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# The Inside-out Journey of Atwood's Moodie: From Dream Vision to National Ghost

**by Brooke Pratt**

In Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* (1993), there is a melancholic "madwoman" or "down-to-earth mentor" who haunts the oldest and darkest of the corridors that run beneath Toronto's Queen Street Mental Health Centre, formerly known as The Lunatic Asylum (414). Lilah Kemp, the novel's schizophrenic central character, helps to rescue this story-bound woman, one Susanna Moodie, from the rows of burning books at the Rosedale Library. The pair, writes Findley, "had two things in common. Fire was their demon—and each could speak with spirits" (49). Lilah's "friend from the other side—which is how Susanna Moodie described herself—had a fund of courage that Lilah knew she lacked herself," and her questions to Lilah are often "overlaid with what appeared to be contempt" (51, 413). Yet, according to Moodie, the curious confidantes will eternally remain "*sisters in time*" (415); they are, in other words, women locked in a trans-historical relationship akin to that of Moodie and Margaret Atwood in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). That Findley's construction of Moodie is in fact based as much on Atwood's poems as it is on Moodie's own nineteenth-century texts is a testament to the prevailing force of Atwood's Moodie in contemporary Canadian culture.[1] By revisiting Atwood's collection and the story of its origins, this essay seeks to shed light not only on the fixation with this Atwood-Moodie connection in Canadian literary studies, but also on the nature of Atwood's designs in her early effort to diagnose the amorphous character of this country.

In her Afterword to *The Journals*, Atwood maintains that "Mrs Moodie is divided down the middle," as are all Canadians, in one way or another (62). But as Eli Mandel judiciously reminds us, "Atwood's Moodie is a mythic figure. While the historical Moodie became a successful lady of letters in a decent Ontario town, the pioneer of Atwood's poems lives a more perilous life in a landscape offering possibilities of allegory and the richly creative pattern of psychic journey" (57). It is precisely as a "mythic figure" that, with Atwood's help, Moodie has entered the national imagination, and that Atwood and Moodie have consequently come to be viewed

as part of a larger Canadian sisterhood of women writers. It can in fact be argued that *The Journals* itself solicits this kind of assimilative response, and that Atwood composed her text in such a way as to encourage its—and her—ascendance into Canada's literary canon. The book's cover, which features a photograph of Moodie on the front and a negative image of Atwood on the back, is just one obvious hint in this direction, not to mention the poems themselves, which further attempt to position Moodie as an insistent Canadian ghost. The gap in the body of criticism that surrounds this text is that, while critics generally recognize the resonance of Atwood's poems and the success of her choosing Moodie as poetic speaker, they continue to posit a natural, almost linear, progression in Canadian literature from Moodie to Atwood and beyond, which has allowed *The Journals* to accrue a kind of preordained status. Atwood herself has repeatedly avowed that the spirit of Moodie once visited her in a dream, but even if this was so, her use of the dream needs to be recognized as a means of authorizing her text and the place of Moodie within it.

## I

Atwood discusses the genesis of *The Journals* in a variety of places, but there are three that especially stand out because of their shared focus on dreaming. The most important of these is the Afterword to *The Journals* itself, which opens with the now (in)famous line: "[t]hese poems were generated by a dream" (62). "I dreamt I was watching an opera I had written about Susanna Moodie," continues Atwood, "I was alone in the theatre; on the empty white stage, a single figure was singing" (62). This dream apparently prompted Atwood to go out and read Moodie's best-known Canadian works in earnest, which, much to her disappointment, "had little shape" and were written in "discursive and ornamental" prose (62). For Atwood, "[t]he only thing that held them together was the personality of Mrs Moodie" and "the way in which it reflects many of the obsessions still with us" (62). In composing the twenty-seven poems that would eventually constitute *The Journals*, Atwood claims to have forgotten Moodie's "disconnected anecdotes" (62), and, while she notes that many of the poems were indeed "suggested by Mrs Moodie's books," she carefully adds that "it was not her conscious voice but the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work that made the most impression on me" (63). Thus, it appears that Atwood's unconscious, inspired by what she perceives to be Moodie's unconscious, is responsible for the direction of *The Journals* on the whole.[2]

