LORRAINE WEIR

Meridians of Perception:
A Reading of The Journals of Susanna Moodie

Eight collages are reproduced in The Journals of Susanna Moodie, paradigms of the perceptual stances and operations to be presented in this volume, icons of the grammar of visual perception which structures Atwood's work. A binary system, this grammar articulates itself through the operations of enclosure and disclosure. Collage and photograph function as one code in metonymic relation to the code of eye and word, disclosing that code which is, in turn, presented in terms of the mirror world of mimetic representation and reified words. Thus mimetic disclosure within the visual code counterbalances phases of verbal enclosure in which denial of earth's language, the "green/vision" (AC, 39), results in amputation of the self.

Superimposition of the arbitrary convention of mimesis upon the perception of her world results in Moodie's skewed initial renderings of it. At the same time, that convention operates within collage/photograph as textual emblem of her transformation across the three journals. Accordingly, the text of the Journals itself exists in a state of torsion as collage and photograph, functioning as mimetic subtext, graphically present stances of semantic enclosure while — viewed synchronically — disclosing to the reader both those stances and their resolution. Present in the text from its first movement, this resolution marks the limitations of Moodie's progress through her various perceptual stances, articulates a sequential grammar for the reader, and works the intertextual balance of collage/photograph and poem. Within the
larger discourse system of all of Atwood’s poetry, this balance encloses the syntagmatic structures of seeing and discloses the phenomenology of visual perception which constitutes her central concerns.

...  
First and last of the collages in The Journals of Susanna Moodie are near-equivalent elements within the schema, with the aged Mrs. Moodie in her Belleville days first depicted in a head-andshoulders photograph, framed by an oval which will remain as constant denotive sign within the volume. A lateral Cyclops, Mrs. Moodie gazes serenely out of an oval portrait photograph tilted onto the horizontal plane of earth; a black mass beneath her, with five abstractions of tree forms arranged on either side of her. Not only a contrast of photograph with nature, this collage signifies the equivalence of eye with self, and the triumph of the code of nature over that of mimetic representation. In the eighth collage, mimetically depicted trees, though backgrounded, serve within this reverse print to resolve the black-and-white masklike image of the poet into themselves. White on black reversal dominates the visual field, absorbing specific cues of identity into landscape. It is an icon of the dance, an ironic depiction of the world of enclosure, of reified words, transcended by aqueous language. Portrait has become landscape, eyes black masses within black-framed oval of face.

Reflections must be disallowed, whether in mirror or camera. The eye is a face, the face a resolution of the human code of asserted dominance. “I need wolf’s eyes/to see the truth” (JSM, 13), where wolves are the primordial inhabitants of the land who drifted without the “networks of roads and grids of fences” (CG, 79) imposed after the coming of the settlers. This is one of the “circle games” around the eye, echoed in the monocular emblem on the cover of You are Happy as well as in the Charles Pachter lithograph which resembles uitchat, the eye of Horus (used on the cover of the first edition of The Circle Game):

From our inarticulate
skeleton (so
intermixed, one
carcass),
they postulated wolves. (CG, 79)

The same postulates are found in the third of the Susanna Moodie collages, accompanying “The Wereman.” Here the optic oval is upright within a white field, enclosing Mrs. Moodie’s husband, advancing toward the wilderness in the attire of a gentleman. Wilderness is horizon, perspective thwarted by the twodimensional quality of Moodie’s image, seeming to march into the emptiness of inconceivable space, while behind him and to the right lurks an animal image, whether fox or wolf, existing in another code, blurred and inchoate. It is a paradigm of Mrs. Moodie’s view:

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

“Unheld” by her sight, he may become a shape-shifter, blending with the undergrowth, camouflaged from the animals, but he will return at noon:

... or it may be
only my idea of him
I will find returning
with him hiding behind it.

He may change me also
with the fox eye, the owl eye, the eightfold eye of the spider (JSM, 19)

for he may have become a werewolf, returning to live within his wife as the animals later “moved into” her in “Departure from the Bush.”

I was frightened
by their eyes (green or
amber) glowing out from inside me (JSM, 27)

She has become an ark, the animals inhabiting her without benefit of Noah’s human intervention, though the process is incomplete for she still cannot see at night without lanterns. Wolf’s eyes elude her; she has not succeeded in becoming “real” —

There was something they almost taught me
I came away not having learned (JSM, 27)

though, by the end of Journal III, she knows at last that “the eyes produce light” (JSM, 52). She has been
surrounded, stormed, broken
in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark
side of light  (JSM, 17)
being impervious to the male “illusion” (JSM, 17) of civilization
shared by her husband and the other planters as they work clearing
the land. They are permitted to “deny the ground they stand on”
(JSM, 16), but that choice is not available to her.

