a permanent subject, but is regarded as involved in a process of transformation" (114). Identity, then, is fluid and undergoing a continual process of change.

That the female figure of the poems speaks in first person,

suggests the possibility that Atwood is depicting a single fragmented subjectivity rather than many separate speakers. The concept of a fragmented subjectivity coincides both with Atwood's portrayal of the gradual recognition of self in other, and also with the ambiguity between speaker and subject of section one. Linda Hutcheon has identified the use of a fragmented female subjectivity as a recurring feature of Atwood's fiction:

Unlike men, who in our Western culture are said to have a firm sense of a single, coherent, rational identity (or to think that such a sense of self is possible and desirable), Atwood's women seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are more fragmented and even multiple. (145)

This pervasiveness makes it seem not only plausible, but quite probable, that Atwood is employing the same technique in her poetry. The female speaker is a medley of the many voices; the poems, a collage of subjectivity in which self consists of parts of the other. This fragmented subjectivity necessarily draws together the individual and society by uniting self with other.

Through the use of a fragmented subject as speaker, Atwood is able to emphasize the inseparable nature of the individual and society. Viewing the self as composed of fragments of the other carries the volume toward the speaker's conscious recognition of this dual nature of selfhood: self as both an individual and also a part of society. Roberta Rubenstein notes Atwood's focus on "the relation of the individual woman to society: her sense of

connectedness to the major moral conflicts of her time, . . . the illusion of exemption from evil; and the necessity for being politically and personally engaged." More specifically, Rubenstein recognizes the moral slant of Atwood's work, which "examines the nature of moral responsibility for both the individual and the group in a world they never made" (260). The issues of identity and morality are inseparable in Atwood's work because they are both part of the larger concept of humanity which the poems explore. Paradoxically, Atwood's use of a fragmented subjectivity seems to peg identity as distinctly female, and thereby to limit her exploration of humanity on a gender basis.

On the contrary, the union of the individual, social, and moral dimensions of self in the second section of the volume demonstrates Atwood's awareness of the complexity of humanity. Her characteristically broad perspective prevents Atwood from allowing gender to limit her exploration; quite the opposite is true. Conscious recognition of the connection between morals and gender actually leads her to invert any presuppositions. Atwood candidly admits that she intentionally challenges such expectations: "'I wanted to deal with the idea that women somehow are more morally wonderful than men. . . . There is no gene for moral wonderfulness. To buy into that is to be back in the nineteenth century'" (Timson 58). Having established a fragmented subjectivity through the female speakers, Atwood slips in a male figure near the end of the volume's second section.

"A Man Looks" is linked thematically to the preceding poems of the first two sections and leads into the third. The poem depicts a loss of love and portrays the male subject in despair, entertaining the thought of death: "He thinks, *I will die soon*" (38). The inclusion of this poem suggests that Atwood's psychological exploration of humanity encompasses both genders. The next section of the volume, which examines figures of both genders, substantiates the inclusiveness of Atwood's perspective. In fact, she seems to recognize not only that both male and female subjectivity are part of humanity, but also that both genders exist in each individual. *Morning in the Burned House* seems to examine the self on the basis of the Jungian notion of collectivity, in which "the human psyche is bisexual, though the psychological characteristics of the opposite sex in each of us are generally unconscious, revealing themselves only in dreams or in projections on someone in our environment" (Guerin *et al.* 171). Self, then, is not only unconsciously part of other, but also consists of both genders. That Atwood suddenly reverts to third person in "A Man Looks" supports the concept of unconscious bisexuality in the human psyche. The speaker's integration of the self as other and as male is still distant, yet these connections suggest that the seemingly anonymous speaker is indeed female. In the first two sections, the speaker has increasingly gained recognition of the self. The anonymous, distant speaker of the first section has gradually developed from a multiplicity of voices into an identifiable female figure with a fragmented

subjectivity. That identity remains fluid and continually in the process of change, reinforces the concept of discovery through loss. Through the death of the familiar, Atwood sustains the connection between identity and mortality, and mortality then leads into immortality. As the poems shift focus to this less tangible spirituality, there is a corresponding shift from societal application of ethics to individual spirituality in which the concept of death gains increasing significance.

## Chapter 2

### "Now look objectively"

*"We think we can go on playing with our toys forever. But if you're not aware of the fact that you may die, you're much less careful about other people. One of the crucial moments in any life is when you come to that realization."*

*-- Margaret Atwood*

Margaret Atwood's insistence that the recognition of death is "one of the crucial moments in any life" is based on the connection between self and other, which she explores in *Morning in the Burned House*. The ignorance of death, specifically, of death in relation to self rather than to other, has a detrimental impact on both the individual and social levels. If mortality is unrecognized, an individual remains oblivious to the complexity of humanity, and contents her/himself, instead, with self-amusement in the material present, simply "think[ing] we can go on playing with our toys forever." This preoccupation with physical existence in the present prevents the individual from reaching beyond, and even from looking beyond, her/himself. As a result, this short-sightedness and navel-gazing not only hinders

self-development, but it also has a negative social influence; interaction with, and attitude toward, others tends to be characterized by carelessness, and the connection between self and other remains unrecognized. Ironically, in the third section of *Morning in the Burned House*, the poems take a step beyond the philosophical slant of the first two sections to focus more intently on the undeniable fact of physical existence. Atwood's exploration of humanity seems to have led the speaker back to the most fundamental level of existence, the physical. Moreover, the speaker's previous claim that "[n]ow there are more of me" seems to have been sacrificed for a single, fixed identity based on the physical self. However, this apparent narrowing of vision is deceptive, for the anticipated result of self-indulgent navel-gazing is inverted. Atwood actually broadens her scope of vision by "limiting" her gaze to the concrete.

The centrality of the physical self is precisely what enables Atwood to move beyond the limitations of physicality, which, earlier in the volume, cause the confusion between the identity of self and other. If self is distinguished from other solely on the basis of physical existence, then identifying an individual self is both necessary and obvious. Such a simple distinction, however, overlooks any possible connections between self and other, and dismisses all intangible dimensions of identity. Since *Morning in the Burned House* moves toward the ultimate recognition of self in other, the volume must also move beyond the physical level to a consideration of abstract

dimensions; the speaker must become "aware of the fact that you may die." Paradoxically, Atwood overcomes the segregating effect of physical boundaries by emphasizing physical existence. Rather than accepting it as a dividing factor, she inverts the physical self to the basis for human collectivity. As a result, the third section of the volume acts as a transitional phase, demonstrating not only continuity but also a marked development from the earlier sections.

This third, and notably central, section of *Morning in the Burned House* is characterized by a series of recognitions. The poems examine the importance of physical existence, but Atwood's peripheral vision simultaneously draws in those aspects of humanity introduced in the preceding sections. The separation between self and other due to the existence of individual physical bodies is not accepted as divisive. Rather, Atwood emphasizes the shared fact of physical existence as an undeniable connection between self and other; shared physicality becomes the basis for human collectivity. This awareness of collectivity represents the social dimension of the self, explored earlier in the volume through morality in the other. In this section, an examination of societal application of ethics results in the awareness that the moral self is part of the social self; the social self, in turn, exists in the physical self.

Not surprisingly, this emphasis on physical existence results in the increasing significance of death as the volume progresses. The poems depict a developing awareness of death in

relation to the self, a movement toward that "crucial moment in any life." Atwood's recognition that the physical self is also the mortal self leads into the questioning of an existence beyond the physical, an exploration of the spiritual dimension of the self. Ironically, the poems move from the abstract concept of morality to concrete physicality, only to return to the abstract, even less tangible, concept of spirituality. This circular progression increases the significance of the section's transitional nature. Through physicality, the poems both unite the moral and social dimensions of self, and also use the transience of the mortal self to substantiate the exploration of a spiritual self. Consequently, identity remains fluid, rather than fixed, since this central section of the volume uses physical existence to reveal the co-existence of various dimensions of self and to acknowledge unexplored human potential in the spiritual dimension.

Just as she urges the reader to do in this third section of *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood redirects her gaze to "look objectively" by focusing on the tangible. Yet through this scrutiny of the physical, she consistently investigates the abstract. The poem, "Romantic," which begins the section, immediately draws these paradoxical impulses together. Like the very first poem of the volume, "You Come Back," this opening poem also concentrates on describing the mundane aspects of life: not grapefruit and dirty sheets this time, but unwashed dishes, washed socks and underpants. Through these physical details, the

speaker draws a distinct contrast between male and female, but the descriptions are exclusively from a female perspective: "When women wash underpants, it's a chore. / When men do it, an intriguing affliction" (45). The deceptive parallelism of these two descriptions makes them both appear to be straightforward statements by an objective, omniscient speaker; however, the second statement carries a subtle turn of phrase that suggests a definite distance between the speaker and those described. Though washing underwear could be labelled "a chore" either by those involved or as a simple observation, it could only be considered "an intriguing affliction" from an external perspective. Consequently, the speaker's description of the women could include the self, but the men are clearly described as the other.

Throughout the poem, "Romantic," there is an increasing identification with the female, and the distinction between the two genders is based on perspectives. Though the speaker initially appears to be detached and objective, the poem actually explores the bisexuality of the human psyche suggested in the second section. Once Atwood establishes the gender of the speaker through an abrupt switch to first person, the speaker's previous perceptions are recognizable indicators of the human psyche's bisexual nature. The "mournful romanticisms" and sense of "freedom," which the speaker attributes to men (45), are actually "psychological characteristics of the opposite sex in each of us . . . [revealed] in projections on someone in our environment" (Guerin *et al.* 171). Significantly, the speaker's sudden switch

from broad generalizations to a specific personal incident not only confirms her gender, but also reinforces the contrast being drawn between men and women. This contrast lies in the social perception of the two sexes:

You poor thing, said the Australian woman  
while he held out our baby--  
as if I had forced him to do it,  
as if I had my high heel in his face. (45)

As Atwood notes elsewhere, "[t]here is still a lot of social pressure on a woman to be perfect, and also a lot of resentment of her should she approach this goal in any but the most rigidly prescribed fashion" ("Curse of Eve" 25). The inescapable criticism created by such unrealistic, idealistic social pressure is evident in "Romantic." The speaker's role as mother and the donning of high-heels, that feminist-hated footwear, both conform to social perceptions of Woman. Nevertheless, the speaker is indirectly criticized, notably by another woman, for deviating from expectations by not holding the child. The father, on the other hand, is unjustifiably pitied for doing so, even though he is equally "deviant."

Despite the speaker's obvious recognition of, and objection to, these radically opposed social perceptions, she is unable to dismiss them. In fact, she claims that socially imposed guilt, and a need to nurture, a Florence-Nightingale-complex of sorts, perpetuate this stifling conformity to "Tradition":

Still, who's taken in?  
 Every time?  
 Us, and our empty hands, the hands  
 of starving nurses. (45)

The speaker's use of the first person plural pronoun to refer to women, at this point, indicates her awareness of female collectivity. Though able to assimilate self with other women through this awareness of a shared social role, she still juxtaposes male and female, continuing to view male as the other. The unconscious nature of the bisexuality of the human psyche supports this tendency consciously to recognize collectivity within a gender, but not between genders. The speaker's perceptions also reveal the socially imposed values of females as nurturers of male warriors: "It's bullet holes we want to see in their skin, / scars, and the chance to touch them" (46). Atwood notes that such socio-political roles are essentially a manifestation of morals: "*Moral* implies political. . . . By 'political' I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how" (*Second Words* 353). The moral self, then, is the social self as well. If Atwood's speaker is to move beyond traditional boundaries based on gender to a recognition of human collectivity, she must question these socially imposed values; she must "look objectively."

With characteristic directness, Atwood does not limit the need for objectivity to the figures in her poems. Having

established its necessity, she no longer allows the reader to remain at a comfortable distance, but addresses her/him directly through an anonymous speaker. The poem "Cell" begins with an imperative, issuing a clear direction for the reader to follow: "Now look objectively." The apparent simplicity of this imperative, however, is deceptive. The speaker directly addresses the reader, but neither commands nor pleads. In fact, s/he seems convinced that the reader is quite capable of objectivity, but is unaccustomed to exercising it. The first line gives the initial impression of a pressing demand: "Now look objectively. You have to." However, Atwood's use of enjambment quickly inverts this demand into a simple acknowledgement of a benign fact: "Now look objectively. You have to / admit the cancer cell is beautiful" (47). Jean Mallinson notes that at the conclusion of Atwood's earlier poetry volume, *You Are Happy*, published in 1974, "imperatives are not orders, but vocatives of insistent longing" (51). Conversely, in *Morning in the Burned House*, the imperative expresses neither an order nor insistent longing, but convincingly directs the reader to acknowledge the speaker's discovery for her/himself. The imperative sounds like an external manifestation of the reader's unconscious, guiding her/him onward in this exploration of boundaries, and also suggesting a connection between the speaker and the reader, thereby perhaps anticipating the acknowledgement of human collectivity.

Since the reader is directed to look objectively, Atwood facilitates this process by using an anonymous speaker to focus

on the physical world. Yet, the speaker in the poem "Cell" uses the tangible as a means of exploring the intangible through the recognition of human mortality. That the speaker encourages the reader to acknowledge the beauty of the cancer cell immediately establishes contrast as the basis of the poem. The concept of connecting cancer--with its obvious associations with death, deterioration, and destruction--to beauty is a disturbing one. It forces the reader to relinquish conventional thought patterns, and to focus strictly on physical appearance, the cancer cell's "mauve centre and pink petals" (47), in order to be objective. The effect of this harsh juxtaposition is similar to that noted by Pat Sillers of Atwood's *Selected Poems*, published in 1976: "These poems are witty, vigorous, powerful; they jolt us out of a world of received ideas and stock responses, where everything, like a carelessly focused snapshot, looks grey, grainy, and indistinct" (65). However, nearly two decades later, Atwood no longer seems content to re-awaken the reader's sensibility and visual perception. Rather, the sharpening of vision leads through the physical to the metaphysical realm, wherein the spiritual aspect of existence is questioned and examined with an intensity previously unmatched.

Atwood creates a smooth, subtle transition from the physical to the metaphysical level by combining the scientific authority of the lab technician with the familiar, convincing voice of the speaker. To describe succinctly the physical properties of the cancer cell, its unchecked growth, the technician simply states,

"*It has forgotten how to die.*" It is the speaker's rhetorical question, "[b]ut why remember?" (47), which develops this accurate physical assessment into a metaphysical one, and draws attention to the inevitability of mortality. S/he offers, then, a rationalization to support the cell's desire to live, and claims it wants "[m]ore life, and more abundantly" (48). Despite the obvious connection to the exponential growth of cancer cells, this claim is also an ironic Biblical allusion to the words of Christ: "'The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly'" (*John 10:10*). The speaker's description of the cancer cell inverts the stark contrast drawn in the Biblical verse, and integrates these oppositional forces. The parasitic nature of the cancer cell, which eventually overtakes its host body, steals, kills, and destroys. These properties parallel the Biblical role of the thief, Satan, and limit existence to the physical realm; once the physical body is destroyed, the cancer within it also dies. Simultaneously, the desire for life reflects that offered by Christ, with the implication of both physical and spiritual existence.

The integration of these oppositional ideas, and the speaker's additional claims of what the cancer cell wants, reinforce the importance of the spiritual dimension. Because the cancer cell is limited to the physical realm, its desires are also concentrated there: "To take / more. To eat more. To replicate itself. To keep on / doing those things forever." Since

the existence of cancer means physical destruction, this desire for physical immortality communicates itself as selfishness, greed, lust, and gluttony. Consequently, the speaker's assertion that "[s]uch desires / are not unknown," and the direction to "[l]ook in the mirror" (48), are sharp criticisms if limited to the physical dimension. Conversely, this prompting to recognize human collectivity can be distinctly positive if the desire to live includes both physical and spiritual dimensions. The constant underlining of death as the ultimate end of the physical self necessitates an acknowledgement of mortality. However, when the spiritual self is considered, the collective desire for "life, and more abundantly," and for immortality, to continue "forever," moves beyond the recognized physical boundaries, and becomes a possibility worth exploring.

Like "Cell," the speaker in "The Loneliness of the Military Historian" directly addresses the reader, opening with an imperative. While the imperative, with its bold directness, continues to express an undeniable request for the reader to acknowledge that truth of which the speaker is convicted, the utterance of the single word is now an unbending challenge: "Confess." Moreover, the apparent simplicity of this imperative is again deceptive. Taken in entirety, the first line of verse inverts the challenging voice to one of benevolent guidance: "Confess: it's my profession." Suddenly, the speaker's request seems to be that of a priest figure, waiting for a sinner's confession. This transition allows the reader to retreat to a

comfortable distance, expecting to witness the military historian of the title as the "sinner" confessing his, notably not her, loneliness. Ironically, Atwood again employs enjambment to cause ambiguity and, perhaps more significantly, to force the reader to abandon hasty assumptions and to acknowledge presumptions. Once the statement is complete, it is apparent that the speaker is, in fact, the military historian who, without doubt, is directly addressing the reader: "Confess: it's my profession / that alarms you" (49). Any sense of reassurance is gone; the imperative is now confrontational and causes the reader considerable discomfort. This tactic of direct attack is recognizable as characteristic Atwood: "she demands uncomfortable mental confrontations that most people would obviously prefer to avoid" (Ayre 26). Yet, George Woodcock insightfully cautions against allowing the recognition of technique to overshadow Atwood's purpose: "the fact that in her own criticism Atwood is inclined to be strongly thematic and even didactic should lead us to be alert to the intent as well as the artistry of her work" (Introduction 8). In "The Loneliness of the Military Historian," the clash between the confrontational approach and the reader's assumptions is suggestive of the "intent" of the poem.