Atwood also refers to this evocative dream in her Introduction to the 1986 Virago Press edition of *Roughing It in the Bush*.[3] Here, she partially revises her own account from the Afterword, where she stated that she "had never read [Moodie's] two books about Canada" until after having dreamt about her (62). She now explains that her first encounter with Moodie's *Roughing It* actually occurred when she was just a young girl, obediently dusting her parents' bookshelves. Atwood specifically remembers taking notice of this text "because of the two interlocking O's of the author's last name" (vii), which are (coincidentally?) not unlike the double "O" in "Atwood." As a small child, she is totally uninterested in this book not only because of its status as a "classic," but also because it appeared to be about "people living in a log cabin in the bush" and was therefore anything but "exotic" to the wilderness-wise Atwood (vii). Moodie's *Roughing It* greeted her again when she reached Grade Six, this time "clothed in the dull grey mantle of required reading" (viii). Atwood then goes on to recount the familiar story of her opera dream, but she now adds some revealing new details. She recalls having "a particularly vivid dream" while she was a graduate student at Harvard, which she tellingly describes as "a sort of Jungian hothouse" (viii). Because she "was not one to ignore portents," she "rushed off to the library" to find Moodie's books, which were kept "in the bowels of the stacks beneath Witchcraft and Demonology" along with the rest of Harvard's Canadiana collection (viii). She read through *Roughing It* and *Life in the Clearings* at "full speed" only to conclude that her "unconscious" must have given her a "bad tip" (viii). In keeping with her reading experience as outlined in the Afterword, Atwood finds Moodie's prose to be "Victorian in a quasi-Dickensian semi-jocular way, veering into Wordsworthian rhapsody when it came to sunsets" and glazed with "a patina of gentility" that offends her "young soul" (viii). Despite these objections to Moodie's writing, Atwood further recollects (in Jungian style) that "the Shadow will not be mocked," and so, she explains, "Susanna Moodie began to haunt [her]" (viii). In a manner comparable to the position that she adopts in the Afterword, Atwood insists in the Virago Introduction that "[w]hat kept bringing [her] back to the subject—and to Susanna Moodie's own work—were the hints, the gaps between what was said and what hovered, just unsaid, between the lines" (viii). Again, she senses a discernable tension between "what Mrs. Moodie felt she ought to think and feel and what she actually did think and feel" (viii), although the latter is admittedly far more difficult to determine.

Atwood's third account of her Moodie dream appears in "Visions of Susanna: the Return of Atwood and Pachter's Vivid Creation," a short

piece published by *Quill & Quire* in which she offers more relevant biographical detail pertaining to her academic and artistic activities of the mid-1960s.[4] When she was first studying at Harvard in 1961-62, Atwood was immersed in American literature, and found herself wondering whether Canadian literature might not warrant the same kind of careful investigation. Upon returning to Harvard in 1965, she has a "vivid" dream about Moodie, "who was already embedded in some dim substratum" of her brain, thanks, in no small part, to her parents' dusty copy of *Roughing It* and her ill-timed Grade Six reader (62). In mentioning her imagined role as the author of a Moodie opera, Atwood also wonders, in this instance, if James Reaney's libretto, *Night-Blooming Cereus*, may have been "at the back of [her] mind," and she observes that "[t]he stage in [her] dream looked a lot like the one at Hart House" (62), the University of Toronto venue affectionately known as the "cradle of Canadian Theatre." Immediately following this night-time vision, she again ventures to the library in search of Moodie's texts, "on the theory that you shouldn't snub such an insistent dream" (62). Having read Moodie's two major works, she remembers thinking that their author seemed a little "dumpy" and "circumspect," but as she begins to produce the poems for *The Journals*, she finds herself returning to the "unsaid" in Moodie's writing (62). "[A]gainst [her] better judgment," Atwood continues to toil over these poems—a process that partially took place in the city of Montreal during Canada's Centennial year (62). With this reference to the heightened moment of Canadian nationalism out of which *The Journals* arose, Atwood nimbly reminds the reader of her place as a prominent player in the development of this country's cultural identity. The three versions of her Moodie dream, especially when read collectively, appear to purposefully lend an odd (and convenient) kind of credibility to Atwood's poetic projections of Moodie's unspoken preoccupations as a newly transplanted expatriate.