* * *

Enclosing Journal I, collages two and four present two opposed
but parallel images of Mrs. Moodie, transformations of external
and internal landscape. Against a rather picturesque treescape of
shaded pines the youthful Mrs. Moodie is superimposed. Her arms
are raised in a gesture of both despair and possession, her fingers
spread wide in the manner of a child’s drawing. Though shaded
in, her eyes are neither the orbs of the “heirloom face” (JSM, 24)
nor the agonized, empty spaces of the sixth collage. She is a shaded
form on a piece of white paper, its border wide around her,
defining her abruptly against the forest. Perspective is suggested
but her form obscures the focal point. “I am a word/in a foreign
language” (JSM, 11). Seeking to impose her language on the
wilderness, she abnegates self and reflection. “I refuse to look in a
mirror” (JSM, 13). Where the speaker of “Progressive Insanities of
a Pioneer” stamps his foot in defiance and fishes for a “great
vision” (AC, 38) of his own past, Mrs. Moodie experiences first
displacement and then surrender. Where the pioneer might have
become Noah, stockling his “log house/boat with all the
animals/even the wolves” (AC, 38), Mrs. Moodie’s option is to
become the ark herself and then, leaving the bush, at last
to metamorphose in old age into the spirit of the forest. Asserting “I/
am not random” (AC, 36) as he imposes himself with shovels upon
the land, the pioneer encounters earth language, “a tree-sprout, a
nameless/weed” (AC, 36), until finally, an unwilling Jonah in
reverse, he is invaded by the “unnamed whale,” the “green
vision,”

through eyes
made ragged by his
effort, the tension
between subject and object. . . . (AC, 39)

That tension is his own doing, the language of opposition his own
weapon. Mrs. Moodie, uncharacteristically using the vocabulary
of the lady, takes the first step toward that “green vision” by
eliminating herself:

I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.
Now it is more accurate:
where my eyes were,
every-
thing appears  (JSM, 7)

Face functions as metonymy for the eyes, and eyes for language,
hers and theirs, the language of “every/thing.”

Two antinomies exist for her:

eyes: light — transcendence; skin: touch — limitation

There are two gardens, one a civilized garden of European flowers
with their human associations of fabric, pots, imitation flowers;
and the other a wilderness order of ferns, fungi, forest plants which

. . . have their roots
in another land
they are mist
if you touch them, your
eyes go through them. (PU, 17)

They are a sieve which does not hold the alien glance. Eyes speak
the aqueous language of light for, after “Fishing for Eel Totems”
and finally ingesting the totemic deity, the initiate learns that

the earliest language
was not our syntax of chained pebbles
but liquid, made
by the first tribes, the fish
people.  (PU, 69)

To escape fear and its synonym, the city, one must become water
itself so that fish and people — human predators encompassing
their territory — may

( . . . walk
through me, not seeing
me)
my eyes diffused, washing
in waves of light across the ceiling. . . . (PU, 37)

To touch is to encounter the boundary of another world, to
encounter it as boundary. It is to assert ownership. This is the
madness of the pioneer. Mrs. Moodie takes the photograph of
herself and performs a symbolic excision of eyes and named self.
She has made her face a mirror, the “ordered absence” (AG, 37)
of the wilderness. The mirror is a camera obscura, inverting and
projecting in darkness the image of the world of light. The eyes,
“almostblind/buds” (JSM, 25), must open slowly to their own
light, seeing at last earth’s codes.

Enclosed by the eye-lid form of skin’s order, Moodie’s
husband is suspended in a thought-world between wilderness
and wolf in the third collage. But in the fourth one, wilderness
dominates. An animal form approaches the focal point of trees
towering above the inset engraving of a woman at work in a log-
house, with children and a cat playing around her while a visitor
looks on. Concluding Journal I, the record of Mrs. Moodie’s first
encounter with the wilderness, the irony of this collage is complex.
Having at last departed from the bush, the subject of the final
poem, Mrs. Moodie is granted an image of domesticity, her an-
guished stance in the second collage having mutated to one of
transient solace. Transient, for Journal II begins with “Death of
a Young Son by Drowning” and continues with dreams of earth-
and blood and war, “The Deaths of the Other Children,” and finally a
dead dog being devoured by maggots. Death crowds a world
figured in the fifth collage and “The Double Voice.” The land has
been cleared, the log-house built, the family created. The Moodies
are foregrounded — father, mother, two children, in descending
order—their forms blurred on a white ground like that of the
second collage, both dream visions. Forest and family assert them-

 selves equally in terms of space but the eye is drawn to the desert of
tree-stumps like wounds before the house.