Atwood's constructed confrontation between the speaker and the reader is inextricably linked to the issue of gender. She establishes the speaker as a female figure early in the first stanza, and this revelation forces the reader to abandon the tendency to classify "military historian" as a male occupation.

Ironically, Atwood employs this very assumption as the basis for the speaker's monologue, which deals with sexist roles and morals. The speaker begins with an ambivalent, non-committal statement that suggests an understanding of the reader's perspective, and so, seems to alleviate the defensiveness caused by direct confrontation: "In general I might agree with you." This apparent collusion with the reader allows the speaker, the military historian, to convey social perceptions convincingly. It is significant to note that the first of these perceptions involves female objectivity. Recollection of the direction, earlier in the third section, to forego assumptions and "now look objectively" seems to contradict the speaker's sweeping generalizations: "women should not contemplate war, / should not weigh tactics impartially, / . . . or view both sides and denounce nothing" (49). However, awareness of the speaker's occupation of military historian actually results in self-contradiction of these claims, suggesting her dismissal of the social perception that females should not be objective; objectivity is a necessity for her occupation.

The speaker's recognition, in the preceding poem "Cell," that the reader is capable of objectivity, but unaccustomed to exercising it, is carried into "The Loneliness of the Military Historian." Atwood's speaker now conveys the conviction, reinforced by her own life, that women are capable of objectivity, but social perceptions have limited, or even eliminated, their opportunities for exercising it. She outlines

the sexist morals and the futile, even trite, efforts that are acceptable female contributions to the war effort. Marching for peace, dying in the useless attempt to protect their children, or committing suicide to escape the torture of repeated raping, are all sarcastically termed "the functions that inspire general comfort." Women are, instead, relegated to "the knitting of socks for the troops / and a sort of moral cheerleading. / Also: mourning the dead" (50). The speaker's recognition that women uphold the moral standards reflects Atwood's own awareness that women face higher moral expectations in society. In "The Curse of Eve--Or, What I Learned in School," Atwood claims that "[w]omen are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement" (25). Nevertheless, the speaker's acknowledgement of the sexism of moral standards makes it clear that women do not necessarily define these social standards. In fact, she recognizes the mutability of these standards: "ultimate virtue, by agreed tradition, / is decided by the winner" (52). This statement questions the existence of a basis for virtue or morality, and suggests that the standard is set not only by men, but by those who wield the most power. As a result, this poem emphasizes the connection, first noted in the opening poem of the section, between Atwood's definition of "politics," dealing with the issue of power, and morals.

Despite her ambiguous "general" agreement with the socially imposed limits, the military historian flatly states that she

will not, and does not, abide by them. Rather than fulfilling the perceived female function of fostering comfort, the speaker opts to be objective, to tell the "truth," which is "[a] blunt thing, not lovely." Moreover, this female has the audacity to claim that she is quite capable of objectivity, and admits that as a military historian, she exercises it: "I am good at what I do. / My trade is courage and atrocities. / I look at them and do not condemn" (50). Contrary to social expectations, the speaker acknowledges the co-existence of opposing forces, and examines them, but remains non-judgmental. Her assertion that "it's no use asking me for a final statement" (53), at the end of the poem, indicates that the speaker has attained and retained objectivity. Much like the writer who, in Atwood's terms "bears witness," the military historian observes and recounts; she records what she sees but does not "judge."

This non-judgmental stance is similar to Atwood's advocacy of morality in the first two sections of the volume, but "The Loneliness of the Military Historian" moves beyond theory to the practical. With characteristic logic, Atwood grounds the abstract concept of moral standards in physical existence, recognizing that theoretical beliefs are worthless without practical application. In a 1977 interview, Atwood adamantly claimed this connection: "'What's important to me is how human beings ought to live and behave. . . . If people end up behaving in anti-human ways, their ideology will not redeem them'" (Sandler 26). That she insists on the importance of the physical consequences of

"political" actions, that is, of exercises of power, is evident throughout "The Loneliness of the Military Historian." However, Atwood's focus on the physical in this poem is inextricably connected to the recognition of human mortality. The speaker's constant references to physical death as a result of war, underlined by grim details, force the reader to acknowledge mortality, but not necessarily in connection to self. Physical death remains a concept related to the other.

Although the mortality of the self is not yet recognized, Atwood's focus on the physical unites the mortal to the social dimension, indicating a constant motion toward human collectivity. Significantly, this acknowledgement of mortality incorporates the suggestion of immortality, depicted in the natural life cycle. The speaker's reference to time and the life cycle in nature suggests a vague understanding of a corresponding cycle in human life:

I have walked on many battlefields  
that once were liquid with pulped  
men's bodies and spangled with exploded  
shells and splayed bone.  
All of them have been green again  
by the time I got there. (52)

Yet, the speaker is unable to draw a distinct connection between the natural life cycle and the human life cycle because she continues to focus on individual existence and physical mortality. Her vision of existence in the larger human context is obscured by the inability to recognize collectivity; self is

still separate from those men, who are the other. Atwood's speaker consciously seems neither to view herself as a continuance of the human life cycle, nor to contemplate the possibility of the dead soldiers' existence in the spiritual realm; her gaze appears to be too intently fixed on the physical level. In 1978, Tom Henighan asserted that Atwood herself has this tendency to fixate on the physical: "a poet of close-up vision who is fascinated by the dark and disturbing particulars of mortal existence . . . Atwood is actually Manichae[a]n in her attitude to the body, though for her the spirit is a dubious proposition" (N. pag.). In *Morning in the Burned House*, however, Atwood uses this fixation on the physical in order to explore spiritual existence, its possibility and its mystery. Perhaps, it is more accurate now to say that Atwood is fascinated by the particulars of mortal existence as they relate to spiritual existence.

Atwood's tentative exploration of spiritual existence is characterized by the figure of the military historian. Although she appears to be oblivious to the concept of existence beyond the physical level, Atwood provides evidence near the end of the poem for the speaker's unconscious recognition of the life cycle and of collectivity. The speaker's description of her actions at the sites of death, the battlefields that are now full of natural life, is a series of symbols:

Of course I pick a flower or two  
from each, and press it in the hotel Bible

for a souvenir.  
I'm just as human as you. (53)

Picking the flower indicates the speaker's unconscious acknowledgement and acceptance of the role of death in the natural life cycle; she kills the flower in the process. That she preserves this "souvenir," this memory and connection to the past, in the hotel Bible suggests the existence of a corresponding spiritual life cycle. The term "souvenir" itself is also a satirical remark which reflects the inadequacy and triteness of this attempt to commemorate those who sacrificed their lives in the war. Similarly, the term "hotel Bible" is significant; its internal juxtaposition suggests both transience, as of physical life, and religion, which is based on the assumption of spiritual existence. As a result, the speaker's claim to be "just as human" as the reader becomes a loaded statement. It suggests an unconscious awareness of human collectivity which can result in easy dismissal of the other, but also implies a contrasting recognition of the complexity of humanity, incorporating physical and spiritual existence.

Atwood moves from an unconscious recognition of human collectivity to a conscious recognition of lost collectivity in the next poem, "Marsh Languages." She trades the figure of the objective female military historian, perhaps to further emphasize objectivity, for an anonymous speaker who laments the linguistic deaths of the "Mothertongue" languages. This speaker may be anonymous, but is clearly female, as revealed by her shared sense

of loss. The loss of language is, in fact, the loss of female collectivity: "the lost syllable for 'I' that did not mean separate / . . . no longer / heard because no longer spoken" (54). Significantly, the speaker connects these female languages to the physical realm and to the co-existence of polarities: "The mouth against skin, vivid and fading, / can no longer speak both cherishing and farewell" (55). In the preceding poem, Atwood defined the ability to view the co-existence of opposites as objectivity, and to accept their co-existence as evidence of non-judgmentalism. Ironically, the "dark soft languages" (54), the female languages, are now the ones she connects to these same abilities.

Far from perpetuating the socially accepted connection between objectivity and the male, the poem indicates that, in reality, objectivity is more closely linked to the female's nature. Female language is one of inclusion rather than exclusion, but it has been conquered and devoured by the male language, "the language of either/or, / the one language that has eaten all the others" (55). The speaker's mourning over this death, these continuing deaths, suggests a desire for co-existence rather than conquest. Similarly, Jerome Rosenberg notes that Atwood's work consistently seeks social unity:

Both familiar and newly etched is Atwood's prevailing belief in the compelling need for some unity to emerge out of the divisions that characterize the world in which we live. Our self-motivated isolation from our fellow humans, . . . is the object of Atwood's scrutiny. . . . ("For of Such" 131)

The attempt to regain "the lost syllable for 'I' that did not mean separate," requires acknowledging the self as an individual and as part of society. Atwood depicts the gradual development of this understanding in the speaker by tracing her recognition first of female collectivity, and then of human collectivity.

"Half-Hanged Mary" is the pivotal poem not only of the third section of *Morning in the Burned House*, but of the entire volume. Through her personification of Mary Webster, the seventeenth-century "witch," Atwood explores the co-existence and boundaries of the moral, social, mortal, and spiritual dimensions of the self. Physical existence remains a significant feature in the poem, since Atwood's exploration of each of these dimensions is grounded, without exception, in the physical. The opening stanzas appear to be a continuance of the preceding poem, "Marsh Languages," due to the focus on language; however, language is no longer considered strictly on an intangible or theoretical level. By connecting the power of language to the tangible level, Atwood immediately establishes the importance of physical existence: "Rumour was loose in the air, / hunting for some neck to land on." More specifically, it is the destructive effect on the physical self which consistently interests Atwood, and now provides the basis on which she examines the various dimensions of self. Mary Webster compares language to war, and suggests that the potency of rumour can kill: "I didn't feel the aimed word hit / and go in like a soft bullet." Ironically, this apparent use of figurative language is inverted to a literal description. Rumour

has a deadly result: "I was hanged" (58). This hanging indicates the extreme result of a random application of morals, and of judgmentalism. The so-called "offences" for which Mary is hanged, are merely social stereotypes and indications of superstition:

I was hanged for living alone,  
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,  
tattered skirts, few buttons,  
a weedy farm in my own name,  
and a surefire cure for warts. (58-59)

This purely circumstantial "evidence," when combined with rumour, convicts Mary of being a witch though, at best, all it really proves is that she is a somewhat eccentric, independent woman.

Atwood's speaker pointedly draws the connection between this random application of morals and her gender. Mary sarcastically claims that being female is her real "offence": "Oh yes, and [having] breasts, / and a sweet pear hidden in my body." Perhaps more importantly, she recognizes that female physical characteristics are viewed as tangible "proof" of evil: "Whenever there's talk of demons / these come in handy" (59). This emphasis on the physical self in connection to morals reinforces the importance of physical existence to Atwood's exploration of the self. The speaker attributes society's judgmentalism to the connection between morality and gender, recognizing that social perceptions inextricably bind the female to evil. Consequently, Mary describes herself, at the moment of her hanging, as "a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree." This Biblical allusion

to Eve's plucking of the forbidden fruit and its consequent result of Original Sin seems to indicate the speaker's recognition of complicity between women and evil. However, the fact that Mary uses an inverted image actually suggests a debunking of this myth. The apple itself represents the power of a socially constructed idea since the Biblical account never actually specifies a type of fruit, and yet an apple is universally cited as the forbidden fruit. That this fruit is "blackened" rather than irresistably tempting suggests that it is spoiled, that the social construct should be discarded. By extension, Mary's identification of self with this spoiled fruit suggests that the socially constructed image of her as witch should also be discarded. Thus, by replacing the "blackened apple," Mary reverses the action of Eve, and symbolically reverses, or debunks, that socially constructed association of women with evil. Similarly, Atwood is well aware of the higher moral expectations that women face, and also of the social consequences of not living up to these exacting, and unrealistic, standards:

. . . if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not merely human, you're worse than human. You are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster. ("Curse of Eve" 25)

It is not surprising, then, that in "Half-Hanged Mary," the speaker's violation, or defiance, of these social standards has

made her, quite literally, into a "witch."

Ironically, Atwood uses a first person account of the hanging as it occurs, that is, the event from Mary's perspective, to offer an objective view. Since Mary, the independent eccentric, is somewhat detached from society, she is able to perceive the boundaries of social conformity. Her position outside these limits also enables Mary to perceive the contrast between male and female positions within these standards. Yet, this juxtaposition of male and female also suggests the unconscious bisexuality of the human psyche, a Jungian concept introduced at the close of the volume's previous section. This unrecognized duality of the psyche is evident in the transference of evil which occurs via the hanging:

The men of the town stalk homeward  
excited by their show of hate,

their own evil turned inside out like a glove,  
and me wearing it. (59-60)

Ironically, even unfounded or wrongful associations of psychological characteristics with the opposite sex reveal the bisexuality of the human psyche. Any characteristic applied to the other is present also in the self, but is "generally unconscious, revealing [itself through] . . . projections on someone in our environment" (Guerin et al. 171). In "Half-Hanged Mary," the evil these men attribute to the female sex is projected specifically onto Mary, but in reality, the hanging is

an external manifestation of their own unconscious. The evil that the men perceive is actually their own unrecognized psychological characteristic, "their own evil" externalized in a "show of hate." It is this tendency to segregate the sexes, and more generally, self from other, which facilitates judgmentalism. In fact, Jerome Rosenberg notes that unrecognized human collectivity leads to inhumane treatment of others: "Because we do not always perceive this unity, we often act cruelly and (out of guilt or fear) conduct ritual slaughter as a means of redemption and a means of control" ("'For of Such'" 131). Consequently, Atwood's advocacy of unity is directly connected to physical existence. Judgmentalism and the random application of moral standards are the result of unrecognized collectivity, but more significantly, both the moral and social dimensions are grounded in the physical self.

Though Mary recognizes the contrast between male and female positions within these moral and social boundaries, she does not accept conformity as a justification for one's conduct. As a result, when the women come to witness the hanging, Mary witnesses the crippling effect of social conformity: "The bonnets come to stare / . . . I can see their fear. / . . . Help me down? You don't dare" (60). Social conformity has made those who were once friends now discard their opinion, and consider Mary dangerous, evil, a witch; alternatively, even if the women retain their opinion, social conformity makes them powerless. The women are not only afraid of witchcraft, the mystical, but of violating

moral and social boundaries: "In a gathering like this one / the safe place is the background, / . . . the safe stance pointing a finger" (60-61). Atwood is fascinated by the factors influencing moral boundaries. She also recognizes that the individual defines her/his own morality through conduct, and so "she has placed at the centre of her work the unfashionable question of moral choice" (Harvey 4). The crippling fear which accompanies social conformity is no excuse for allowing inhumane action. Barbara Hill Rigney notes that, for Atwood, the individual is responsible for both moral and social boundaries; circumstances do not justify compromise: "what one chooses to do about given conditions is one's own responsibility. . . . One is condemned to one's freedom and must bear the responsibility for both action or refusal to act" (47). That is, inaction is also a conscious decision, so the individual is equally responsible for its consequences.

In "Half-Hanged Mary," the speaker recognizes that the women's inaction is caused by social conformity, but also sees it as a shirking of individual responsibility. Mary conveys this objective view of the women's role with considerable sarcasm:

I understand. You can't spare  
 anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl  
 against the cold,  
 a good word. Lord  
 knows there isn't much  
 to go around. You need it all. (61)

As in "Red Fox" of the volume's first section, Atwood satirizes

the ability to rationalize behaviour so devoid of human compassion. However, the sarcasm, which in "Red Fox" is directed toward the dismissal of moral standards, is re-directed now toward that self-righteous judgmentalism which can result from conforming to social and moral standards. Significantly, Mary lists physical comforts as indications of compassion; this focus on the body indicates Atwood's basis for morality. Rather than circumstance or tradition, the application of moral standards should be regulated by physicality. Hilda Hollis observes that this focus on physical existence is what guides Atwood: "she disputes universalizing moral and social interpretations, but simultaneously recognizes corporeality, a phenomenon that exceeds Western metaphysics" (118). Physicality enables Atwood to advocate moral standards without succumbing to the numbing effects of social conformity. The effect on the physical body defines the limits of moral and social existence, and leaves no room for judgmentalism to condone inhumanity. Moreover, physicality provides a tangible basis for morality, one which insists on some degree of stability. Though moral boundaries are fluid, they are not inscrutable or undefinable: "Morality, *social conscience*, is not innate and fixed, and yet it is not subject to an infinite shifting because the living, breathing child [or human]. . . cannot be written away" (Hollis 134). While recognizing the complexity of social and moral systems, Atwood's use of physicality as the basis for boundaries advocates a distinction between societal judgment and individual values. As

Hollis further notes, "Atwood attempts, through her poetry, to create a very basic metaphysical system--the imposition of suffering and pain on other people is wrong" (142). By emphasizing that this tangible physical body should override any theoretical standards to determine the limits of conduct, Atwood simultaneously draws attention to the human collectivity represented by physical existence.

Ironically, the confinement of the speaker's physical body to the noose releases her from the constant attention demanded by physical existence. Since Mary is removed from "the daily / fingerwork, legwork, work / at the hen level," she is able to resume her exploration of the spiritual aspect of self, informing God that now "we can continue our quarrel, the one about free will." Significantly, this consideration of spirituality parallels Mary's perception of morality and social conformity; she consciously rebels against imposed limits and advocates individual definition of boundaries, or "free will." It is not surprising that Mary approaches spirituality through a connection to physical existence. The hanging of her physical body, an act against her will, prompts Mary to challenge God and the traditional notion of free will. Her perspective, however, is skewed because it remains limited to the physical realm. Mary seems to equate free will with the complete authority to govern her own existence, and she offers the hanging as proof that free will does not exist: "Is it my choice that I'm dangling / like a turkey's wattles from this / more than indifferent tree?" (61).