## II

The extent to which critics have unfalteringly taken up the original version of Atwood's dream narrative and accepted it with little pause is nothing short of remarkable.[5] Not only does this overwhelmingly credulous reception confirm the force of Atwood's Afterword as a gloss on her own work, but it also demonstrates her shrewd ability as both a poet and a critic to read the cultural atmosphere in which she is writing and to address her audience accordingly. As Kim Stringer confesses: "[i]t is as if Susanna Moodie's spirit instructed Atwood to write her poem sequence…especially since, at

the time of the dream Atwood insists she had not read Susanna's Moodie's books; it was her dream that prompted her to do so" (175). Thus, the strange provenance of the poetic sequence becomes, for Stringer (and numerous others), a compelling and convincing supplement to the text. Fiona Sparrow similarly conceives of Atwood's reference to her dream as "the most revealing and perceptive comment" in the entire Afterword, in terms of its relevance to the poems proper (27). My own view of the dream story actually accords with this sentiment, although not in the way that Sparrow probably intended it. She, like many critics of *The Journals*, identifies the "two solitary figures in the theatre" as being suggestive of the "double voice" that pervades Atwood's poems (27). If this is indeed the case, then why did Atwood deliberately frame *The Journals* in this manner?

Ann Edwards Boutelle sees a specifically gothic motive behind the inclusion of this dream in the Afterword, pointing out that "Atwood takes pains to emphasize the non-rational and partly uncontrollable genesis of the work" and that this further "serves to establish a mysterious and almost mystic connection between Moodie and Atwood" (42). The problem with Boutelle's reading is that, although she finds Atwood's selection of Moodie as poetic persona to be particularly appropriate, she ends up naturalizing the "mystic connection" between the two women in her subsequent analysis. Diana Relke alternatively paraphrases Atwood's dream as follows: "[t]he poet, as sole occupant of the theatre, is swallowed up by its vast emptiness, even as Moodie, the creation of the poet's dreaming mind, is threatened by the empty whiteness that surrounds her. Moodie sings out Atwood's text but there are no ears but the poet's to hear it" (38). For an article that purports to reject the Afterword as a "convenient interpretive crutch that has encouraged critical laziness" (35), Relke's attachment to Atwood's dream as an unmistakable sign that the poems themselves were "born out of the silence which has threatened so many generations of women poets" is surprising, to say the least (38). Jacqui Smyth's innovative attempt to establish the Afterword as a kind of textual mediator brings with it a more nuanced interpretation of the opera dream, despite her reluctance to consider Atwood's larger critical intentions. Smyth argues that "it is fitting that the poems are generated by a dream, because this serves as a possible explanation not only for the existence of the poetic sequence, but also for the paranoid schizophrenia that characterizes the text as a whole" (152-53). Although Smyth never openly questions Atwood's construction of this dream, she does endeavour to interrogate its prominent placement within *The Journals* by suggesting that "[o]ne of the intriguing features of

this dream description…is the way it holds traces of the previous poems" (153). She also ventures to clarify Atwood's claims in the Afterword by reiterating the fact that the poems of Journal III were, by the author's own admission, more properly "generated by a photograph" than by a dream (159).