Did I spend all those years
building up this edifice
my composite
self, this crumbling hovel? (JSM, 41)

And two voices, resolved into a double one, take turns using the
same pair of eyes, one the voice of culture, etiquette, the lady’s
world; the other the voice of knowledge that

... men sweat
always and drink often,
that pigs are pigs
but must be eaten
anyway, that unborn babies
fester like wounds in the body. . . . (JSM, 42)

Similarly, in “The Wereman” and collage three, Mrs. Moodie
“can’t think/what [her husband] . . . will see/when he opens the
door” (JSM, 19), for he may see the results of her vision to which he
is himself impervious (as the oval isolation of his figure in the
collage indicates). His is the world of touch, of limitation. His
vision produces the world of fences and shovels, the pioneer’s
notion of wilderness “absence of order,” the world of “The
Planters” who will be defeated if they “Open their eyes even for a
moment to these trees,” “to this particular sun . . .” (JSM, 17). The
politics of the skin, with its imposition of territory, is opaque to
vision. Unless the “entire skin/becomes sensitive as an eye” (as it
does only in “Memory”—YAH, 11), the encounter between the
worlds of eyes and skin can only be destructive:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye (PP, 1)

Journal III records Mrs. Moodie’s descent into old age, her
mutation into dying (a transitional rather than an absolute stage
for her), and her resurrection into wilderness immutable. Introduced
and punctuated by the last two collages within the poem cycle, it
reaches to complete the optic emblem of the book, linking first and
last collages through parallel inversion. In collage seven for the
first time the boundary line associated with the two voices crosses
the middle of the page, dividing Belleville’s polite world of society
and chat from the world of sight. Energetically below the main street,
the body of Mrs. Moodie young once more reclines at seeming ease,
long hair rayed out around her, “opal/no/eyes glowing” (JSM, 49).
The white border around her figure in collage one has dis-
appeared; the blurred, oval eye-spaces have been transmuted.
Where the animals had once partially inhabited her, now earth
reaches to claim:

...
My arms, my eyes, my grieving
words, my disintegrated children
Everywhere I walk, along
the overgrowing paths, my skirt
tugged at by the spreading briers
they catch at my heels with their fingers  (JSM, 41)

Now at last the "heraldic emblem," the oval of face and eyes, portrait frame and "ordered absence" of the transparent tree world moves into place. The language of light and reflection returns:

I revolve among the vegetables,
my head ponderous
reflecting the sun
in shadows from the pocked ravines
cut in my cheeks, my eye-
sockets 2 craters

... 
I am being
eaten away by light  (JSM, 48)

— both the light of nature returning her reflection rendered void on arrival at Quebec and the light of this "Daguerreotype taken in Old Age" reflecting a seeming solipsism which, far from denying the world, allows its richness:

the eyes produce light the sky
leaps at me; let there be
the sun-
set  (JSM, 52)

Emptiness ("your place is empty" — JSM, 61) is the insistence upon the human order, upon the hierarchical cosmology, and thus upon the syntax of territory, ownership, expropriation. It is the "power politics" of hook-and-eye sexual relationships, of woman's anatomy aligned with land to be explored and exploited. Exploration produces "thingscape":

Those who went ahead
of us in the forest
bent the early trees
so that they grew to signals:
the trail was not
among the trees but
the trees

and there are some who have dreams
of birds flying in the shapes
of letters; the sky's
codes . . .  (JSM, 20)

Those who cannot see the wilderness must subject it to the ritual of naming, imposing a rhetoric of human analogy, and gaining only a haunted universe of "ideas" (as in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," "The idea of an animal/patters across the roof" of his night-bound cabin — AC, 37). Landscape can only be earned, most easily by those who are themselves objects of the market economy and thus members of "underground" whose procedures include absolutism. In "Fragment: Beach," it is an ablation by the sea which leaves the campers in their tents "absolved, washed/shells on the morning beach" (PU, 76). In Surfacing, it is the unforeseen result of the narrator's descent into the "multilingual" (S, 178) water-world and encounter with the hanged heron-god who is Christ (S, 140), Logos, language incarnate. "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (S, 181). At first using the world's codes of power and domination, the nameless voice knows that she must "immerse herself in the other language" (S, 158) in order "to be whole" (S, 146), to escape the illusion of mind/body separation with its product, skin's isolationism, and to transcend "place" for earth. Initiation is first the mimesis of the animal world and then the abnegation of the mirror world of abraded touch, the refusal of status within an alien thingscape:

I must stop being in the mirror. I look for
the last time at my distorted glass face:
eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair
standing tangled out from my head, reflection
intruding between my eyes and vision. Not
to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror
so it's toward the wall, it no longer
traps me. . . .  (S, 179)

Mirror obtrudes between sight and touch, between transcendence
and limitation. It is a crystal skin. Its trap is the extension of a false
belonging, link between woman's body —

Mirrors
are the perfect lovers,
that's it, carry me up the stairs
by the edges, don't drop me.
that would be had luck,
throw me on the bed
reflecting side up,
fall into me,
it will be your own
mouth you hit, firm and glassy . . .

and topography, the colonized earth:

So now you trace me
like a country's boundary
or a strange new wrinkle in
your own wellknown skin
and I am fixed, stuck
down on the outspread map
of this room, of your mind's continent . . .

(CG, 39-40)²

• • •

Cameras operate in an analogous manner, synthesizing the light
and mirror/reflection codes in the service of the unseeing eye
Imitating only its operator's glass ambitions (its lens becomes his
"glass eye" — CG, 45), the camera performs its mirror tricks of
perspective, transmuting object into subject of perception — the
lover's narcissistic paradigm once again. Its vocabulary is of the
false world, the crystalline syntax of the circle game. Its product,
presented in mirror poems of reflexive structure like "This is a
Photograph of Me" (CG, 11), is an icon of the two voices. The
mirage of time past is caught in a seemingly blurred print which,
on closer inspection, becomes a landscape of tree, lake, low hills,
and a frame house — a "syntax of chained pebbles . . . ." Like
collage seven divided across the middle by a sort of perceptual
equator, the poem turns upon itself and parentheses open on a
shifting world akin to that of the forest undergrowth in "Two
Gardens." The circle game is opposed to the luminous water-
world of "earliest language." Diffused within a transparent
matrix, voice is absorbed of boundaries, even of the integument of
skin itself for

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion . . .

It is Susanna Moodie's vision of "union" when

... each
thing (bits
of surface broken by my foot
step) will without moving move
around me
into its place

and the strife of worlds² (her self displaced to the margin) will at
last yield to the dance.

This is the last of the procedures for underground, a poem
which presents the awkward present moment of aging people
practicing country dances and then, "the dance/whose patterns we
could not/see almost forgotten" (PU, 77-9), the dance itself begins.
Against "'a green lawn at evening' or along a beach at sunrise, they
move not in the cosmic dance whose emblem is the melothesia³
(analogy triumphant, the world in human form), but in the dance
of a lost cosmology whose emblems are wolf's eyes, the voices of
birds:

their faces turning, their changed hands
meeting and letting go, the circle
forming, breaking, each
one of them the whole
rhythm (snow on the tree
branches)

transformed
for this moment/ always
(because I say)
the sea — the shore
poem, is a subfigure of metaphor. Metonymy refers to substitution based on contiguity or contextual association; synecdoche is a subfigure of metonymy. According to Jakobson, metaphor dominates in poetry and in the romantic and symbolic schools while metonymy dominates in prose and the realistic school. See Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, Fundamentals of Language (1956), pp. 76-82. The heavily metonymic nature of Atwood’s poetry accounts, in part, for the apparent ‘realism’ of her work.


Meridians of Perception, Lorraine Weir

This paper is indebted to two meticulous critics, Barbara Blakely and Patricia Merivale, who are not responsible for its obscurities.

1Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970). Although they are structuring devices of central importance, Atwood’s collages have not been included in the otherwise complete section of her Selected Poems (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976) devoted to the Journals. Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: AC: The Animals in that Country (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968); CG: The Circle Game (Toronto: Anansi, 1966); JSM: The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970); PP: Power Politics (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); PU: Procedures for Underground (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970); S: Surfacing (Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1972); YAH: You are Happy (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974). Subsequent references will be followed by title abbreviation and page number in parentheses within the paper. Analysis of selections from Two-Headed Poems and Others will be found in my essay,” “Fauna of Mirrors: The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood,” ARIEL 10:3 (July 1979), 99-113.

Collages referred to in this paper are located as follows: one — front cover; two — p. 8; three — p. 18; four — p. 28; five — p. 40; six — p. 44; seven — p. 56; eight — back cover.