In contrast, the traditional concept of free will applies to spiritual existence, referring to the individual's right to choose whether to be reconciled to God, or to continue in that disobedience brought on by Original Sin. "Free will," in this respect, makes no pretense of offering unrestricted self-governance; paradoxically, the freedom offered is the voluntary submission to, or rejection of, a Higher Authority. This discrepancy in definition makes it impossible for Mary to reconcile the concept of free will with her present situation since she "sees" only the physical.

Once Mary considers her imminent death, she begins to overcome this limitation of her perspective to physical existence. Yet, while still focused on the physical realm, social condemnation leads Mary to conclude that "Faith, Charity, and Hope / are three dead angels." Charity, of these three concepts, is the most closely linked to physical existence; consequently, the complete absence of charity in Mary's experience results in her dismissal of all three as "dead." Mary's perspective, then, inverts the Biblical claim: "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Cor. 13:13). In fact, none of the three exists any longer, and certainly in Mary's experience, charity was the least of these.

Conversely, the conscious acknowledgement of her physical mortality is indeed "one of the crucial moments" in Mary's life. She is forced into awareness: "My throat is taut against the rope / choking off words and air / . . . Death sits on my shoulder"

(62). Evidence of the spiritual dimension of her self immediately follows this sudden conviction of her own mortality; like a physical reflex action, Mary begins to pray. Initially, the prayer is unrecognizable to her; she observes: "Out of my mouth is coming, at some / distance from me, a thin gnawing sound"

(63). Soon, however, Mary recognizes this desperate prayer to live:

There is only one prayer; it is not  
 the knees in the clean nightgown  
 on the hooked rug,  
*I want this, I want that.*  
 Oh far beyond.  
 Call it *Please*. Call it *Mercy*.  
 Call it *Not yet, not yet*,  
 as Heaven threatens to explode  
 inwards in fire and shredded flesh, and the angels caw.  
 (64)

In spite of Mary's conscious recognition of prayer, spirituality remains a subconscious dimension of the self. Her desire for immortality is no more than that of the cancer cell in the poem "Cell," recognized as a concern for continuing physical existence. Nevertheless, the acknowledged presence of angels, even cawing ones, suggests Mary's subconscious awareness of spiritual existence, life beyond the physical realm.

Like the speaker in the poem "Sekhmet," which concludes the second section, Mary recognizes the insincerity of so-called "religion." By distinguishing between this empty ritual of asking for material blessings, and the one real prayer, the prayer to live, Mary suggests a difference between "religion" and

spirituality. Iris Murdoch maintains that spirituality, in the form of morality, can exist independent of religion: "The word 'spiritual' . . . may be taken over by the moral as a way of saying goodbye to religion" (495). However, she also acknowledges that "[t]hinking about religion throws light upon what morality means and is" (495-96). Similarly, Mary's consideration of religion leads her to redefine morality, and so to redefine her concept of self: "Before, I was not a witch. / But now I am one" (67). This new identity is independent of those moral standards that condemn witchcraft. Bonnie St. Andrews notes that "[t]o gain self-knowledge--for where else does knowledge of good and evil begin--requires moving beyond, potentially, the 'good' and 'evil' defined by existing orders" (10). Consequently, Mary must disregard the moral standards by which society has judged her, and rely on her own judgment; she must replace that "blackened apple." Atwood's speaker has developed considerably from the section's opening poem, "Romantic," in which she resigns herself and all women to a stereotypical gender role, simply accepting sexist standards. In "Half-Hanged Mary," the speaker, who begins by challenging these social standards, no longer needs to rebel against social condemnation. She simply "refuses to allow male 'morality' to define reality for her" (Christ 14). As a result, Mary's claim that she is now a witch may seem to be a concession to societal standards, but it is actually a dismissal of them.

Mary's description of herself as "a witch" is not based on social moral standards, but rather on a redefinition of her

subjectivity. If she were conceding defeat, the speaker would necessarily have to admit that she has been a witch all along. That she maintains her prior innocence, "[b]efore, I was not a witch," suggests that a change has taken place. Likewise, the transference of evil which occurs when Mary is cut down, "[t]hey see their own ill will / staring them in the forehead / and turn tail," does not account for the change since Mary already wore their evil when she was first strung up. The change has occurred in Mary's perspective. She now recognizes an existence separate from her physical body: "My body of skin waxes and wanes / around my true body" (67). This new definition of self suggests a mysterious spiritual existence which Mary can only vaguely define as "a tender nimbus." Atwood's speaker acknowledges the spiritual dimension of self, substantiating the need to explore its mystery. Significantly, Mary's constant awareness of physical death accompanies this new definition of self: "My first death orbits my head, / an ambiguous nimbus, / medallion of my ordeal" (68). As Atwood contends, the awareness of one's mortality is a crucial, life-changing moment. The speaker discovers spirituality through mortality. Though Mary escaped death once, this only seems to heighten her awareness of human mortality: "My audience is God, / because who the hell else could understand me? / Who else has been dead twice?" (69). This off-hand remark also implies that God exists just as Mary does; although Mary claims to have been "dead twice," she is very much alive. Still, the recognition of spirituality seems to intensify the separation

between self and other, since Mary is convinced no one other than God could possibly understand her.

Ironically, this acceptance of the mysterious spiritual dimension of the self unites self with other, without Mary's knowledge. Though adopting her new identity leads to complete social ostracism in the physical realm, it actually restores lost collectivity to Mary. The co-existence of polarities, which characterizes both the lost feminine collectivity in "Marsh Languages" and also objectivity, now characterizes Mary's existence: "The cosmos unravels from my mouth, / all fullness, all vacancy" (69). This restoration of collectivity, though unrecognized by the speaker at this point in the volume, suggests the poetry's constant movement toward conscious recognition of human collectivity. Similarly, the co-existence of polarities in nature, "I eat flowers and dung, / two forms of the same thing" (68), continues to suggest the union of the spiritual and physical realms in nature. The natural life cycle seems to be a physical manifestation of immortality. However, like the "Military Historian," Mary recognizes the natural life cycle, but fails to make the conscious connection to the human life cycle. The co-existence of polarities and her recognition of them does suggest an important accomplishment of which Mary is aware. She is able to "look objectively" and speak freely: "I can now say anything I can say" (68). Since she has just become aware of a spiritual self distinct from her physical self Mary is far from understanding its nature. This mystery makes objectivity

invaluable for facilitating her study of the unknown. "Half-Hanged Mary" uses the physical self to acknowledge the co-existence of the moral, social, mortal, and spiritual aspects of self; however, it only begins to explore collectivity, death, and an existence beyond the physical realm.

Following this pivotal point in the volume, Atwood tidies up the section with two poems which emphasize the speaker's awareness of change. Both poems integrate earlier concerns with suggestions of the direction to be taken in the final two sections. In "Down," Atwood returns to a consideration of language in order to establish it as the means of exploring the unknown. The speaker begins by describing a new recognition of the mystery that exists in life, and her/his conviction of a realm beyond the physical: "the underworld emerges. / It can happen at any moment." Nevertheless, physical existence is essential to the exploration of this intangible realm. The speaker enters this alternate existence only through the physical act of writing. Writing is portrayed as a process that is, at least partially, unconscious: "Old thread, old line / of ink . . . / where are you leading me this time?" (72). Atwood recognizes this power of language to unite the physical and intangible realms; as she remarks, "Writing is where the world and the word connect. Even in the 'real' world, the tangible and visible is not for most people the only reality" (*Southern Ontario Gothic* 19). Not surprisingly, then, writing leads the speaker to the underworld: "past the believable, / down into the darkness /

where you reverse and shine" (73). The sudden switch to second person in describing the underworld suggests an attempt to retain objectivity by distancing the self. Moreover, it reinforces the volume's earlier suggestion of the speaker's fragmented subjectivity. Her/his conscious description of the unconscious creates a perceived internal split; the unconscious becomes "other," and so the speaker identifies her/himself as "you." Significantly, the speaker discovers that those who inhabit the underworld are vying for a voice: "these mute voices . . . / [are] trying to make you hear them" (73). This need draws attention to the fact that the speaker is also the writer. Being led by the unconscious was her/his way of entry into the underworld, but the purpose of the journey seems to be the writer's conscious recognition of spiritual existence, for the writer to hear those mute voices.

The necessity of physical existence for the writer's developing awareness is not limited to performing that act of writing which involves the unconscious. As with morality in "Half-Hanged Mary," Atwood's insistence on grounding the intangible in physicality persists in "Down." The writer can only acknowledge the voices through her/his physical body:

What do they need?

You make a cut in yourself,  
a little opening  
for the pain to get in.  
You set loose three drops of your blood. (73)

This recognition of uniting the physical with spiritual existence seems to be an instinctive partaking of suffering, but it is also suggestive of ritual sacrifice. Kathryn VanSpankeren connects such journeys to the underworld specifically to the ritual of shamanic descent, and claims that Atwood's work "identifies it [shamanism] with the creative process, with its powers and dangers, particularly the danger that despite the return, the descent into the creative subterranean realm of the unconscious permanently changes the shaman . . ." (189). Atwood indeed seems to expect a conscious change in the writer as a result of this descent. The voices ask the writer to "[s]peak for us," to "[w]itness" (74). Yet, Atwood also claims that the spiritual value of writing, of "bearing witness," is not limited to the writer, but extends beyond her/him; she insists that writing is "spiritually important, spiritually important for our communities" ("Trip Through the Inferno" 2). This connection between writer and community reflects the interdependence between the individual and society, as well as the volume's progression toward this recognition.

Atwood links the physical act of writing with spiritual development as both a means and a result. The writer enters the unconscious through the writing process, and this journey leads her/him to write. Perhaps more significantly, writing is consistently connected to physical existence; it is not independent of life in the "real world," but is grounded in the physical. As Sherrill Grace notes, "[t]hough fascinated by . . .

the independence of a verbal universe, Atwood remains committed to social and ethical perspectives in her art" (*Violent Duality* 130). The rhetorical question that concludes the poem implies the need for the connections between writing, spiritual awareness, and social existence in the physical world. The speaker prompts the writer, her/his own unconscious, to act on the new recognition. The question, "What are you supposed to do / with all this loss?" (75), makes clear that a course of action is expected, and suggests that the response, for a writer, is to write.

It is significant to note that the loss which the speaker/writer has experienced is connected to death. As in the volume's first section, loss is recognized in retrospect and indicates a movement toward discovery. The voices that the writer encounters in the underworld belong only to those whose physical existence ended in unnecessary and brutal death. The list of these sufferings and grim deaths is horrifying in length, and seriously questions the moral standards of a society which allows such conduct. The voices of the underworld, "the kingdom of the unspoken" (74), seem to scream for the writer's attention, and s/he is far from powerless. As Janice Kulyk Keefer notes, the writer has the power "to tell the terrible or tedious truths of how we live and how things are," but also possesses the power "to envision alternatives to the morally intolerable reality we've created" (164). In "Down," however, the writer does not actually engage in writing upon return from the underworld. The poem

concludes with the implication of this result, but the writer's instinctive response is to turn to nature: "You want to wash yourself / in earth, in rocks and grass" (75). S/he recognizes the existence of the life cycle in nature, and seems aware of the parallel to human life. Kathryn VanSpanckeren makes the more drastic assertion that such an affiliation with nature is, in fact, an affiliation with the dead: "The dead . . . penetrate the world of the living; they inspirit the body of nature, with its cycles of life and death" (189). This connection suggests not only that nature provides the physical evidence of cyclical existence, but also that the intangible realm of spiritual human existence manifests itself in nature. In this manner, "Down" provides a foundation for the increasing significance of nature as *Morning in the Burned House* proceeds to examine spiritual existence and the human life cycle.

In keeping with the transitional nature of the third section, the final poem reintroduces and re-evaluates ideas from earlier in the volume while simultaneously establishing a basis for the remaining sections. The opening stanza of "A Pink Hotel in California" integrates both of these functions. The poem begins with Atwood's speaker recounting memories of the past: "My father chops with his axe / and the leaves fall off the trees. / It's nineteen forty-three" (76). Unlike the recollections that characterize the volume's first section, however, these memories are described in first person and use the present tense, giving them an odd sense of immediacy. The introduction of the father

figure is particularly suggestive of the volume's direction; he is closely associated not only with nature but, more specifically, with death in nature: chopping wood, falling leaves, the approach of winter. In the final sections, Atwood examines death directly in connection to the father figure; her exploration of the life cycle and the possibility of spiritual existence centers around this loss, from anticipating his death to mourning its occurrence.

In this first stanza, the speaker also associates the father with a gun, which provides a direct link to the developing consideration of war. War is initially presented in connection to the other, and in stark contrast to the "comfort and safety" connected with the self: "The children dance around it [a bonfire], / singing about the war / which is happening elsewhere" (76-77). However, the speaker is suddenly conscious of a change in perspective, and of the terrible reality of war hidden behind those childhood jingles: "What has become of them, those words / that once shone with such / glossy innocence?" Significantly, Atwood's speaker recognizes her/his changed perspective through language in the new significance attributed to the words that are now connected with physical pain and death. Once s/he has achieved this recognition, it is impossible for the speaker to dismiss "the war / which won't stay under the waves and leaves" (77). Atwood is well aware of this power of language to disrupt, disquiet, and disillusion. As a writer she values such power, but Atwood also acknowledges that the rude awakening is generally

unwelcome and even avoided: "on the whole, audiences prefer that art be not a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul, containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland, and all the other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth" ("Disneyland" 129). Yet it is this disturbing complexity of human existence with which Atwood continually confronts the reader, which the speaker must face.

Facing this complexity results in the speaker's most significant conscious recognition. S/he becomes aware of the cyclical nature of life and her/his own connection to it: "This is the pink hotel / where everything recurs / and nothing is elsewhere" (77). The fluctuation between 1943 and 1994 within the poem suggests that the cyclical nature of life exists even in "linear" time. Only in the very last line of the last poem of this section does the speaker connect "external" events to the self. By admitting that "nothing is elsewhere," the speaker portrays the development of her/his understanding, and suggests the individual's inextricable connection to society. War is no longer "happening elsewhere," so the naive and false security of childhood is shattered. The speaker's movement from the juxtaposition of self and other, to the association of war, that which was strictly "other," with self indicates the increasing recognition of human collectivity. Moreover, the numerous references to death in the poem, either as a result of war or symbolized by the ashes that were once trees, combined with the cyclical nature of existence, foreshadow the speaker's conscious

connection of physical mortality to the self. The section concludes with the speaker on the verge of that very acknowledgment of mortality, about to experience what Atwood terms that "crucial moment in any life." Throughout the third section, the objective analysis of physicality has revealed aspects of the moral, social, and mortal self; it has suggested and questioned the existence of the spiritual self. Even now, in the section's final poem, the importance of physical existence remains. Until the speaker recognizes the limitations of physical existence, s/he is unlikely to desire more, but once death becomes real, personal, and seemingly final, the possibility of continuing existence in another realm becomes well worth exploring. To achieve this recognition through this exploration is the goal of the remaining poems in *Morning in the Burned House*.

### Chapter 3

#### "Now see"

*"My own dim life should teach me this,  
That life shall live for evermore,  
Else earth is darkness at the core,  
And dust and ashes all that is."*

*-- Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

Atwood's poetry is like a series of oscillating concentric circles, moving ever outward only to return inward, and therein lies its power. The speaker's constantly roaming vision precludes the possible risk of either self-absorption or simple detachment, and explores, rather, the extent of self-involvement in "external" events. As the radius of focus expands, boundaries are pushed outward, and the increased distance necessarily delays, but does not prevent, the volume's consistent return to self. Moreover, this progressive circular structure creates an interdependence among the sections of *Morning in the Burned House*. The speaker's gradual recognition of the connection of death to the self, suggestively directed by the final lines of the previous section, resumes in the fourth section. Though this section ostensibly examines death in connection to the other, as

the speaker tries to come to terms with the death of her/his father, it is the speaker's connection of mortality to self which characterizes the poems. That this series of elegiac poems fills an entire section of the volume underlines their obvious claim on Atwood's attention, a persistent focus which is attributable to the actual death of her own father. Atwood herself maintains that biographical connections are irrelevant: "You don't need biographical information unless the work is unintelligible without it" (Sandler 16). Though the reader may not "need" the information to understand the work, an awareness of such drastic changes in a writer's life can still suggest reasons for certain predominant themes.

Just as George Woodcock has recognized that drawing the connection between Atwood's work and her personal life "may be irrelevantly biographical," and yet that the tone of *Two-Headed Poems* does seem largely influenced by the domestic changes in Atwood's life ("Metamorphosis" 134-35), the present thesis recognizes a similar personal influence directing Atwood's attention in *Morning in the Burned House*. This awareness also moves the voice of the speaker undeniably closer to that of Atwood herself. The fragmented subjectivity of the previous sections seems to change, and the speaker becomes a distinct voice of Atwood, a female persona closely aligned to the writer. Moreover, such a recognition of personal loss may suggest that the apparent brusqueness characterizing these "elegies" is, in fact, a pervading sense of numbness. These poems may be Atwood's

attempt, as a writer, to examine a death so personal and so traumatic that she returns her speaker to that role of "spectator," which Frank Davey identifies in her early work, in order to formulate an analysis of the event. Not surprisingly, such an analysis treats the actual event briefly, in a single poem, but focuses on the effects of this death, trying to come to terms with human mortality.

In this section of the volume, the speaker not only witnesses death, but internalizes mortality. Through the relation to self, the speaker moves from looking objectively to seeing, and so to seeking continuity of life; as Tennyson would have it: "My own dim life should teach me this, / That life shall live for evermore." Once the transience of physical existence is acknowledged, a belief in spiritual immortality seems necessary to preserve meaning in life: "Else earth is darkness at the core, / And dust and ashes all that is." Consequently, the speaker's increasing recognition of mortality is accompanied by a complementary awareness of the spiritual realm. That mortality is first connected to the other, then applied directly to the self, indicates the underlying human collectivity through physicality, as in the third section. However, collectivity is more encompassing in the fourth section, as it is also based on spirituality. Atwood distinguishes between physical and spiritual existence by focusing on the role of death within the life cycle. This emphasis also suggests the correlation of humanity and nature, thereby leading into the final section of *Morning in the*

*Burned House*. Yet, the speaker's awareness of spiritual existence must be personal, learned from her "own dim life," and desired, before she can engage in exploring the full human life cycle.