The critical discourse surrounding Atwood's collection also reverts more generally to the language of haunting and reincarnation. Despite its overall breadth and variety, the larger critical response to *The Journals* is uniformly fascinating in its preference for non-rational terminology when it comes to describing and placing this text, and for its willingness to embrace (and therefore validate) Atwood's version of Moodie's experience. For a book of poems with titles such as "Thoughts from Underground" or "Resurrection" (not to mention the accompanying series of ghostly watercolour images), perhaps this practice is not exactly unexpected. But while this tendency might very well cohere with critical discussions of *The Journals*—a text that recreates and reinterprets a real historical figure in poetic form—the body of criticism on these poems once again falls into its own rhetorical trap by eliding or evading the constructedness of Atwood's poetic persona in favour of an oddly more naturalized approach. The titles of many critical articles alone suggest this propensity for quasi-spiritualistic readings of the perceived relationship between Atwood and Moodie: "Shared Experiences: Susanna Moodie Relived in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*" (Stringer), "Resurrections: Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill and Emily Carr in Contemporary Canadian Literature" (Eva-Marie Kröller), and "Atwood's Haunted Sequences: *The Circle Game, The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* and *Power Politics*" (Judith McCombs) are three representative examples. Boutelle asserts that the poems create "an atmosphere of ghosts and possessions, of art created against the conscious will of the woman writer" (42). She concludes that, by the close of the text, "[e]motional forces have been joined, between Atwood and the 'other voice' heard in Moodie's work, to demonstrate not only the closeness of the twentieth-century writer to her nineteenth-century forerunner, but also the power released in acceptance of this closeness" (45). Relke likewise discerns a highly personal connection between Moodie and Atwood, arguing that "[t]he very private and traditionally female genre which the *Journals* imitates in poetic form suggests the existence of a strong and intimate bond between Atwood and her literary foremother" (41). The "unique power" of *The Journals*, according to Sherrill Grace, is the way in which the past speaks to Atwood and to the reader through these poems, "for in them Susanna Moodie lives

on, a touchstone and a signpost, or, more powerfully, a myth" ("Moodie and Atwood" 79).

In addition to Grace's own conviction that "it is through Atwood that Moodie speaks—through Moodie that Atwood speaks" (*Violent Dualities* 34), the perception that Moodie is somehow communing with Atwood via the poems themselves permeates a number of other critical responses to the text. According to Eva-Marie Kröller, "Atwood's Susanna sends out messages to the poet and, through her, to the reader" (42). Rosemary Sullivan concludes that "a kind of magic transference" must have enabled Atwood to hear in Moodie's work "a voice that spoke about her own doubleness" (210). For Stringer, *The Journals* closes with "the Moodie persona's continued existence after a period of 137 years, [and] it appears as if the spirit of Susanna Moodie has become the poetic voice of Atwood" (180). Some reactions to this element of the text are more egregiously convoluted: "while the speaker does not know who she is," writes Boutelle, "we do not know it either. Is Atwood adopting Moodie's voice? Is Moodie using Atwood's voice? Is either real? Is neither?" (43). Al Purdy, on the other hand, predictably treats the question of voice in Atwood's poems with a blend of irony and wit: in reference to the impressive "other voice" that informs *The Journals*, he muses "[p]erhaps it is Atwood's own voice, or perhaps it is Susanna Moodie herself singing Atwood's opera. The duality is there. But I think Margaret Atwood has always had this duality in herself, a quality that she suggests is Canadian, a kind of 'paranoid schizophrenia' which enables her to be a ghostly observer peering over the ghostly shoulder of Susanna Moodie" (80-81). Purdy goes on to describe "the Moodie-Atwood persona" as "some kind of primitive corn-mother-spirit that sits in a modern bus along St. Clair Ave. in Toronto, embodying the ghostly citified barbarism of this country" (84). In Relke's more positive feminist reading, Atwood wholeheartedly embraces this "other voice" or spirit, "which can be seen to represent a whole generation of Atwood's literary foremothers" (42). Regardless of where Moodie's voice comes from exactly (although the most logical and obvious answer would be that it comes from Atwood's artistic mind, which has no doubt been shaped to some extent by Moodie's own texts), the critics have clearly been heavily influenced by Atwood's particular "resurrection" of this Canadian pioneer.[6]