1Although collage eight is, strictly speaking, a reverse print photograph, I have included it under this heading because of the balancing of collage and photograph in terms of both aesthetic form and perceptual technique which is central to Atwood’s concerns in the Journals. The
trees in the background of the photograph are said to be "mimetically
depicted" bearing in mind the many options available during the
"taking" of the photograph and during the initial printing of the
negative (as well as during subsequent printings — e.g., the reverse
printing technique used in this collage). Both collage and photograph are
acts of superimposition — the collage in an obvious, material way: the
photograph in terms of optics as well as processing, and of the perspec-
tival rearrangement of realities implicit within it (photograph as the
perpetual tourist's act of memory, surrogate and skewed experience).
Collages synthesizing sketch and photograph or engraving mimic the
puzzlebox inversions of a poem like "This is a Photograph of Me" (CG, 11).
Or, to use another of Atwood's codes, they are "Tricks with Mirrors"
(YAH, 24).

See below, p. 79.

Cf. S. 187 where the narrator's father, unlike Moodie's husband, does
become a shape-shifter in death.

Cf. Paul Schilder, The Image and Appearance of the Human Body
(N.Y.: International Universities Press, 1950), pp. 85-7 and passim. This
association of touch with property is transcended in Two-Headed Poems
(Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978) in which, through the bond of
mother and daughter, flesh is reclaimed. See Adrienne Rich, Of Woman
Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (N.Y.: Bantam, 1977) on
the nature of this bond and on patriarchal expatriation.

Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein: "... solipsism, when its implications are
followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism
shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-
ordinated with it." (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, tr. D.F. Peares and

Cf. Annette Kolodny's discussion of the conquest of the New Worlds,
first, seduction and ultimately rape of the land in The Lay of the Land

See Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (London: Tavistock, 1970),
pp. 21-3, on the ancient concept of analogy, current in European thought
until the end of the sixteenth century. Foucault writes that "Man's body is
always the possible half of a universal atlas.... He is the great fulcrum of
the centre upon which relations are concentrated and from
which they are once again reflected." "Upright between the surfaces of the
universe, he stands in relation to the firmament (his face is to his body
what the face of heaven is to the ether; his pulse beats in his veins as the
stars circle the sky according to their own fixed paths; the seven orifices
in his head are to his face what the seven planets are to the sky)...." This is
precisely the tradition which leads Atwood's pioneer to his progressive
insanities in the New World.

Other variations on this theme include "A Soul, Geologically" (PU,
58), "Asion" (AC, 69), "Journey to the Interior" (CG, 57).

Other poems of this type include "Game after Supper" (PU, 7), "Girl
and Horse, 1920" (PU, 10), "Delayed Message" (PU, 19), "Woman
Skating" (PU, 61), and "Younger Sister, Going Swimming" (PU, 66).

Cf. Dennis Lee's approach to the strife of "earth" and "world" in his
book Savage Fields — An Essay in Literature and Cosmology (Toronto:
Anansi, 1977).

See Leonard Barkan, Nature's Work of Art (New Haven: Yale Univer-
sity Press, 1975) on the melos of the land. Barkan's references to the
and its literary exfoliations. Note that the cosmology of the seamless universe
"refers not to an anistemic world view (which the European dichotomies
of animate/inanimate — and the finality and conclusiveness of the
category 'inanimate' — provide an explicit framework for judgement) but
to a world in which exists a "basic metaphysical unity in the ground of
being," as A. Irving Hallowell states in his study of "Ojibwa World View
and Disease" (reprinted in his Contributions to Anthropology, Chicago
notes that the Ojibwa world view (in which interaction of "other-than-
human-beings" — including animals, plant life, and so on — and human
beings is not only possible but a chief source of dream visions, disease
cure) leaves a door open that our orientation on dogmatic grounds
keeps shut tight" (Ibid., p. 385). It is to a world view of this sort that
Atwood alludes. See also Hallowell's "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior,
and World View" (pp. 357-80), and "The Ojibwa Self and Its Behavioral
Environment," (reprinted in Hallowell's Culture and Experience

The Making of Selected Poems, Linda W. Wagner

1 Margaret Atwood, You Are Happy (New York: Harper and Row,

2 Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972,

3 Surfacing. p. 127.

4 You Are Happy, p. 10.

5 Surfacing, p. 91.

6 You Are Happy, p. 95.

7 Ibid., p. 96.

8 Margaret Atwood, The Circle Game, p. 68. In the 1974 collection, she
plays with the image of two islands but this time they are not so distinct.
References in the next pages refer to poems in this collection and are given
in text.