The key concerns of the volume's fourth section are all contained in the opening poem, "Man in a Glacier." The speaker immediately addresses the reader with an imperative: "Now see" (81). This direction is followed by a detailed physical description of a man literally frozen in time, preserved in a glacier, which both introduces death and nature, and suggests a connection between them. Though the imperative seems simply to guide the reader's visual perception, the words carry far greater importance. As in the previous section, Atwood uses the imperative to indicate an insight the speaker has achieved and toward which she directs the reader. In comparison to the speaker's earlier prompting, "[n]ow look objectively," the direction "[n]ow see" suggests a recognized distinction between looking and *seeing*; that is, the speaker seems to insist on a movement beyond observation to assimilation. This movement from external to personal not only structures the poem, but reflects the development of the entire section. Once mortality is recognized in the other, the speaker "sees" its connection to the self, which propels the exploration of spirituality.

The structure of "Man in a Glacier" follows the speaker's transition from looking at the external to seeing the personal. The poem begins with a physical description of the frozen messenger, which includes a brief allusion to spirituality; the

man was found "with everything intact: shoes, teeth, and arrows, / closed eyes, fur hat, the charm he wore to protect him / from death by snow." The charm is a physical representation of a superstition, or perhaps even a primitive religion, and his present state clearly depicts its ineffectiveness: "They think he must have been / a messenger, done in by bad weather." This oblique reference to a futile system of belief casts a shade of doubt on human attempts to deal with spirituality. It is this frozen image of the man that Atwood uses to move from the objective (other-related) to the subjective (self-related). The speaker draws the connection from the literal to the figurative image, moving abruptly from the archaeological discovery to unearthed slides of her father. This parallel between the discoveries suggests that the father figure is also dead, and the speaker substantiates this speculation with the claim: "here's my father, / alive or else preserved" (81). Like the man in the glacier, the slides are able to preserve the image of the father "with everything intact," but they cannot preserve life. The speaker not only recognizes this limitation of the still slide image, but also draws a comparison to the protective charm:

This was all we got,  
 this echo, this freeze-framed  
 simulacrum or slight imprint  
 in answer to our prayers for everlastingness. (82)

As an answer to the plea for immortality, the slide is sadly inadequate, suggesting that the speaker's prayers are as useless

as the primitive beliefs represented by the charm. Human attempts to deal with spirituality, then, seem to be devalued as futile and ineffective.

However, the speaker's disappointment is due to the fact that she views "everlastingness" solely in terms of physical existence. This persistent focus on the physical self fails to acknowledge the possibility of existence in a spiritual realm; consequently, death is final, the end of existence. Since the slide is all that remains of the speaker's father in the physical realm, and she is unaware of any other, the sense of loss is heightened. Like the poem "Waiting," early in the volume, Atwood connects the speaker's recognition of loss to a growing realization of mortality. This fourth section focuses on the speaker's increasing awareness and leads into the final section, where loss and discovery co-exist. In "Man in a Glacier," the loss is that of the speaker's father through physical death, and the resulting discovery is the recognition of physical mortality: "the first time we discovered / we could not stop, or live backwards" (82). This recognition is both a significant development of understanding and an indication of the limits of the speaker's perception. The speaker's use of the first person plural subject to describe the discovery is revealing. Clearly, she not only objectively recognizes physical mortality in the other, but also sees its connection to the self. That is, the speaker has passed what Atwood terms that "crucial moment in any life" of becoming aware of one's own mortality, and is now

capable of expanding her vision. Yet, at this point, the speaker views the human life cycle strictly as the unstoppable linear progression of a determinate time span.

This perception of the life cycle seems to be confined to the physical realm; it is biological, scientific, and terminates in physical death. Ironically, the speaker identifies this discovery with the ability to see rather than simply to look:

when we opened  
our eyes, found we were rocked  
with neither love nor malice in the ruthless  
icy arms of Chemistry and Physics, our  
bad godmothers. (82)

Though the speaker's recognition of collective biological mortality does indicate a sharpening of perception, the insistent focus solely on physicality simultaneously reveals her lack of awareness of spirituality. However, this lack of consciousness by no means eliminates the speaker's spiritual self; it only draws attention to her level of awareness. In a review of *Surfacing*, Margaret Laurence remarks that Atwood deals with the ultimate quest by exploring:

the theme which is central to our mythology, our religions, our history and (whether we know it or not) our hearts--humankind's quest for the archetypal parents, for our gods, for our own meanings in the face of our knowledge of the inevitability of death. (47)

Similarly, *Morning in the Burned House* traces the search for

meanings in the face of death. The speaker's recognition of mortality leads to the corresponding recognition of the need for something beyond physical transience. Once aware of this need, the speaker seeks a means to fulfil it, and so looks beyond physicality. Atwood's exploration of humanity must include spirituality as she examines the possibility of existence outside the tangible realm. The speaker's awareness of the spiritual dimension increases gradually, and Atwood follows its progression, tracing the recognition of death from a physical end to a step in the life cycle.

As a result, "Man in a Glacier" continues to limit conscious discovery to the physical realm, but also suggests an instinctive awareness of spirituality. The speaker is aware that the recognition of physical mortality is both inevitable and collective. She seems to attribute this recognition to science, but personifies Chemistry and Physics into evil godmothers, "who were present at our birth, who laid / the curse on us: *You will not sleep forever*" (82). This combination of science and fairy tale imagery suggests the existence of the intangible, or more specifically, of the mysterious, the mystical. In fact, Atwood claims that science and mysticism are not mutually exclusive. When asked in an interview about the presence of mysticism in her work, Atwood notes that drawing such a conclusion is a matter of perspective: "Much of what you may interpret as mysticism is simply science translated into a literary form. In other words, if you take a physicist and push him far enough he will get to

something that is pretty close to what you might call mysticism" (Hammond 115). The speaker's explanation, then, reveals the boundaries of her consciousness, defining what she sees.

Notably, the speaker's recognition of the transience of physical existence instinctively leads to spirituality. This discovery of mortality is what causes the "prayers for everlastingness," the desperate plea to continue physical existence which is identified in "Half-Hanged Mary" as the only real prayer: "Call it *Please*. Call it *Mercy*. / Call it *Not yet, not yet*" (64). Ironically, the speaker unconsciously acknowledges the spiritual dimension of self through the act of praying. Although the prayer is limited to the physical, in that it is a request to preserve mortal life, the act itself extends to the spiritual and social dimensions. This instinctive response provides evidence of an unconscious recognition of the spiritual realm. While not necessarily connected to traditional "religion," the speaker's prayer must be addressed to an intangible Higher Power, some Life source, even if unknown. Moreover, as in "Half-Hanged Mary," praying is a reflex, and this innate reaction to the imminence of physical death substantiates the existence of a spiritual dimension in the self. In "Man in a Glacier," however, this manifestation of spirituality occurs as the result of the indirect threat of mortality. The speaker is not dangling precariously from the tightening noose herself, but recognizes the limitations of physicality in the other and applies them to the self. This awareness of collectivity indicates the speaker's

acknowledgement of the social dimension of self. Yet though the speaker claims to see, "we discovered / . . . when we opened / our eyes" (82), and there is some evidence of a sharpened perception, her vision is clearly still limited to the tangible. Death is viewed only as final loss, rather than a step in the life cycle, and so the recognition of mortality is an inevitable "curse." From this perspective, it is ironic that the speaker unknowingly demonstrates that this "curse" leads to spirituality. Similarly, the remainder of the section builds on this limited understanding of death to explore the concept, and leads to the speaker's conscious discovery, in Tennyson's words, "[t]hat life shall live for evermore."

The transition from external to personal in "Man in a Glacier" establishes the direction for the entire section. The re-orientation from the other to the self occurs not only in the obvious movement from the archaeological discovery to the fossil of personal history, but also in the speaker's assimilation of her/his father's mortality. It is the latter, the intangible, rather than the tangible, transition which seems to fascinate Atwood. Indeed, she considers this awareness of the transience of one's own physical life "a crucial moment" and, like Tennyson, relates it directly to acknowledgement of the spiritual realm. Consequently, the fourth section of *Morning in the Burned House* seeks continuity of life, moving toward the recognition of existence beyond the physical. Atwood engages in this exploration of the life cycle specifically through the speaker's

confrontation with the death of her father. Though the opening poem reveals the speaker's awareness of mortality, and describes it in retrospect, the section reverts to tracing the gradual progress of this awareness. Thus Atwood's interest in the process of exploration leading to discovery is again brought to the forefront. The poems examine the stages of awareness by depicting the speaker and her father both prior to and following his death. Perhaps most importantly, this detailed exploration of the speaker's loss not only traces her conscious recognition of physical mortality, which "Man in a Glacier" leads the reader fully to expect, but also reveals the complementary development of spiritual awareness only suggested in the opening poem.

The next four poems of the section, from "Wave" to "Dancing," seem to comprise a type of unit in which the perceptions of the father and the speaker are intertwined, but possess some degree of ordered progression. The poems move from the speaker relating the father's perceptions to include the speaker's own perceptions, revelations of self, based on these observations of the other. In "Wave," the speaker reveals both the limitations of her father's perception, and his intuitive awareness. The father is overcome by a powerful wave of forgetfulness which obliterates much of the past, much of his life: "Suddenly, whole beaches / were simply gone." In addition, he is disoriented and confused by the present, which he does not recognize either. Consequently, the speaker is aware of the limitations of her father's perception: "We remained to him in

fragments" (83). This loss of memory causes the father to view both self and other as fragments, to see only parts of the whole. Yet in spite of this limited vision, his confusion reveals an intuitive awareness. Atwood reverts to the image established in "A Pink Hotel in California" at the conclusion of the third section to indicate now the father's recognition of pending physical death: "We need more wood, he said. / The winter's on its way, / It will be bad" (84). This connection of the father to nature, fire(wood), and an intense approaching winter, foreshadows his death. At this point, however, it is the father who is aware of his mortality, not the speaker; she seems only to lament the physical loss of memory he has already experienced.

"King Lear in Respite Care" also focuses on the father's perception, rather than the speaker's, and juxtaposes increasing limitation with surprising intuition. The father's perception seems unreliable, obscured and blinded as by a cataract. Nothing is familiar any longer; he even views himself as a stranger:

Another man's hand  
coming out of a tweed sleeve that isn't  
his, curls on his knee. He can move it with the other  
hand. Howling would be uncalled for. (85)

Self is other and unrecognized, but more significantly, it is the physical body that is a stranger. The father is no longer able to assimilate the concept of self with physical existence. As a result, the physical self is described in the third person, placed at a distance. Like the very first poem of the volume,

"You Come Back," the omniscience of the speaker makes the connection between speaker and subject ambiguous. The confusion between self and other, then, extends from the father and his physical body to the father and the speaker. The identity of the speaker is particularly equivocal in the sudden philosophical insight: "Time is another element / you never think about / until it's gone" (85-86). Though this anonymous conclusion seems to be based on observation, it is unclear whether this observation is of self or other. Conversely, it is clear that the "you" is all-inclusive, and so the statement relates to both self and other, making the distinction inconsequential; in fact, this anonymity gives the statement an air of authority. The contrast of the father figure's limited perception to this firm conclusion intensifies its significance. The statement connects loss to increased awareness; time is added to other unnamed elements that only come to attention when they are "gone." This connection complements the structure of Atwood's volume by suggesting that loss is required for discovery to occur.

Loss is also a distinguishing feature of the poem "A Visit." On the obvious level, loss is evident in the speaker's recognition of those physical losses which are connected to the process of aging, and are observed in the other: the ever-dimming memory, the paralysed hand, the immobile feet, the lack of "[a]ll the brain's gadgets." The poem seems simply to deal with physical deterioration in the other and its effect on the self, portraying the sadness and vicarious sense of loss experienced by the

speaker. However, the first stanza suggests that the recognition of these physical losses is directly connected to spirituality. The opening lines juxtapose the image of a Christ figure with a human: "Gone are the days / when you could walk on water. / When you could walk" (88). Physical deterioration has resulted in a new awareness of limitations; however, whether the speaker is describing her father's perception or her own is ambiguous. These lines may refer to the father's altered perception of himself in that physical losses have led to the awareness that he is neither invincible nor immortal. Instead, the father recognizes his physical vulnerability and mortality; he is but human, after all, and subject to physical limitations.

Alternatively, the beginning of the poem may refer to the speaker's perception of the father, marking the section's transition from the perspective of the other to that of the self. Once the speaker recognizes physical deterioration, she no longer idealizes the father as an infallible, immortal deity; he is no longer able to defy nature, to "walk on water." Peter Slater remarks that this recognition of the distinction between spiritual deities and falsely idealized humans is related to attaining adulthood: "We have to see our childhood 'gods' as fallible adults like ourselves. . . . [P]art of this experience is the discovery that the gods too experience death and rebirth" (*Dynamics* 148). The speaker's recognition of physical deterioration does cause her to acknowledge the father's mortality, as opposed to the immortality attributed to gods, but

also seems to limit him to physical existence. Conversely, Slater relates the shattered idealization directly to the awareness of the continuity of life, to the discovery of "death and rebirth" and not simply of mortality. This connection seems to suggest that the speaker is moving toward discovering the life cycle, though she is not yet aware of spirituality. In fact, in the subsequent poem, "Dancing," the speaker readily acknowledges the hidden mystery in life: "There is always more than you know" (90). It follows, then, that there is always more to discover by exploring the unknown; dispelling one mystery will inevitably uncover another. The speaker's recognition of her own limited perspective is a significant development and suggests a desire for reaching beyond boundaries, for moving out into a larger circle of vision.

As though to emphasize the significance of the speaker's increasing perception, Atwood focuses on her developing vision in the poem "Bored." The movement from looking objectively to seeing is two-fold, both tangible and intangible. The poem begins with recollections of the past, much like the first section of the volume, in which the speaker describes routine activities once shared with her father. These activities are domestic chores, tasks which the speaker, as child, regarded as numbingly repetitive and monotonous; she remembers them as "[a]ll those times I was bored / out of my mind." Yet, in retrospect, the speaker makes a finer distinction:

It  
 wasn't even boredom, it was looking,  
 looking hard and up close at the small  
 details. Myopia. (91)

The details on which the speaker focuses are related to physical existence, primarily to fulfilling the needs of the body by providing food and shelter: helping with yardwork, gardening, housework. She seems to be engaging in these activities because it is expected, part of the role of "child," and so her involvement is half-hearted or absent-minded. Nevertheless, these domestic chores fulfil many basic level needs, which early twentieth-century psychologist Abraham Maslow has identified as the foundation of an innate human hierarchy of needs:

*"Physiological needs* include the needs for food, water, warmth, and sexual contact. . . . *Safety needs* include the needs for security, dependency, freedom from fear, and a stable and structured environment" (Carlson 556). The "myopia" of Atwood's speaker, then, describes her tendency to concentrate on these basic aspects of physical existence. Ironically, the innate hierarchical arrangement makes it necessary to secure these "primitive" human needs before "higher level," that is, less tangible, needs can be fulfilled. As a result, such concentration on physical needs by Atwood's speaker is actually suggestive of the future movement beyond single vision to duality of perception, and also indicative of the interdependent connection between physicality and spirituality.

Significantly, this "myopia" is not limited to circumstances

which keep the childhood speaker absorbed in "[s]uch minutiae" of physicality, but also suggests her lack of perspective in general. Like the imperative that begins the fourth section, "now see," the father attempts to direct the speaker's perception of physical existence to be more inclusive. Though she recalls the father trying to draw her attention to the domestic activities of animals fulfilling the same basic needs as humans, "He pointed / such things out," the speaker's attention was always elsewhere: "I would look / at the whorled texture of his square finger, earth under / the nail." This fixation of vision on what is immediate, rather than distant, provides evidence of the speaker's "myopia" in relation to physical surroundings. However, "myopia" is defined not only as a physical condition of optical limitations, but also as "lack of insight or discernment; obtuseness" ("Myopia"). The speaker's focus on the father's physical body, then, suggests her blindness to the existence of a spiritual dimension. She is blind to larger life and cannot see beyond the tangible realm; vision is limited to a single dimension.

In retrospect, the speaker recognizes this "myopia," or lack of insight, which characterized her childhood. Yet knowledge seems burdensome, and she toys with the concept that ignorance is bliss: "Perhaps though / boredom is happier. It is for dogs or / groundhogs" (92). Significantly, the speaker connects contentment in such limited awareness to animals. Jean Gibbs notes that in Atwood's work, "Humanity is reduced to bestiality with its

concern for only immediate physical needs. . . . The wish to escape into a larger existence is reiterated many times over" (63). That is, human need differs from animal need, and cannot be satisfied by mere physicality; rather, the desire for "escape into a larger existence" suggests an innate need for spirituality, an existence beyond the physical. Though Atwood's speaker does quickly abandon the idea of happiness in myopic physical existence, whether she is consciously aware of a spiritual realm remains unclear.