Mandel seizes upon the "special form of ghost story" (56) employed in *The Journals* in a slightly different manner. He admits that Atwood's "handling of history as myth and of ghost stories as the structural principle of the Canadian character strikes me as nothing less than superb. The audacity

of choosing a mad old lady as the symbol of a country and its pioneer schizophrenia is perhaps no more surprising than that so many have read it as valid self-definition" (63). Atwood's own reconstructions and additions to this myth have only strengthened the ties that apparently bind her to her literary ancestor. She elaborates on her association with Moodie in both the Virago Introduction to *Roughing It in the Bush* and in the short piece, "Visions of Susanna." In the latter, she describes Moodie as her "youthful Ms. Hyde," making Atwood the "Miss Jekyll through which [Moodie] manifested herself" (62). She then contrasts her own distaste for the city with Moodie's distaste for the wilderness, arguing that they both share an experience of being "uprooted" (62). As women and as writers, both Atwood and Moodie were once "anxious," "scrabbling for cash," "under pressure," and "far from home" (62). Both were also well-aware of "the space between what could be said safely and what needed to be withheld from speech" (62). "I said for her what she couldn't say," recalls Atwood, "and she for me. It's often over such distances, such emptiness and silence, that the poetic voice must travel" (62). Evidently, Atwood herself is by no means exempt from propagating the belief that Moodie was able to contact her from beyond the grave. By perpetuating this "ghost story," Atwood further attempts to construct a Canadian (or female-Canadian) literary community that reaches across temporal boundaries. In the Afterword to *The Journals*, she merely expands this subjective connection by positing Moodie as an emblem of our fraught national identity; in other words, she makes an effort to apply her own alleged identification with Moodie to the population writ large.

The Virago Introduction is also an intriguing document in this respect. Atwood again endeavours to establish a Jekyll and Hyde kind of partnership between Moodie and herself. She explains that "[l]ife in a log cabin in the bush had been normal and pleasant for me, but it was obvious that it was, and had to be, quite otherwise for her. I got culture shock from flush toilets, she got it from mosquitoes, swamps, trackless wildernesses and the thought of bears. In some ways, we were each other's obverse" (ix). Atwood also tries to generate a link between Moodie and her twentieth-century readership by stressing that "[i]f Catherine [sic] Parr Traill with her imperturbable practicality is what we like to think we would be under the circumstances, Susanna Moodie is what we secretly suspect we would have been instead" (xiii). She then closes the piece by affirming (qua T.S. Eliot) that "a work of literature gains meaning not only from its own context but from those later contexts it may find itself placed within" (xiv). It is difficult to avoid reading this statement as a tacit allusion to Atwood's

own poetic reclamation of Moodie's life and work. Indeed, Heather Murray contends that this Introduction actually stands in as the preface to the Virago edition of *Roughing It in the Bush*, in terms of its placement within the text. For Murray, prefaces in general are inherently contradictory because their inclusion ensures that "a post-facto authorial interpretation masquerades as a statement of intent" (92). Things are compounded in this specific case, because "[f]or an English-Canadian audience, 'Atwood' is already the preface to Moodie: we are always reading back through her, always looking into Atwood's Moodie" (93). Murray thus suggests that, in publishing *The Journals*, Atwood became "responsible in no little respect not only for Moodie's popularity and status as a foundational cultural figure, but for the ways we now read her" (93). While this claim essentially denies the influence of Moodie's texts on their own terms (and implicitly undermines the capabilities of the reader), Murray is not alone in recognizing the profound cultural impact of Atwood's poems. For example, in his *Globe and Mail* review of the Virago edition of *Roughing It*, entitled "Atwood is reunited with Susanna Moodie," William French observes a "direct and substantial" connection between the two women, whom he sees as having a great deal in common. The intertextual references to Moodie (or Atwood's Moodie) in several (post-1970) Canadian literary works (namely Findley's *Headhunter* and Shields's *Small Ceremonies*) also attest to the lasting impression of Atwood's poems on her fellow writers.