The concluding lines of "Bored" do suggest that the speaker's perception has moved beyond the physical: "Now I wouldn't be bored. / Now I would know too much. / Now I would know" (92). Nevertheless, exactly what she "would know" is ambiguous. Atwood seems to include the possibility that the speaker recognizes that existence outlives physical boundaries; if she acknowledges spiritual existence, then her vision would no longer be limited to scrutinizing physical details, to that "boredom." The significance of the physical would be distinctly minimized. Conversely, the speaker may realize that physical existence is not permanent, without necessarily acknowledging spiritual existence. In this case, she would not be "bored" by "such minutiae" either since she would be carefully scrutinizing it to preserve in memory that which will otherwise cease to exist; the physical would have even greater significance for the speaker than in childhood. The ambiguity created by these bipolar possibilities is particularly effective since it emphasizes the

prevailing sense of regret in "Bored." Regardless of the degree of awareness the reader attributes to the speaker--which, in fact, may depend on the reader's own degree of awareness since s/he functions as an "interpreter," assigning meaning to the ambiguous references--the poem expresses regret for an experienced loss. Though the regret may be interpreted as a longing for the past, as in the volume's first section, the intensity of this loss intimates the death of the father figure. Since Atwood neither overtly states nor affirms the occurrence of this event, the suggestion of death takes on an air of mystery, intrigue and uncertainty; the poem wavers between a retrospective lament and a foreboding prediction. Perhaps most significantly, this ambiguity reflects the blurred vision of the speaker, thereby emphasizing the need to move beyond myopic perception.

Though the speaker's attention remains focused primarily on the physical, her conscious recognition of mortality now leads to a distinct increase of perception in the following poem, "Flowers." Initially, the speaker relates the father's perception of his surroundings. In contrast to "Bored," she focuses on that to which the father draws her attention: "He says he is on a ship, / and I can see it." Though the speaker recognizes that the father's conclusion is based on the physical resemblance of the hospital to a ship, this new found ability to "see" is more than an acknowledgement of the father's perspective. The speaker's own perception uses the tangible to move into the intangible; she now sees the ship as the ship of death. In fact, the speaker's focus

on the father's physicality reinforces this connection; his physical position suggests death: "He lies flattened under the white sheet" (93). Despite the fact that the father is still alive, this traditional signification of death guides the speaker's perception. Thus the poem shifts from the father's perception of the ship-like surroundings to the speaker's perception of her father on the ship of death:

he is on a ship;  
 he's giving us up, giving up everything  
 but the breath going in  
 and out of his diminished body;  
 away from us and our waving hands  
 that do not wave. (94)

This description of the father "giving up everything" suggests that he perceives the connotative meaning of ship as well. However, the fact that this description is from the speaker's perspective is most significant, indicating the transition in focus from the father's perception to that of the self. The exclusive focus on the speaker's perception in the rest of the poem also provides evidence of her increasing range of vision and assimilation of the other.

Unlike the poem "Bored," wherein the speaker's recollection of the past is of shared tedium, "Flowers" describes her recollection of divided pleasure. Though the speaker remembers that final fishing expedition in vivid detail, the memory of irretrievable happiness does not simply create a deep sense of regret; it sharpens the speaker's perception. Despite her

father's present state of physical deterioration, or perhaps because of it, the speaker now recognizes that he consists of more than the physical self: "somewhere in there, . . . / is the same father I knew before." This recognition of the existence of an intangible realm is still vague. The speaker does not connect this abstract dimension of her father directly to spirituality, yet acknowledging the existence of an unseen, if indefinable, aspect of the father demonstrates a gradual broadening of vision.

This hazy recognition of the intangible is accompanied by a sharply contrasting, clear recognition of mortality. The speaker not only acknowledges her father's pending death, but also relates this mortality of the other immediately to the self:

There will be a last time for this also,  
 bringing cut flowers to this white room.  
 Sooner or later I too  
 will have to give everything up. (95)

Echoing the description of her father on the ship of death, "giving up everything," the speaker consciously recognizes both the collectivity of physical existence and its transience. This awareness emphasizes what Stan Persky admires as Atwood's "sense of the tenuousness of our being" in *Morning in the Burned House* (C25). It is significant to note that the "tenuousness" Atwood conveys is that of the mortal self; equally significant is her exploration of the intangible dimensions of self, which insists that selfhood is not limited to physicality. Part of the power behind Atwood's volume is her ability to explore simultaneously

the tangible and intangible, recognizing the complexity of their inextricable connections, rather than attempting to simplify and separate them. Moreover, she neither devalues nor dismisses the potency of physical existence, and so the speaker in "Flowers" clings to wishes of preserving her father's life, anticipating memories of visiting him in the hospital, and all the while "hoping I could still save him" (95). Since the speaker is not consciously aware of an existence beyond the physical, her desire to "save him" from physical death has a sense of urgency; it is the need to prevent what is recognized as inevitable, but is also perceived as the end.

Atwood portrays dreams as manifestations of the speaker's developing consciousness. The movement toward a recognition of the spiritual dimension occurs through the unconscious, as revealed in "Two Dreams." Prior to the father's death, the speaker has two similar, but diametrically opposed, dreams of him. The first dream represents death strictly as the end of physical existence. The father chooses the classical literary, though typically female, death by drowning; he includes the melodrama of his wife, the speaker's mother, witnessing as "*[h]e went into the lake, in all his clothes, / just waded out and sank.*" Whereas the mother is left in a helpless panic, "*Why did he do that?*" the speaker responds to her frantic cry: "I dove to find him" (96). This act of diving, strongly reminiscent of Atwood's protagonist in *Surfacing*, represents the speaker's attempt to understand "why." Jerome Rosenberg identifies such

actions as "Atwood's typically ambivalent consideration of death, of submergence into nature, of the journey into the underground side of the human soul" (*Margaret Atwood* 69). However, the speaker in "Two Dreams" is unsuccessful in achieving any understanding of death; the father is beyond her reach: "he was too far down" (96). This distance in the failed attempt to reach the physical body also suggests that the speaker is not conscious of diving into "the underground side of the human soul." Rather, she remains fixated on physical existence and views the father as irretrievably lost.

In spite of the apparent failure of the speaker's dive in the first dream, this submergence into the unconscious seems necessary to enable the speaker to dive deeper. Ironically, the speaker's journey deeper into the unconscious in the second dream occurs above ground. Since the dream occurs prior to the father's death, it is suitably set in autumn, preceding the "winter" of death foreshadowed in "Wave." Similarly, the leaves that were falling in "A Pink Hotel in California," at the conclusion of the third section, have completed their funereal descent; none clings precariously to a branch for life, but all are witnessed lying lifeless: "all the leaves fallen." The speaker describes the dream scene as a hilltop, suggestive of the summit of experience, with a startling image of restored destruction:

we were up on the hill, all the leaves fallen,  
by the small cabin that burned down,  
each window zinced with frost,  
each log restored,

not blurred or faded by dream,  
but exact, the way they were. (96)

This restoration is a re-creation. The speaker recollects this specific location from her past and in connection to her father: "we were up on *the* hill . . . / by *the* small cabin" (emphasis added). The cabin that was destroyed by fire in "real life," the one the speaker remembers, is now vividly re-created in this dream scene; the cabin's features are "not blurred or faded by dream, / but exact, the way they were" (96). This overlap between "reality" and its re-construction in the dream strongly supports the concept of dream as a dive into the speaker's unconscious.

Within the unconscious, the speaker engages in an exploration of death, and moves toward the conscious recognition of spirituality. The destroyed cabin is the image of death; as Val Ross notes in a review of *Morning in the Burned House*, "[t]he burned house is also a metaphor for where each of us lives, the body" (C1). The cabin's restoration in the dream, then, represents another existence, the existence of the body beyond the physical realm. In *Survival*, Atwood identifies a similar motif of "[b]urning down a house in order to free it" ("Quebec" 229); that is, the burning, or death, of the physical body can be seen as a means of freeing the self. In "Two Dreams," the cabin has been restored from cinders, but is now covered in frost. This autumnal frost is similar to the ice in "Man in a Glacier." Both the frozen messenger and the restored cabin have been preserved "exact, the way they were," but the ice was unable to preserve

life in the messenger's physical body. Conversely, the frost-covered cabin symbolizes not only the death of the physical self, but also the restoration of the self in another existence. This duality of existence is evident in the speaker's description of her father in the dream. She immediately recognizes him, "standing there / with his back turned to us / in his winter parka, the hood up." Since it is only autumn, the "winter parka" signifies the father's preparation for immediate winter, for death. However, Atwood inverts this recognizable physical description to indicate that the self seen in the dream is not the father's physical identity. The speaker follows her description of the father "in *his* winter parka" (emphasis added) with a sudden contradiction: "He never had one like that." The dream now clashes with "reality," emphasizing the distinction between this restored existence and the physical existence that the speaker considers the only reality. Moreover, the dream figure of the father remains out of reach; the speaker can no more reach him above ground than under water: "Now he's walking away. / The bright leaves rustle, we can't call, / he doesn't look (97). This distance seems to indicate that the father is now lost to the speaker, as in the first dream. However, the duality of this dream figure, a recognizable re-creation of the physical self, but clearly not the "real" physical identity, indicates a dual existence. Though the father is lost in physical death, represented by "walking away" and not looking back, he is simultaneously preserved in this other existence, restored, re-

created. Yet, the poem concludes with an overwhelming sense of loss, and of regret for this physical loss, which suggests the speaker's continuing focus on death as an end. Still, Atwood does suggest that a gradual recognition of spiritual identity is forming within the speaker's unconscious, and she depicts this development by juxtaposing the "Two Dreams," with their obvious similarities and subtle, but significant, contrasts.

In a compelling companion piece, "Two Dreams, 2," Atwood further examines the role of the unconscious. In this poem, only one of the dreams belongs to the speaker; the other, to her sister. Moreover, in contrast to the speaker's first two dreams, these journeys into the unconscious do not occur prior to the father's physical death, but following it. Interposed between "Two Dreams" and "Two Dreams, 2" is the poem, "The Time," which briefly records the actual event, but Atwood's focus remains on the effects of this death. The existence of the father figure in "Two Dreams, 2" is strictly in the intangible, in the memory and the dreams of his children, who continue to probe their unconscious for an understanding of death. The sister's dream pictures the father "in some kind of very strange nightgown / covered with bristles, like a hair shirt. / He was blind." The religious association of the "hair shirt" to penance or mortification suggests that the father's inability to "see" may refer to spiritual blindness. Thus Atwood has ironically inverted the spiritual blindness which characterized the father's physical existence into an external manifestation; in the spiritual realm,

the father is afflicted by a "physical" blindness: "he was stumbling around / bumping into things." Similarly, the speaker's claim of her own dream being comparable, "[m]ine was close," draws attention to the emphasis on physical existence and the blindness to spirituality. The speaker sees the dream figure as a physical restoration: "He was still alive, . . . / He couldn't talk, but it was clear / he wanted everything back."

Significantly, this desire for "everything," which the speaker attributes to the father, is for the physical, "the shoes, the binoculars / we'd given away or thrown out" (99). Yet, unlike "Flowers," in which the speaker pictures the father on the ship of death, "giving us up, giving up everything" (94), the "everything" refers now strictly to physical objects, not people. Since the speaker's focus is so keenly fixed on the tangible realm, she views discarding these physical objects as discarding the father. The speaker, then, seems also to be "blind," but through this exploration of the unconscious, Atwood directs her: "now see."

In "Two Dreams, 2," the speaker recognizes the dreams as "messages, / oblique and muffled," but is unable to perceive their function. Her perplexity is voiced in a rhetorical question fraught with despair: "What good can they do?" Yet, the structure of the poems suggests the answer; the role of dreams is to increase awareness through these journeys into the unconscious. Regret and guilt colour the speaker's dream of her father: "all of it / was a mistake, but it was our fault" (99). It is these

emotions, rather than grief, which reflect the speaker's unconscious. Consciously, she has pushed grief and memory aside, thereby intensifying these feelings of regret and guilt. Yet, the speaker does recognize that the unconscious is inclusive and uncontrollable: "Nothing gets finished, / not dying, not mourning." Moreover, she also recognizes that the dead are alive in the unconscious, in dreams: "the dead repeat themselves, like clumsy drunks / lurching sideways through the doors / we open to them in sleep." It is not surprising that she considers dreams unwelcome intruders; these journeys into the unconscious are haunting nightmares of "those we have loved the most, / returning from where we shoved them / away too quickly" (100). The dead not only exist in the unconscious, but force their way into consciousness through dreams.

Even more chilling is Atwood's claim that the self can exist in the dead. In an early interview Atwood categorized types of visible ghosts, and professed to favour this eerie combination of self and other: "the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off, and that to me is the most interesting kind . . ." (Gibson 29). Atwood seems to be depicting this type of dream "ghost" in "Two Dreams, 2." The speaker claims that these dream figures of the dead grapple with the living to retain their hold on existence. However, she suggests that it is the living who make this existence possible: "from under the ground, from under the water, / they clutch at us, they clutch at us, / we won't let go" (100). The speaker's unconscious

determination to hold on to the father makes the dream figure, her dead father, a fragment of the speaker's self. Nevertheless, this recognition of part of the self existing within the other is still an unconscious one. In her dream, the speaker sees the father "wearing stripes, like a prisoner" (99); he is, in fact, a prisoner of the speaker's unconscious. The father no longer exists as a physical self, but the poem "Two Dreams" suggests that he does exist in the realm of the unconscious and is struggling for acknowledgement on the conscious level. Likewise, the speaker's struggle to understand death occurs through the unconscious, and she is making gradual progress toward the conscious acknowledgement of existence in another realm.

Atwood continues to probe the idea of the dead being alive in the poem "Oh." The speaker describes Christmas wreaths placed as memorials on graves as "the shocked mouths grief has made / . . . leafy and still alive / that hurt when you touch them." This juxtaposition of live memorials for the dead leads the speaker to question the motivation behind these tangible representations of grief: "Who are they for? / Do we think the dead care?" (101). Either response to these rhetorical questions draws attention to the self. If the idea of the dead being aware is dismissed, then the wreaths are reduced to sentimentality, visible evidence of dwelling in perceived loss, or sad attempts to console the self. If these living symbols are combined with the sense of ritual surrounding them, then the idea of the dead being aware is accepted, and they are perceived as alive in another existence.

The role of the self remains significant, for those alive in the physical realm also keep the dead alive in that realm through conscious acknowledgement of their continuing existence. The wreaths, then, are tributes to the dead and a means of connecting self to other. A recent interview suggests that Atwood is inclined to the latter belief: "'We live with dead people,' Atwood comments. 'By which I mean, as soon as somebody dies they just don't pass out of memory'" (Marchand D1). That is, the dead continue to exist in the physical realm as part of the living. The memorial wreaths are visible evidence that Atwood's speaker participates in this resuscitation of the dead, though her questioning of the activity indicates only a hazy consciousness of this link between the living and the dead.

As the poem progresses, the speaker's degree of awareness becomes more discernable, and she indicates a clear recognition of the life cycle in nature. Evidence of the continuity of life is present in nature, and the speaker seems to be aware of it. Her gaze has shifted from following the descent of dying leaves to focus on the "bare trees [that] crack overhead." Although it is the middle of winter and the trees are frozen, they still contain life. Conversely, the "flowers / already stiff with ice" are like the frozen messenger in "Man in a Glacier," the first poem of the section; the ice can preserve the physical form, but cannot preserve life in it. In spite of this "death," the speaker recognizes that the flowers remain part of the natural life cycle: "In the spring the flowers will melt, / also the berries,

/ and something will come to eat them." This seemingly obvious observation is significant; it demonstrates the speaker's ability to foresee life in that which is physically dead by connecting the flowers to a transformed role in the life cycle, rather than simply viewing their death as an end. Such evidence of a gradual progression of awareness reflects the exploratory nature of the volume. As Anne Blott notes, Atwood's poetry "explores many phases of growth and movement working through to recognition that nothing is ever lost, for all things are part of a continuum" (276). At this phase in the volume, Atwood's speaker begins to recognize the concept of existence as a continuum, but she still views the continuation of life as a continuation of physical existence.

Consciously, the speaker in "Oh" seems fixated on the physical, but the poem suggests that she has an unconscious awareness of the continuity of life, which is beginning to colour her perception. The speaker recognizes the seasonal life cycle, and intuitively seems to connect the idea of a continuum to the human life cycle:

We will go around  
in these circles for a time,  
winter summer winter,  
and, after more time, not.

This is a good thought. (102)

Although her perception still seems limited to physical existence and to end in "winter" or death, the speaker's range of vision

has developed considerably. At the beginning of the section, she perceived the inevitable recognition of human mortality as "the curse" (82), whereas this same acknowledgement is now "a good thought." The speaker not only recognizes the physical life span as limited, but more importantly, she accepts it as such. Connecting the seasonal life cycle directly to human existence suggests the speaker's unconscious awareness of the continuity of life; even if this awareness is not consciously formed, such an inkling may facilitate acceptance of physical transience. Moreover, the speaker recognizes the collectivity of this determinate physical existence; she consciously connects mortality to the self. By accepting her own mortality, the speaker also moves toward consciously acknowledging the spiritual realm. Significantly, Atwood does not remove the speaker's focus from the physical. Rather, the speaker explores the possibility of spiritual existence through scrutinizing the physical. As a result, the connection of nature to humanity, formulated by the speaker in "Oh," becomes increasingly important in the volume's final section. The speaker's perception is not simply averted from physical surroundings, but changes from looking objectively to seeing beyond the tangible.

The juxtaposition of "reality" and dream in the final poem of the section, "The Ottawa River by Night," draws attention to the role of the unconscious in the speaker's developing perception. On the obvious level, the setting of the dream is an unconscious re-creation of the speaker's memory of a past

canoeing expedition shared with her father. Less evident, but perhaps more significant, is the symbolic meaning of this setting. The traditional literary connection of water to the life cycle is particularly relevant, as is its connection to the unconscious: "According to Jung, water is also the commonest symbol for the unconscious" (Guerin *et al.* 150). Atwood's choice of setting is even more specifically defined; the dream, this journey into the unconscious, is set on a river at night and in the light of a full moon. These environmental features are highly symbolic; not only is night associated with "chaos, mystery, the unknown; death; . . . [and] the unconscious," but also rivers represent "death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; [and] transitional phases of the life cycle . . . " (Guerin *et al.* 150-51). Atwood's combination of these elements, in addition to suggestions of the supernatural or mysterious associated with a full moon, creates an unmistakably strong image of the intangible realm. Nevertheless, this other existence, depicted in the dream, is inextricably connected to physical existence. In this journey to the unconscious, the speaker recognizes her father, but distinguishes this dream figure from the "real" one. He is no longer physically deteriorated, but restored: "I remember [him] now; but no longer as old. / . . . evidently / he can see again" (104). Unlike the sister's dream in "Two Dreams, 2," where the father was spiritually blind, this dream suggests that he has regained his sight, that his penance is complete, and so he moves past this transitional phase of the

life cycle.

Even in the dream, the speaker is well aware that the father no longer exists in the physical realm. The dream is, in fact, the speaker's unconscious witnessing of the father's spiritual progress in the life cycle, his movement toward eternity. She views from the dam, able to see the placid fullness on one side and the "swirling foam of rapids / over sharp rocks and snags" on the other; beyond these rapids, beyond death, the speaker sees her father: "moving away downstream / in his boat, so skilfully / although dead." The dam seems to represent a blockage point in the passage of time, perhaps marking the boundary of physical existence, and the speaker's position upon it enables her to view part of the life cycle usually blocked by this dam. Still, despite this vantage point, the speaker cannot see eternity. Her vision is limited to providing "visible" assurance of spiritual existence. While the speaker observes from the dam, her father figure moves out of sight: "There now, / he's around the corner." It is significant that although she is unable to see further, the speaker intuitively knows his destination: "He's heading eventually to the sea." Moreover, she makes clear that this is a spiritual journey, and the sea is the sea of life: "Not the real one, with its sick whales / and oil slicks, but the other sea, where there can still be / safe arrivals" (104). Unlike the description of the ship of death in "Flowers," wherein the speaker perceived the father only physically, now the father's boat is perceived as a spiritual vessel, carrying him to a life

beyond. This image of being "put out to sea" through physical death echoes "Crossing the Bar," in which Tennyson foresees the speaker's own spiritual journey:

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
 The flood may bear me far,  
 I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
 When I have crost the bar. (496)

Nevertheless, the speaker "sees" this spiritual journey and recognizes the continuity of life only within the dream, which is a journey to the unconscious. Her unconscious awareness and understanding of the spiritual realm, is unquestionable, but, on the conscious level, the speaker is only beginning to form this recognition of spirituality.

Atwood concludes the poem, and thus the section, with the speaker's ambivalent reaction to this dream of spiritual existence. When she is jarred awake, the speaker's unconscious seems to be gasping for breath in the hazy state of disorientation that accompanies this sudden return to consciousness. Iris Murdoch remarks that "[m]en [that is, humans] dream when they are awake too. The outer and the inner are in a continual volatile dynamic relationship" (349). Not surprisingly, the struggle between the outer and inner, or the conscious and unconscious, is particularly strong as the speaker makes the transition from one realm to the other. Upon waking, the speaker is apparently able to remember the dream, and finds it disturbing, for she attempts to dismiss it: "Only a dream, I

think, waking / to the sound of nothing." Alternatively, she does not remember the dream; even if the speaker considers the dream itself the "nothing" that awoke her, she still recognizes its power to invade her consciousness. Like consoling a child frightened by a nightmare, the speaker automatically tries to dispel the power of the dream, to consciously push it aside. Her perception, however, is characterized by co-existing polarities which signify the speaker's ability to "look objectively." She must admit that this "nothing" is something, and the something is both recognizable and obscure: "Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore, / and someone far off, walking" (104). This acknowledgement of hearing the sound from her unconscious complements the speaker's increasing ability to "see," and emphasizes the sharpening of her perception.

Similarly, Atwood's speaker recognizes that this place is not a physical location from her past, but she seems aware of an innate connection to it. Although this location is hauntingly similar to "the shore, / the beach" of "Two Dreams" (96), that site of the speaker's unconscious premonition of the father's death, she no longer associates it with loss. The sound of footsteps, though "far off," is reassuring, and indicates a continuing, if distant, existence in another realm. Thus the speaker describes this shore as "[n]owhere familiar. Somewhere I've been before." This paradoxical "recognition" suggests an innate connection to the spiritual realm, an awareness of the continuity of life. Nevertheless, the speaker's recognition of

spirituality lacks clarity, and is in the formative stage. Atwood emphasizes the significance of exploration through the speaker's own affirmation of the gradual development of perception: "It always takes a long time / to decipher where you are" (104). This ambiguous statement suggests either that the speaker is reflecting on a completed process, or that she is acknowledging the need for more time and further exploration while engaged in the process; the degree of her progress remains uncertainly defined. "The Ottawa River by Night" does indicate a strong development in the speaker's understanding of spirituality, but also limits much of this awareness to the unconscious. It is the final section of the volume that works through the speaker's conscious recognition of the life cycle.

Evelyn J. Hinz claims that Atwood's work portrays an inherent human orientation to immortality: "she has . . . explored the innate need of the individual to believe in something 'eternal' beyond the self" (26). However, it is significant to note that this need for spiritual existence follows the acknowledgement of physical mortality. Recognition of the life cycle restores meaning to life through an awareness of the interdependence of physicality and spirituality. Within the fourth section of *Morning in the Burned House*, the speaker has accepted the transience of physical existence, and has connected mortality specifically to the self. This conscious recognition, then, prepares the speaker to explore the possibility of spiritual existence more fully. Her journeys to the unconscious,

through dreams, enable the speaker to "see" the spiritual dimension. Atwood emphasizes the role of the unconscious as the precursor for conscious recognition of spirituality. The unconscious translates into the speaker's consciousness as an intuitive awareness of the spiritual dimension. Yet, Atwood does not disregard the "dust and ashes" of physical existence. Conversely, just as she grounded morality in physicality, so Atwood roots her exploration of spirituality in the tangible. The speaker's perception remains largely focused on the physical, but instead of redirecting her gaze, Atwood inverts the effect of this "tunnel vision" by drawing attention to evidence of the life cycle in nature. Through this recognition, the volume's final section explores death as a transitional phase rather than a final end, and defines the parameters of the speaker's ability to "now see."

## Chapter 4

"(I can almost see)"

*"If we had a sacred habit of mind, all kinds of things would be 'sacred.' Most are not at present. We would be able to see into things, rather than merely to see things. We would see the universe as alive."*

*-- Margaret Atwood*

Despite her apparent admiration of cultivating "a sacred habit of mind," Atwood herself is not exempt from lapsing into the tendency "merely to see things." In *Morning in the Burned House*, this habitual inability "to see *into* things" translates into a somewhat disjointed first half of the final section. Atwood's speaker seems to be struggling for a focal point, and this random casting of vision results in an unfocused beginning for the section. Having both acknowledged mortality in connection to the self, and recognized the need for something beyond the physical, the speaker now attempts to see the "sacred" aspect of life. Tangible evidence of the life cycle in nature preoccupies the speaker, and it is through the physical that Atwood moves the poems beyond physicality to spirituality. Only when the speaker recognizes the limitations of human perception does Atwood

introduce the concept of transformation or metamorphosis as a means of attaining immortality; the speaker begins to "see the universe as alive." Paradoxically, to see human spirituality, the intangible dimension of self, is physically impossible, and so the speaker's degree of perception is self-limited by the physical. Yet the eternal goal of humanity, to reach beyond one's grasp, compels the speaker to continue in this attempt to see the unseen. The ability to "see" acquires a meaning beyond the physiological, and the awareness of this spiritual realm prompts the speaker's final claim: "(I can almost see)."

Ironically, the speaker's insistent focus on the physical also eliminates the perceived significance of selfhood, and replaces it with the conscious awareness of collectivity. The self continues to exist as an individual, but as an individual who has discovered self in others. Thus loss and discovery are not only causally related, but they also co-exist. Within this final section, Atwood seems to incorporate all the aspects of perception introduced in earlier sections: the speaker recognizes the multiplicity of self, begins looking objectively, sees the need for sharper perception, and so attempts to acquire it. In the process, the identity of the speaker is more removed from Atwood, and returns to a state of uncertainty. However, the confusion of identity which plagued the first sections is now inverted to a positive aspect, reflecting the speaker's acknowledgement of collectivity. The self exists simultaneously as an individual and as an inextricable part of society, both

identifiable and anonymous. Perhaps more importantly, the spiritual dimension of the self not only exists, but also extends human collectivity beyond shared physicality. The concept of collectivity becomes a defining feature of the self, characterizing all of its many dimensions.

The final section of *Morning in the Burned House* seems divided into halves; the first five poems are a "miscellany" in which various rather dissociated and somewhat obscure links to earlier sections exist. This sense of blind random wandering leaves the reader with a bewildering sense of aimlessness as though suddenly removed from the course of exploration. Such dislocation strips the poems of their potential effectiveness, replacing it with a sense of confused re-assessment. In contrast to the very personal nature of the fourth section, Atwood begins this section with a strangely distant yet immediate locale. In "Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona," the powerful image of the river as a manifestation of the spiritual realm seems to have dried up. The speaker is no longer perched on a dam, envisioning a spiritual journey, but is knee-deep in the dying weeds of the river bottom, viewing all that remains of the once "violent" river: the "trickle" of water and "the trash caught overhead in the trees." The poem conveys a sense of detachment which clouds the speaker's identity. This detachment distances the reader while, paradoxically, the speaker uses the first person plural subject directly to involve the reader: "The river's been here . . . right where we're standing." The speaker

still attributes the same distancing of death that characterizes the first section of the volume to the reader: "Everything bad you can imagine / is happening somewhere else, or happened / here, a hundred years or centuries / ago" (107). Oddly, the speaker also claims that the reader envisions the river as the scene of a cowboys-and-Indians murder ambush, thereby associating nature with the past, confrontation, war, and death. This eerie transference of past death into a present dream "reality" reinforces Janice Kulyk Keefer's sketch of Atwood's universe: "For all that human lives are meaningless and peripheral in any cosmic scheme of things . . . we have proved ourselves, none the less, to be atrociously adept at maiming, torturing and murdering one another" (167). Not surprisingly, then, the speaker confronts the reader with this same danger: "As for you, the river / that isn't there is the same one / you could drown in, face down" (108). S/he suddenly disclaims the sense of detachment and security as false, and confronts the reader with this blunt connection of death to the self. By extension, this insistence on self-recognition suggests that the distance between "you" and the speaker is also a fictionalization. Nature, even the "trickle" of evidence of the river's existence, is consistently connected with physical death. Since the speaker still appears to be focused solely on the tangible, this juxtaposition of human mortality and the permanence of nature intensifies the sense of transience. Although the speaker does attribute perceptions to the reader that seem to mirror the stages of her/his own development as

traced throughout the volume, the persistent sense of distance in the poem stifles its intensity.

Nature and humanity continue to be contrasted in the subsequent, more successful poem, "The Moment." Atwood brings self-centred human perception into perspective by giving voice to nature. Though the speaker seems to be focused on physical surroundings, Atwood employs the physical to emphasize false perception and its consequences to the reader: the moment of recognition and triumph becomes the moment of loss and defeat. Perhaps the speaker foresees the expected end of the reader's exploration because s/he has already experienced it, and like the imperatives of the third and fourth sections, this poem is an attempt to convince "you," the reader, of a truth the speaker has discovered. Thus "you" can be perceived as an objectification of the speaker's own experience, as well as a reference to the reader. The supposedly victorious moment marking the conclusion of the reader's exploration of life is limited to physical existence; it is portrayed as a perceived "conquering" of existence by securing ownership of a physical piece of the world. Atwood sketches the macrocosmic nature of this egocentric perception of ownership to emphasize its bloated self-importance:

you stand in the centre of your room,  
house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,  
knowing at last how you got there,  
and say, *I own this.* (109)

That very moment of "victory," however, exposes the degree of

knowledge and possession or control to be inversely proportional to human self-importance. An inflated notion of either knowledge or possession reveals a true ignorance of larger existence and a serious case of "myopia."

In "The Moment", nature recoils from such a self-absorbed individual, and so the moment of false recognition is inverted into the moment of loss. The poem portrays nature--trees, birds, cliffs, and air--removing itself from contact with this "colonizer," and characterizes this loss of contact as the onset of a symbolic death: "you can't breathe" (109). This "death" is increasingly significant when viewed in light of Atwood's claim that Canadian literature uses the wilderness "as a symbol for the world of the unexplored, the unconscious, the romantic, the mysterious, and the magical" ("Canadian Monsters" 100). The individual's self-centred perception establishes impermeable boundaries; s/he is dead to the unconscious and blind to the mystery of the unexplored. This insight compounds the meaning of nature's words: "*You own nothing*" and "*You never found us*" (109). Indeed, if the reader fails to recognize the limitations--the self-delusion and ignorance--of strictly physical perception, the inability "to see *into* things" will culminate in dulled senses and ultimate self-defeat. In such a case, "you" would be blind to this larger existence; this now suggests the impossibility of the speaker objectifying her/his own experience. It is the speaker's ability to "see" that makes this "Beware-the-Ides-of-March" poem possible; s/he is warning the reader, warning "you" of pending

avoidable doom.

This pervasive sense of uncertain distinction between the speaker and the objectified "you" is a prominent aspect of the poem "Up," and connects it to the very early sections of the volume. The omniscient speaker's intimate knowledge of "you" creates a sense of detached self-evaluation; the self seems to be viewed from a distance as the other in order to facilitate objectivity. As the poem opens, the speaker offers an inside perspective of emotional state, indicating an intimate knowledge of "you," but simultaneously suggests that this "omniscient" knowledge is limited: "You wake up filled with dread. / There seems no reason for it." Yet, far from indicating that the speaker must be describing a "you" distinct from the self, this limitation suggests that the speaker may be probing the extent of her/his self-knowledge. The external physical surroundings offer "no reason" for approaching the day with reluctance; in fact, this state of "dread" is entirely inconsistent with the state of nature: "Morning light sifts through the window, / there is birdsong, / you can't get out of bed." Since the physical environment offers no definite answers, the speaker must turn from the external to the internal, and searchingly asks, "What prevents you?" Atwood uses this initial examination of the physical in order to alter the speaker's perception to looking beyond the physical. Significantly, this internal probing reveals that the "dread" is not caused by future uncertainty or fear of the vast unknown; it is "[n]othing so simple." Rather, this

inexplicable reluctance is a crippling effect of the past with "its density / and drowned events pressing you down" (110). As in the earliest sections of the volume, the past plays a strong role in the present, but these memories of losses are now intensified in effect. The retrospective recognition of the significance of past events no longer indicates a sharper perception, but is unbearably burdensome. Rosemary Sullivan remarks that the protagonist in *Surfacing* achieves this same degree of recognition: "She seems to have recognized that she cannot abdicate from history, or from society. But she has not broken the circle because she has not achieved spiritual regeneration" ("Breaking" 112). Awareness of the inescapable connection to the past--both personal and social--remains a feature of Atwood's work; however, *Morning in the Burned House* breaks sharply from this assessment in the area of spiritual development. The gradual, but constant, progress on the journey toward spiritual regeneration is the volume's great strength.

The ambiguity between the speaker and the objectified "you" seems to create the possibility of casting doubt on the actual degree of progress made specifically by the speaker. Yet, Atwood inverts this very danger of hazy connection or lack of specificity into a positive feature. The speaker's close identification with "you" actually negates the possibility of complete objectivity, thereby emphasizing subjectivity. Similarly, this intimate connection between the speaker and the objectified "you" reinforces the notion of human collectivity.

The speaker's inability to distinguish completely between self and other indicates that the awareness of collectivity overrides the separating influence of individuality in the narrow sense. Since this recognition colours the speaker's perception, it becomes inconsequential whether s/he is describing self or other—the subject could be either, but more likely, is both. As Atwood has exclaimed in a recent *Imprint* interview: "either/or thinking drives me nuts. I don't see why things have to be one thing or the other. . . . Why can't things be both? And in most people's life, they are both" (Kelly 155). Not surprisingly, then, Atwood's speaker and the unnamed "you" are increasingly interchangeable in this final section of the volume, suggesting that the confused search for individual identity has transformed into an expression of collective identity. Thus the speaker's prompting command, "[f]orget all that and let's get up" (111), reveals the extent of identification with the subject. The speaker's inclusion of self in "let's get up" suggests that "you" is the other to whom the speaker relates the self, and so offers moral support. However, the speaker also seems to be directly addressing the self by adopting a first person plural subject in order to stir the self into action; that is, "me" telling "myself" that "we" can do this. As a result, the pronoun "you" refers both to self and other simultaneously, and the ambiguity of the referent emphasizes their underlying collectivity.

Atwood underlines the speaker's recognition of this interconnection between self and other in the final stanza of

"Up." Not surprisingly, the acquisition of this new insight is associated with death; as Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes, Atwood's poetry presents "death as a wellspring of creativity" (189). Having failed to elicit a physical response, the speaker now changes tactics completely, and turns to a hypothetical confrontation of death:

Now here's a good one:  
you're lying on your deathbed.  
You have one hour to live.  
Who is it, exactly, you have needed  
all these years to forgive? (111)

Significantly, facing the prospect of physical death--even hypothetically--clarifies the inextricable connection between self and other. The speaker's use of the pronoun "you" remains all-inclusive since the subject being addressed is directed to focus not on the self, but on the influence of the other on the self. As a result, the identity of the unnamed "you" is inconsequential, for the real insight involves a recognition of self and other as inextricably intertwined. Nevertheless, this very recognition of interconnection is also a recognition of the self; a new awareness of the social self is coloured by the effect of the spiritual dimension. It is the inability to forgive the other that has shackled the self, preventing true freedom. True exploration of the self in *Morning in the Burned House* combines the social and spiritual dimensions. Carol P. Christ defines these explorations as two distinct goals:

In the *social quest*, the hero or heroine searches for self in alienation from and reintegration into human community. . . . In the *spiritual quest*, the self's journey is in relation to cosmic power or powers; often an interior journey, it may also have communal dimensions. (2)

Nevertheless, Christ is quick to acknowledge that this distinction does not preclude the possibility of these quests existing together. This co-existence certainly characterizes Atwood's volume; more specifically, she deals with the interdependent union of social and spiritual quests. The speaker journeys toward the discovery of self both in relation to the physical community, the social quest, and also in the larger area of human existence, the search for meaning in the spiritual quest. As the speaker's perception of tangible surroundings sharpens, s/he simultaneously cultivates "a sacred habit of mind."