In her comparison of *The Journals* to Moodie's two major works, Laura Groening insists, like Murray, that "Atwood's poetic reading of Moodie's texts has been adopted by other critics…and brought to bear on *Roughing It in the Bush* in such a way that we are forced to conclude that anyone reading the poetry before reading Mrs. Moodie's books will take a point of view back to the originals which will totally obscure their authentic meaning" (169). While I am not in total agreement either with Groening's claims or with her method of argument (she accuses Atwood of misreading Moodie's nineteenth-century reality through metaphor but then proceeds to speak as an authority on behalf of Moodie herself), I do think she addresses some important (and under-explored) issues pertaining to both this text and its author. Despite Groening's problematic desire to recapture what she refers to as the social and cultural authenticity of Moodie's texts as historical documents, her critique of Atwood as poet-critic is nonetheless valuable. "If *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* were simply a brilliant book of poetry inspired by a nineteenth-century text," she writes, "it would not matter in the least that the book does not represent an accurate portrait of nineteenth-century Canada" (168). After all, Atwood is creating a poetic

construction whose resemblance to the "real" Susanna Moodie is cursory at best. But this collection "is not simply a brilliant book of poetry inspired by a nineteenth-century text," Groening continues, because "Atwood is as much a critic as she is a poet, and her Afterword demonstrates that she is a critic throughout this book of poems. The poems are the exact embodiment of the critical position articulated in the Afterword" (169). Although other critics (such as Relke) blatantly reject this last assertion, Atwood's position as a poet-critic remains integral to thinking about *The Journals* as a cultural artefact. Groening uses this fact to support her denunciation of Atwood's Moodie persona as historically inaccurate. But she also presumes that the voice of the Afterword is solely and straightforwardly expository. I want to argue instead that both of Atwood's roles—the poet and the critic—are at least partially performative, and that while Atwood cannot be faulted for the way in which her text has been taken up by critics and readers alike, further critical attention can and should be given to her status as a high-ranking Canadian trendsetter and cultural commentator in order to provide more nuanced speculations on the artistic and cultural intentions that may have informed her creation and publication of *The Journals* in the first place.

III

Atwood is certainly not the only poet ever to have turned to her nation's literary past as muse,[7] nor is she the first Canadian writer to incorporate a version of Moodie into her art. As Kröller notes in her examination of Canadian literary "resurrections," Robertson Davies fictionalized both Moodie and Traill in his play, *At My Heart's Core* (1950), exactly twenty years prior to the release of Atwood's poems (44). Both Relke and Boutelle, who each discuss *The Journals* in explicitly feminist venues, note that Atwood's affinity for Moodie as a fellow woman writer conforms to a larger pattern among contemporary female authors to find a traceable "literary matrilineage" (Relke 41). In her comparative analysis of gender and national identity in *The Journals* and Ruth Whitman's *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey* (1977), Erin Smith reminds us that the relationships between these writers and their respective nineteenth-century counterparts "are mediated by their own needs as poets and their own placement in history" (76). Thus, "[t]his searching into the past is…not only an examination of national history, but also a search for histories of people like oneself. The collections are part of the project of rewriting the past to make sense of the present and the place of a white Canadian or American woman

within it" (77). If Smith is correct in this assertion, then perhaps the social and cultural milieu out of which Atwood was writing when she began her Moodie poems needs to be examined in greater detail than has been the case to date.