"Girl Without Hands" and "The Signer" complete the "miscellany" half of the final section, and draw attention to physicality. The speaker's use of "you" remains interchangeable for the self in "Girl Without Hands," and this objectified subject conveys the limitations of strictly physical perception. Boundaries of this perception are created by the physical self, yet, paradoxically, even the supposedly concrete, stable physical environment is elusive and cannot be contained:

you can't hold it,  
you can't hold any of it. Distance surrounds you,  
marked out by the ends of your arms

when they are stretched to their fullest.  
 You can go no farther than this,  
 you think, walking forward,  
 pushing the distance in front of you. (112)

The limitations of perspective are an illusion perpetuated by the "myopia" of the self. The potential for expanding limits of perception always exists, but is not always acknowledged; rather, it is stifled by a self-limiting attitude: "You can go no farther than this, / you think." Ironically, this assumption occurs while physically contradicting the very claim of limits by "walking forward," and "this" impassable boundary is never reached because it continually fluctuates with the self. Nevertheless, perception that only takes physicality into account is restricted to viewing this arm's-length private space surrounding the self as a buffer of "dead space you have made / and stay inside" (113). What is required is a change in perspective, or the ability to "see."

The recognition of spirituality is essential to broadening vision. Lindsey Tucker's remark about the protagonist in *Lady Oracle* is equally true of the speaker in Atwood's poetry: "These [spiritualistic] beliefs enable her to think in new ways about space and boundaries" (43). Only once the speaker becomes aware of the intangible realm does this self-limited perception move beyond the physically-defined and physically-confined boundaries, enabling the speaker "to see *into* things." Ironically, in "Girl Without Hands" Atwood signifies this awareness of an intangible realm through touch, a sensory perception of the physical self, yet she also inverts "touch" to a non-physical sense: "you would

feel nothing, but you would be / touched all the same" (113).

Similarly, this change in perception is evident in "The Signer," the final poem of the "miscellany." The speaker describes the transformation of language into physical form through the "interpreter." As spoken words are translated into sign language, the speaker recognizes the limitations of perception: "Unable to see her, I speak / in a kind of blindness, not knowing" (114). Now it is the inability to see the physical that creates "blindness," which draws attention to the significance of the physical in Atwood's volume. The speaker's perception only moves beyond the physical through the physical; Atwood makes no attempt to deny the very real claim on human attention that physical existence holds. Still, she also suggests the urgent need to "see" beyond the tangible, and so "The Signer" concludes by looking forward to future unity in "the place where all the languages / will be finalized and / one" (115). Collectivity seems to be the key for the restoration of that unity described as lost in "Marsh Languages" of the third section. Though the influence of this collectivity appears to be deferred to the future, the speaker and the signer are engaged in this collective endeavour now: "together we are practising / for the place" (115). This recognition of collectivity indicates the speaker's increasing awareness, and the fact that they are "practising" in the physical realm suggests that "the place" is beyond the tangible. Again, the speaker's perception of the physical, acknowledging their mutual involvement in the present

activity, leads to a perception beyond the physical as signified by the expectation of this future unity.

At this point in the final section, the poems shift from miscellaneous observations to an integrated unit, thereby emphasizing Atwood's focus on perception and demonstrating the speaker's gradual development of "a sacred habit of mind." In the very first line of "A Fire Place," Atwood skilfully establishes and then inverts an expectation in order to underline both the continuing interdependence that characterizes the volume and also the significant difference that marks this group of poems. The poem opens with an air of importance in the announcement: "Here is the place." The attentive reader's instinctive reaction is to connect "the place" with that intangible future existence to which the speaker alludes in "The Signer." However, it is this very expectation that Atwood undercuts. This "place" is neither the realization of an anticipated futuristic unity, nor part of the intangible realm. On the contrary, the location is connected most strongly to the past, and its physicality is the basis of the poem. Significantly, Atwood also establishes a link to death in this opening line of "A Fire Place." As the title deceptively suggests, arrival at this destination does not hold the promise of basking in the warmth and comfort of a glowing hearth, but triggers a recollection of "the place" as a site of near-death: "Here is the place where the lightning fire one time / almost got us." A sense of awe and wonder at having escaped this natural phenomenon--or, more accurately, both of these natural phenomena,

lightning-created fire and physical death--is conveyed by the detailed description of the forest fire. The apparent futility and smallness of human efforts, using "hand-pumps and axes" to fight the raging blaze (116), makes the escape seem more remarkable; they were able to control nature and so control their own destiny.

Yet, this human tendency to perceive the self in control is no more a feature of this poem than of "The Moment," wherein Atwood exposes human egocentric perception to be wilful ignorance and self-delusion. In "A Fire Place," the men who "conquered" nature did not escape death; they merely postponed it, for the speaker describes them as "the heroic youngish / (now dead) men." Moreover, Atwood emphasizes the limitation of their perception; these same "heroic youngish" men saw only the physical damage created by the forest fire: "The whole thing a gash (they said) in the forest. A scar" (116). It is this inability to "see" anything more than destruction that the poem challenges. Focus remains on the physical, but turns to evidence of the natural life cycle, indicating the continuance of life in this "gash" or "scar." As Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes, "Death is not a permanent condition, but a transition within the natural life cycle . . ." (193). Perhaps most importantly, then, Atwood pointedly includes human involvement in the phases of the life cycle: "fireweed, and (blue) berries, and the bears, and us." These carefree children on a blueberry picking excursion are part of the early regrowth of the forest; the parallel between children as early phases of

human growth and the tender new regrowth of the forest surely suggests that death is transitional in the human life cycle as well. Nature's life cycle is a process of restoration, and so the "scar" in the forest experiences rejuvenation:

Now that bright random clearing  
or burn, or meadow if you like, is gone  
also, and there's scrubland, a light-green  
sticky new forest. (116)

Notably, even this description of renewed life contains a reference to perception. The site may be viewed as a "bright random clearing" in the forest, or conversely, as evidence of a "burn," depending entirely upon the perspective of the viewer. That Atwood intentionally underlines the individual's degree of perception as the varying factor is clearly evident in the off-hand remark that "clearing / or burn" are not the only alternatives; the site could be either of these, "or meadow if you like" (116). Ironically, the supposedly stable physicality of the location becomes markedly unstable and fluctuates according to the perception of the viewer.

Atwood's speaker seems to recognize that the real distinction between the human life cycle and the natural life cycle is a matter of human perception. The forest fire--started not by human carelessness, but by lightning, nature itself--was not simply destructive, but human efforts to control it prove that they viewed it as such. Now, in retrospect, Atwood's speaker acknowledges that "Earth does such things / to itself: furrowing,

cracking apart, bursting / into flame" (116). This recognition of "self-destruction" in nature coincides with VanSpanckeren's characterization of Shamanism, which "presents nature . . . not as peaceful and good but as a holistic unity of life and death, and life in death" (203). In nature, death is not an end but is followed by life; more specifically, life and death co-exist, for the site of destruction contains the seeds of renewal. Yet the human tendency "merely to see things" prevents the recognition of this co-existence, and focusing on the immediate physical result strengthens the perception of destruction. Atwood concludes the poem by drawing attention to this limited human perception: "Only we can regret / the perishing of the burned place. / Only we could call it a wound" (117). This fixation on "perishing" creates a needless "regret," for the death in nature is but a temporary loss--perhaps not even a "loss," but a necessary phase in the life cycle, allowing renewal.

In reference to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Judith McCombs claims that "[f]ear of bodily death and spiritual disintegration may well be *the* (Western European) human response to a nature that is dark, unpeopled forest and harsh winters" ("Atwood's Haunted" 42). Now, in *Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood redefines this human response to nature. The fixation on "perishing" is indicative of the "myopia" that characterizes human perception. By focusing on physicality, evidence of death in nature does become a forcible reminder of human mortality. Yet nature does not create a fear of spiritual disintegration, for

humanity fails even to recognize spirituality in the self. This sad failure of perception is what the poem ultimately laments. Despite evidence of rejuvenation in nature, the human perspective is limited to seeing only destruction. Significantly, the first sign of life after the forest fire is poplar, "feeding on ashes" (116), which suggests the image of the phoenix in fire, ashes, and rebirth. This image of resurrection--or, possibly, of purification--combines aspects of both physical and spiritual existence as complementary dimensions of the life cycle. Nevertheless, human perception is oblivious to spirituality, and although focused on physicality, remains blind even to physical evidence of the interdependence of destruction and renewal.

This apparent denial of, or blindness to, the complexity of human existence is inverted in the subsequent poem, "Statuary," through the concept of metamorphosis. The speaker is now one of many statues, and so is inanimate, merely a stone representation that lacks the dimensions of humanity. Like the frozen messenger and the "frozen" slide image of the father in "Man in a Glacier," the statue seems able to preserve the human form, but unable to preserve life. Ironically, Atwood challenges this logical expectation, and questions the validity of labelling the stone "lifeless." The poem portrays the gradual destruction of the physical in this statuary as unknown human "assailants" chip off protruding body parts, finally leaving only headless stubs. Significantly, but not surprisingly, the very first parts removed are "Wingtips" which connect the statues to the spiritual

dimension. If the statues as representations of the human form-- in spite of these spiritual appendages--contain no life, then surely the headless stub is lifeless as well. Yet Atwood contradicts that very conclusion by giving life not to the human form of the statue, but to the stone itself. She inverts "lifeless" stone by connecting it to the process of metamorphosis, but denies that nature contains an inherent mystical side. Rather, Atwood claims that "mysticism is in the eye of the mystic--not necessarily in the stone or the tree or the egg" (Hancock 285). That is, the degree of human perception defines the boundaries of what is seen as alive in nature, just as it limits recognition of human complexity.

Yet it is Atwood's recognition of the unacknowledged potential of human perception that seems to drive this attempt to stir blinded humanity out of complacency through confrontation. Just as she gave voice to nature in "The Moment," Atwood now gives voice to that headless stub of a destroyed statue, and this voice is collective, an individual speaking as part of the statuary. Having begun as an identifiable stone figure reduced to an unidentifiable, "generic" lump of stone, the statue is conscious of physical change. However, Atwood does not limit the change to this human destruction, but extends the process to include natural change. She continues to focus on the physical and describes the gradual erosion of the stone: from stone to rubble to pebbles, and finally, to liquid. It is the continual "evolutionary" or metamorphic process that seems to hold such

fascination for Atwood; in an interview, she attests: "It's been a constant interest of mine: change from one state into another, change from one thing into another" (Sandler 14). Notably, in "Statuary" this metamorphosis is not "evolution" in the sense of developing improvement, but rather metamorphosis is linked to destruction. This connection is significant since the process of erosion emphatically places destruction within the life cycle, and it is the recognition of the life cycle that allows "destruction" to occupy a positive, meaningful role. The stone undergoes this process of change only through destruction; physicality in each state of existence must be destroyed, ground down to ever smaller particles, in order to enter the successive state of existence. As John Wilson Foster correctly remarks, "[t]he message of Atwood's poetry is that extinction and obsolescence are illusory, that life is a constant process of re-formation" (154). That is, the "end" of one existence is but the entry into another form of existence.

Perhaps most importantly, this transition from state to state is not limited to the physical realm. Although the statue's metamorphosis is from one physical state to another, the consistent process of erosion leads away from the solidity of the stone to the fluidity of the water. Similarly, this movement away from a fixed physical shape suggests a movement away from the tangible and toward the intangible. Atwood uses physicality to focus on perception beyond the physical dimension. Ironically, the ability to perceive that the destruction of physical

existence leads into another form of existence is attributed to the "lifeless" stone. The stone speaker is aware that the water, that symbol of the unconscious and the life cycle, "lets us see down and into." Not only does the stone recognize that seeing into the depths of the unconscious is indicative of existence on another level, but also recognizes the unconscious fluidity of human subjectivity, "[t]hat lets us fly and embody, like you" (119). As in the earliest sections of the volume, Atwood bristles at the concept of either humanity or the self as a single, identifiable essence. The illusive complexity of humanity, that withstands probing exploration and always exposes some other unknown dimension, is what seems to hold Atwood's interest. Consequently, her position is often identified as one of challenge; Eleonora Rao claims that Atwood's works challenge ideology with change: "They confute notions of [a] 'human essence' that sees individuals as possessing a number of innate qualities, which would make change impossible. On the contrary, Atwood's poetic vision lays stress on metamorphosis and change" (xvii). By replacing the stability of human essence with the instability of metamorphosis, Atwood undermines the structure both of society and identity. Yet because fixation is identified with stagnation, this frightening instability is inverted to a positive sense of continual development.

Change is the evidence of development, but if it is not recognized as such, then change is only proof of the loss of stability. Perception is limited to viewing change, particularly

deterioration of the physical self, as both negative and destructive. At the conclusion of "Statuary," it is still the stone that recognizes the complexity and fluidity of humanity. As the stone changes from its concrete form closer to water, this entry into the unconscious and the life cycle moves even "lifeless" stone closer to humanity: "Until we are like you" (119). Ironically enough, Atwood uses the juxtaposition of this perceptive stone and blinded humanity to emphasize the need to sharpen human perception. Fixation on the physical is no longer--arguably, it never was--a plausible excuse for "myopia" since the visible change in physicality is now the basis of insight. Atwood insists on the need to move beyond the physical to viewing "destruction" as a necessary part of the life cycle, and to "see the universe as alive."

Evidence of this ability "to see *into* things, rather than merely to see things" does finally exist in the last two poems of the volume. "Shapechangers in Winter" consists of a tripartite structure which focuses on three stages of perception. Surely it is not coincidental that this sharpening of perception is associated with winter, the season of death. Atwood's insistence on looking and seeing beyond the physical is inextricably connected to the acceptance of mortality; only by coming to terms with physical death can one move beyond it. In the first section of "Shapechangers in Winter," the speaker focuses strictly on the physical, but it is the extent of this vision that is remarkable. The poem convincingly moves from looking objectively to seeing,

and from offering alternative perspectives to providing a seemingly omniscient view. Winter is immediately, but apparently objectively, introduced since perception is initially deferred to the reader. The indiscriminate blanketing of snow--that physical evidence of winter's existence, and that prospectively "destructive" agent of change--is left open to interpretation: "You could read this as indifference / on the part of the universe, or else a relentless / forgiveness." Yet having offered these alternatives, the speaker chooses neither, "I feel it as a pressure, / an added layer," and proceeds to recount her/his perception in minute detail. This all-encompassing vision begins from "above, the white waterfall of snow / thundering down" (120), and moves progressively downward through each layer of physical existence. As the speaker verbally "travels" from the attic down, s/he lists objects that relate to personal, familial, social, ancestral, and ecological existence. Finally, this downward spiral terminates with "the earth's fiery core," only to turn as though deflected "sideways, out into the city, street" and progressively beyond (121). That the speaker's narrowing vision begins with snow and ends with fire is strongly suggestive of a movement in perception beyond physical death to a phoenix-like "resurrected" existence, to a purer state.

The speaker's narrowing field of vision, however, is transformed into an expanding perspective. This peripheral vision comes to rest only when it has reached the remotest visible object, which seems to enable the speaker to establish a sense of

place: "then the stars. That's where / we are" (122). Suddenly, the concluding words of the fourth section in "The Ottawa River by Night" take on new meaning in the physical realm: "It always takes a long time / to decipher where you are" (104). The speaker's seemingly definite statement of place is deceptively ambiguous. The all-encompassing vision comes finally to rest on the sight of the stars. Although the proximity of the announcement of location to the final vision of the stars tends to suggest as much, the speaker's claim of place is not simply somewhere up in the vastness of space. Conversely, existence is also firmly earth-bound and physical; in the midst of all these surrounding layers, the speaker sees "us in our bed" (121). The ambiguity of this statement of existence is crucial and effective. The speaker's recognition of existence is no longer limited either to the individual self or to the physical self; rather s/he is also aware of a collective existence that encompasses far more than the physical. Notably, the speaker does not simply abandon individuality for collectivity, but acknowledges their co-existence. The physical self may be insignificant in this vast expanse of vision, yet it is not lost; the self is still identifiable as that figure in that bed with that person in that house, and so forth.

Conversely, the second section of "Shapechangers in Winter" seems to begin with the loss of this individual self. The section opens with a description of transformation in which the speaker and mate were engaged "[s]ome centuries ago" (122). Carol P.

Christ notes that "in the state of transformation individual human identity has no meaning. . . . [But] loss of particular identity does not mean loss of life power" (17-18). Consequently, the speaker is able to say, "[b]ack then, I had many forms" (122), affirming both the sense of physical transformation and the preservation of life. Unlike the frozen images or statuary, earlier in the volume, this transformation does not sacrifice life in order to preserve physical form, but fluidity of form preserves life. Similarly, the speaker's recognition of physical change accentuates the existence of "life power" separate from the physical self. Even in the physical self, renewal and destruction co-exist:

Every cell  
in our bodies has renewed itself  
so many times since then, there's  
not much left, my love,  
of the originals. (123)

As the physical body ages and deteriorates, the continual process of renewal slows down but does not cease. This "stable" tangible self is actually in constant state of flux. Along with this deterioration of the physical self comes the forced acceptance of physical limitations: "Then there's / the eye problems: too close, too far, you're a blur" (123). Atwood's connection of these limitations to boundaries of perception is most significant, suggesting an inversely proportional relationship between physical perception and the ability "to see *into* things."