In 1965, as the seeds for these poems were first being sown, questions of Canadian heritage and identity were at the forefront of cultural and political debates. Although Sullivan idealistically maintains—in her biographical study of Atwood's artistic development—that 1960s nationalism was only "codified as a cultural movement" after the fact, and that it began, in reality, "with a bunch of artistic people trying to practise their art in their own country" (201-02), this era of cultural exploration was inevitably rooted in the broader ideological agendas of the period. Indeed, Verena Bühler Roth, in her examination of Atwood and the wilderness theme, suggests that was has become known as the "Canadian identity crisis" was in fact "*the* intellectual problem" of the 1960s (11). Not only did this period see an increase in "literary productivity," but it also gave rise to a "new phase of critical reflection on Canadian literature" (12). Roth points to a corresponding effort made by the federal government to "create a literary community in Canada" through an increased level of involvement with institutions such as the Canada Council and the CBC (12).[8] She further connects this cultural campaign to the rise of what she calls "Canada's political self-confidence," and cites the new flag in 1965, Montreal's hosting of Expo '67, and the 1967 Centennial celebrations as evidence of this pervasive nationalistic atmosphere (12). Northrop Frye provides a similar survey of the Canadian cultural scene in the 1960s in his well-known "Conclusion" to Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (1965). He too highlights these administrative "efforts to create a cultural community" in Canada, and is himself considered to be a central participant in—some would say creator of—a burgeoning need for the production of a national myth (823). Though it appeared two years after *The Journals*, Atwood's own critical treatise, *Survival* (1972), also acts as a prime example of a detailed (if somewhat essentialist) meditation on these cultural and national themes.

Beyond this concern with Canadian culture, the 1960s also witnessed a rejection of rational order and conventional hierarchy by many of the country's angst-ridden youth, as reflected in numerous literary works of the period. Scott Symons's scathing attack on Ontario's "Grit" establishment in *Place d'Armes* (1967), where he brazenly describes himself as a "Para-Canadian, released from any allegiance to the Canadian State but obsessively devoted to the Canadian Nation" (n. pag.), provides an obvious (if

extreme) example of this rebellious attitude. Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* (first published as a limited edition in 1968) stands as a less outrageous (although equally condemnatory) representation of this dissident pattern, as does, of course, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966). Atwood herself was undoubtedly writing out of the same restless environment. But in considering the cultural and political tensions of the period and/or Atwood's generation, the question then becomes: why is it that she specifically selected Moodie as a figure ripe for resurrection? As a British emigrant, Moodie represents a kind of alien intrusion into the Canadian landscape; she is characterized by her propriety, her rational sensibility, and her refusal to adjust to life as a backwoods settler.[9] This is the Moodie who appears in the opening poem of *The Journals*—the one whose "lack / of conviction" and ridiculous shawl of "incongruous pink" signal her subject position as "a word / in a foreign language" (11). Yet Moodie and Atwood do share some commonalities as writers, in that they both address the transitional nature of selfhood in their individual texts. As Stringer observes, "[t]he writer/narrator of *Roughing It in the Bush* begins a process of adaptation, having to contend not only with a strange new country, but also with a new, developing self-identity" (170). In conceding that Atwood is similarly concerned with identity and self-discovery—for herself as a poet, and for the nation as a whole—the rationale behind her selection of Moodie as speaker becomes more readily apparent. By choosing the dramatically "dismayed" Moodie over figures such as Anna Jameson, the liberated "tourist," or Catharine Parr Traill, the resilient "coper" (*Strange Things* 96-97), perhaps Atwood was trying to suggest that only through the collapse of one set of ideals can there ever be room for the growth of another. Many of the poems from Journal I are indeed devoted to this theme of regeneration. It is also worth noting that Atwood does not just record what she intuits to be Moodie's internal turmoil, but she also takes the artistic liberty of turning this figure into an omniscient underground phantom who feels "scorn but also pity" for "the inheritors, the raisers / of glib superstructures" who move imperviously through their daily lives amidst the "shrill of steel and glass" that echoes above her (57), lines strongly reminiscent of Lee's *Civil Elegies*, where he specifically laments the inability of Canadians to hear the ghosts of our nation's past.