Yet the real insight that Atwood provides is not the opposition of physicality and degree of perception, but their interdependence. These signs of physical aging and deterioration are indicative of human mortality, and necessarily draw attention to death. Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes that "[a]s death or the 'other' is identified with the self, the self appropriates its transformative power" (192). This link coincides both with Atwood's own claim that the recognition of mortality in relation to the self is "one of the crucial moments in any life," and also with Tennyson's insistence that this life power exists beyond the physical: "Else earth is darkness at the core / and dust and ashes all that is."

The speaker's recognition of this continuing existence is evident in the third and final section of "Shapechangers in Winter." Atwood's grounding of this moment of recognition in winter solstice emphasizes the sense of timelessness. This existence is removed from the restrictions of time and space that govern physical existence. Still, existence beyond the physical realm is no more a solo-endeavour than existence within. As Gloria Onley remarks, "Atwood implicitly defines 'spiritual survival' in pragmatic terms as self fulfilment within a community structure (whether the community consists of two people or several or a large group)" ("Margaret Atwood" 51). Indeed, Atwood acknowledges this mutual dependence which characterizes both spiritual and physical existence. In either realm, this co-dependency only increases when confronted with the unfamiliar:

"Taking hands like children / lost in a six-dimensional / forest, we step across" (124). Ironically, it is the lack of physical visibility that leads to recognition of the other, and so presumably, of the connection of self to other that extends beyond the physical:

when it's darkest and coldest  
and candles are no longer any use to us  
and the visibility is zero: *Yes.*  
*It's still you. It's still you.* (125)

This recognition of the other is simultaneously a recognition of the self since self exists in the other. Moreover, the suggestion of physical death is strongly conveyed by the winter, darkness, and lack of physical perception. "Shapechangers in Winter" seems to conclude by positing continuity as part of human existence, and indicates that physical existence can, and should, include the expectation of this future existence.

Peter Slater argues that such a view is essentially a form of religion: "*a religion is a personal way of life informed by traditional elements of creed, code, and cult and directed toward the realization of some transcendent end. . . . A personal way of life is both individual and communal*" (*Dynamics* 6-7). In *Morning in the Burned House*, all of these elements are present; Atwood explores the individual, moral, social, mortal, spiritual, and collective dimensions of self. Atwood's search for the self within social existence, and of finding meaning to and for life, is really a search for religion. Notably, Slater is careful to

distinguish his use of the term from its traditional association: "Notice in particular that being religious may or may not involve some kind of belief in God. . . . Ways of being religious include ways of drawing on extra resources for living and confronting intensely personal ways of dying" ("Five Ways" 2). As a result, religion is freed from the constraints of empty ritual that Atwood scorns in numerous poems throughout the volume, most notably, "Sekhmet, The Lion-Headed Goddess" and "Half-Hanged Mary." This dissociation, then, equates "religion" with a personal spirituality, a conscious acknowledgement of the spiritual realm as well as the spiritual dimension of self. Evelyn J. Hinz offers a similar liberating definition of religion as "that which answers to man's need to believe in something immortal and eternal" (28). This connection identifies religion with the innate human need for continuity of life, and so parallels Tennyson's claim that a belief in immortality is necessary to preserve meaning in life once mortality is fully acknowledged. Atwood replaces the traditional association of religion with a more inclusive, less defined concept of spirituality; paradoxically, this apparent generalization is actually an internalization. The broader concept of religion as spirituality moves away from meaningless ritual directly to involve the individual. As Iris Murdoch concisely remarks, "religion is a form of heightened consciousness" (484); the awareness of a spiritual dimension involves a sharpening of perception, a dual vision. Ultimately, "religion" or spirituality

is the acceptance of both an existence beyond the physical, and also another intangible dimension of the self, co-existing with the physical self.

The volume's eponymous poem, "Morning in the Burned House," is the culmination of Atwood's exploration of humanity, and effectively unites physical and spiritual existence. The contradictory opening stanza establishes the structure of the poem as one of paradox and co-existing oppositions: "In the burned house I am eating breakfast. / You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast, / yet here I am." Significantly, the speaker offers no explanation, but seems to attribute understanding to the reader and simply clarifies or re-affirms this shared perspective: "You understand." Despite this awareness of the reader's presence, the speaker is essentially alone and is confused by the absence of others:

No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,  
mother and father? Off along the shore,  
perhaps. (126)

That the others may be "[o]ff along the shore" strongly suggests that they may, in fact, be dead. The possibility that the family no longer exists in the physical realm, however, is immediately countered with the "evidence" of their existence: clothes on hangers and dirty (breakfast?) dishes. At the same time, the reality of this "physical" existence is also in doubt since the

reader knows "there is no house." The speaker's own form of existence, though undoubtable, is indeterminate. Lindsey Tucker notes that "spiritualism blurs boundaries between the world of the dead and that of the living" (44). This connection suggests that the physically dead and physically alive can still exist together within the physical realm, but in an intangible form. If this morning in the burned house is an intermingling of physical and spiritual existence, then the apparent inconsistencies, contradictions, and lack of clarity all attest to the speaker's recognition of this co-existence.

Despite this recognition of the overlap between physical and spiritual existence, the speaker does not profess to hold a complete understanding of it. On the contrary, there is a sense of mild bewilderment tempered by acceptance: "I can't see my own arms and legs / or know if this is a trap or blessing, / finding myself back here" (127). The speaker does not attempt to deny this eerie melding of past and present, tangible and intangible, but candidly conveys the uncertainty that it produces. Notably, this uncertainty is not accompanied by fear, and so the speaker's initial reassurance that "[y]ou understand" seems to be an attempt to provide security for the reader, rather than for the self. In spite of the speaker's own uncertainty of whether this experience is "a trap or blessing," the experience itself is impossible to deny, so s/he reassures the reader of this co-existence. The duality that characterizes this experience also relates to the image of the burned house. As in "Two Dreams," the

burned house in this poem denotes the physical building and connotes the physical body:

everything

in this house has long been over,  
kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,  
including my own body. (127)

In *Survival*, Atwood delineates two functions of fire or burning which can be applied to this duality of the burned house. She connects fire to religious tradition; "fire as a purgatorial burning-away of disease or sin" is linked to the burned house as body. Moreover, Atwood also claims that the physical house represents "various stages of stagnation or decay. And since the 'house'--the tradition--is also a trap, burning it down is viewed by some as a delightful temptation" ("Quebec" 229). In connection to "religion" or spirituality, then, this burning is the liberation of self from limitations of physicality and empty tradition to freedom by accepting the spiritual dimension as an inherent part of the self.

Atwood clearly emphasizes this awareness of a self that is unquestionably separate from the physical dimension. The speaker insists on the existence of self, "here I am" (126), but this existence is by no means physical. That association of self to the physical body is dismissed, but without a trace of regret; the speaker easily acknowledges the "death" of that self:

"including the body I had then, / including the body I have now /

as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy." Having found contentment with the realization of a self that exists both outside the physical realm and within it, Atwood's speaker correctly affirms that "(I can almost see)" (127). This equilibrium results from the perception of spirituality, or as Peter Slater argues, of religion:

Ways of being religious in my view are ways of living with boundaries and transcending the limitations of our starting positions as individuals, as groups of people and perhaps even as a species. In particular they are ways of living with the boundaries of living and dying, of meaning and meaninglessness and of accepting and rejecting ourselves and others. ("Five Ways" 1)

That is, the speaker not only recognizes boundaries but moves beyond them, not only acknowledges mortality but sees beyond it, and comes to terms not only with individuality but also with collectivity. Obviously, Atwood's speaker still cannot physically see the spiritual realm. The intangible is not visible, and yet, for the speaker, the new-found "reality" of spiritual existence makes it seem almost perceptible: "bare child's feet on the scorched floorboards / (I can almost see) / in my burning clothes." In the end, the speaker seems to become the image of the phoenix, existing as "cindery, non-existent, / radiant flesh. Incandescent" (127). The interdependence of destruction and renewal is manifest in this paradoxical existence of Atwood's speaker who is burning but finally whole, mortal but immortal. The ultimate achievement of *Morning in the Burned House* is the

speaker's recognition of the complexity of the self,  
particularly, of human spirituality, and the illumination of  
perception in this dawn of discovery is nothing less than  
incandescent.

## Conclusion

"We discovered . . . when we opened our eyes"

*"When you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings; as you grow, your immediate surroundings become larger. . . . [B]ut as you go on, the writing--if you follow it--will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen."*

-- Margaret Atwood

*Morning in the Burned House*, Atwood's long-overdue new collection of lyric poetry, has been worth the wait. Though many connections to her earlier works are evident, the significance of this publication lies in its expansion of perception to focus directly and intently on the spiritual aspect of the self. The structural intricacy of the volume convincingly draws the reader into its progressive exploration of human spirituality and, indeed, "will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen." By beginning with the loss of the individual spiritual self in the first section, the volume's subsequent questioning of moral boundaries results naturally. Similarly, an examination of morality necessarily draws the focus of the poetry outward from self to

other. Despite the apparent objectivity of this examination of society--or, perhaps, due to it--the poems convey the pressing need for moral standards, and insist on individual responsibility. Atwood describes poetry as "an attempt to make something happen," something distinctly positive: "There are always concealed magical forms in poetry. By 'magic' I mean the verbal attempt to accomplish something desirable" (Levenson 22). In *Morning in the Burned House*, this "something" which Atwood attempts to accomplish is, in part, a return to individual morality and acknowledgement of responsibility.

Yet, in a more comprehensive sense, the "magic" of this poetry draws attention to the need for sharpening perception. The volume prompts perception within itself as the poems gradually progress toward a recognition of an intangible dimension in the life cycle, but it also involves the reader in this exploration, thereby challenging her/him to reach beyond familiar boundaries of vision. In fact, Atwood seems to extend this challenge to sharpen perception to critics of her work: "critics are always reviewing the book before last. They've assimilated your previous books and they have an idea about the kind of poet you are, and if you do something different it takes them a while to see what is happening in the new book" (Sandler 21). Perhaps the interval of a decade since Atwood's last lyric publication will prove beneficial in this respect by alerting readers and critics alike to the possibility of change. Change is certainly a feature of this volume, and is increasingly visible as the poems

progressively develop toward a recognition of life beyond the physical realm. It is this changing degree of awareness and increasing perception with which my thesis is primarily concerned.

Nevertheless, the significance of this new collection can only be measured fully by a recognition of both its change and its continuity in relation to Atwood's earlier works. The poetry of *Morning in the Burned House* is indebted to much of Atwood's previous exploration of the self for providing a basis upon which to build. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this earlier exploration is Atwood's recognition and appreciation of the complexity of selfhood. Identity is characterized by fluidity, change, and, not least of all, an element of mystery so that the self is always potentially something more. Consequently, Atwood is able to explore the unknown without sacrificing what self-knowledge is already in possession; she simply expands her range of vision. As Sherrill E. Grace observes, "Atwood's 'universe,' or system, is not something that has changed in the sense of having altered or become essentially different." Rather, she correctly asserts that "[i]t was there from the earliest poems (in *Double Persephone*, 1961), waiting to be articulated, beginning to be imaged" ("Articulating" 4). This paradoxical duality of continuity and change complements the duality of self recognized in this new volume: a self that remains individual but is also collective, a self that consists of a physical dimension and also a spiritual one.

The progressive exploration and increasing recognition of duality in the self causes Atwood's new collection to examine another aspect of her "universe." Though the concept of immortality has long existed in Atwood's work, it now acquires a new dimension. The concluding stanza of a poem in *Double Persephone* entitled "Her Song" offers two alternatives:

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.

*Morning in the Burned House* offers a third. The possibility of a continuing existence is not limited to either assimilation into nature or immortalization in verse, but extends to the conscious awareness of a co-existing spiritual self. The "nameless bird" becomes, instead, the phoenix as the interdependence of loss and discovery is ultimately acknowledged in the final poems. Yet, in order to arrive at this recognition of the co-existence of loss and discovery, the volume undergoes a gradual process of ironic reversals. The initial exploration of self turns outward to the other only to discover self in the other. Similarly, an initial loss of spirituality leads to a consideration of morality, and this more "tangible" form of spirituality is then replaced by a scrutiny of physicality; finally, the subsequent recognition of human mortality returns the explorer to a (re-)discovery of spirituality as a dimension of the self.

This circular progression reinforces the unity of the volume's five interdependent sections, and perhaps more importantly, it exhibits that duality of perception which the poetry itself advocates. The self is perceived simultaneously as individual and collective, as well as both physical and spiritual. Though this new collection of poetry offers a sharpened perspective, Atwood has a longstanding interest in the connection of self to community and spirituality. It is an interest in whose intrinsic value she seems firmly to believe, and one she willingly defends. In a personal letter, Atwood has insisted on the importance of this connection: "I would like this country to be a place one can live well in, spiritually & culturally; writers, as well as other people, should be concerned with much more than money. If you find that foolish I'm sad for you" (Letter to Dobbs). *Morning in the Burned House* is Atwood's newest contribution to this spiritual and cultural environment, and it is a collective affirmation of the value of this connection. Atwood reassures us that although the process of exploration in life is endless, discovery is still attainable: "We discovered . . . when we opened our eyes."

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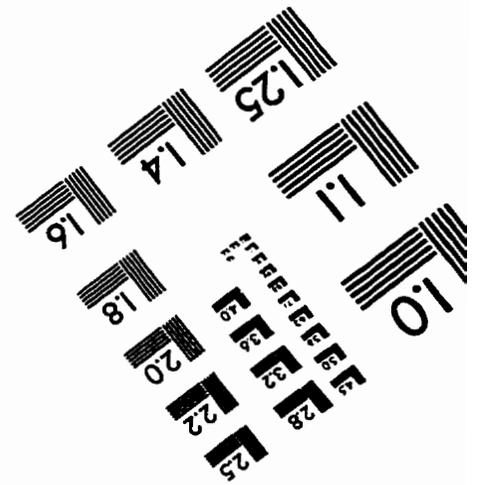
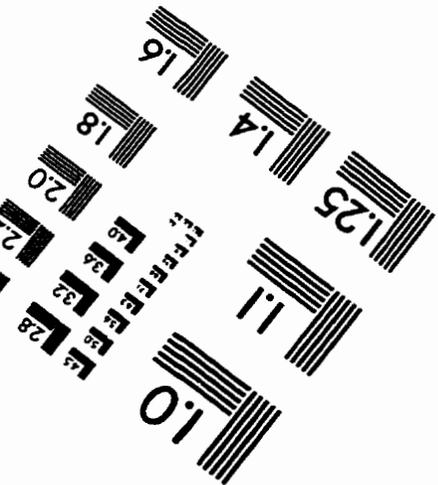
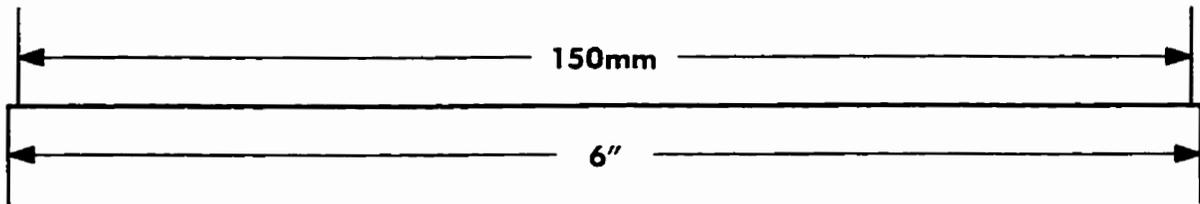
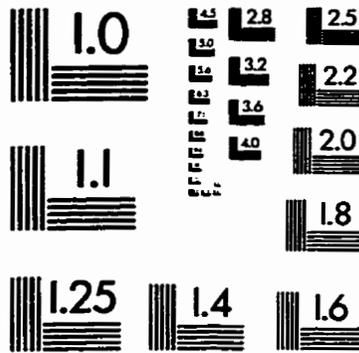
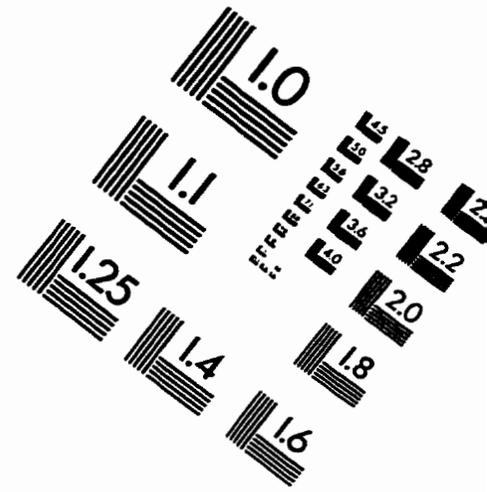
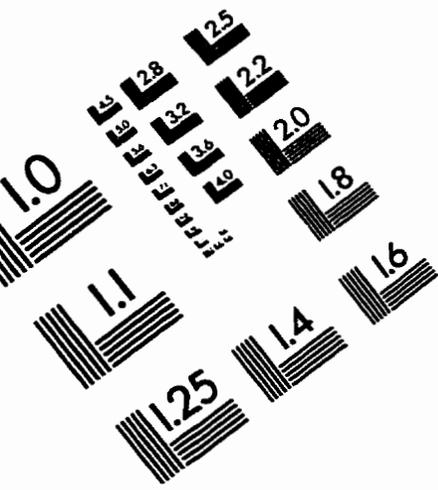
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