Atwood implies in her Afterword that present-day Canadians are still characterized by the "violent duality" that acts as a symptom of our collective "paranoid schizophrenia" (62), and that if readers can begin to understand Moodie's failures as our own, perhaps we will eventually gain a better appreciation for the complexities of our nation and our troubled

place within it.[10] Numerous critics regard *The Journals* as a record of the Moodie persona's journey from sanity into madness, and back again. Groening suggests that Atwood "often allegorizes this journey into the unconscious in terms of an actual physical journey into the Canadian wilderness," in part because of a belief that, like Moodie, "modern man has repressed his animal nature and exalted his reason" (170). Thus, for Groening, Atwood "finds in the experiences of Mrs. Moodie the perfect metaphor for a psychic journey in search of the Jungian self-knowledge that is necessary to achieve the integrated personal self" (170). This reading is an explicit inversion of the critical stance that adopts Atwood's dream story as reality, because it demonstrates that the poet's vision of Canada as being somehow schizophrenic came before her choice of Moodie as the symbol for this national affliction.[11] The figure of Moodie, as she exists in (or hovers between the lines of) her own texts, presumably embodied for Atwood some of the more telling attributes of Canadian society as it existed in the late 1960s; but it must be remembered that Atwood deliberately *chose* Moodie as her poetic subject, despite her repeated affirmation that an unprovoked dream vision guided her firmly in this direction.

For Sullivan, this dream is a welcome explanation of Moodie's powerful effect on Atwood's artistic mind, because "[n]othing other than that tip from the unconscious would have suggested that poems about an obscure, long-forgotten nineteenth-century pioneer writer would work" (209-10). With this emphatic statement, Sullivan essentially implies that Atwood could never have taken on such a bold and ambitious project without the assurance and inspiration of her dream itself. While she grants that John Berryman might have managed to accomplish such an achievement with his *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (even without the aid of a fortunate dream), she then proceeds to undermine, dismiss, or forgive Berryman's effort because "at least Bradstreet was an American" (210). Not only is Sullivan's inference here admittedly ambiguous, but it is also problematic, especially in light of Atwood's intense engagement with American literature during her tenure at Harvard. It is perhaps worth emphasizing the impact of Perry Miller, the Harvard professor from whom Atwood took a graduate course entitled "Romanticism in American Literature," on her thinking at the time, not least because she would later name Miller as a "grandfather" of *Survival* ("Visions of Susanna" 62). As the author of *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), a collection of essays on the Puritan imagination and its influence on later American writers, Miller was self-consciously engaged in a search for the origins of American literature and intellectual thought, which he classifies as "the massive narrative of the

movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America" (vii).

Although Atwood's *The Journals* is best categorized as a work of art rather than academic scholarship, it is not unreasonable to imagine that she too was attempting a similar kind of cultural exploration in seizing upon Moodie as a pioneer of comparable significance for Canadian literature. Sullivan herself cites Miller's graduate seminar as being a particularly important influence on Atwood's artistic and academic development. While reading Miller's *The Raven and the Whale* (1956), a work of American literary history detailing the nineteenth-century cultural debates of New York City's literati, Atwood was apparently pleased to learn that, like Canadians, "the Americans, too, had had their own period of colonial insecurity and their search for national identity" (128). As a Canadian living in the United States, she was already engaged in the process of "trying to sort out her Canadian nationalism" when she enrolled in Miller's course and encountered these ideas (128). Ironically, then, it was her immersion in American literary culture that enabled her to recognize Canada as "a country with a shape and a culture of its own" (139) and fostered her desire to make a personal contribution to Canadian literary culture. While the resulting book of poetry is infused with tones of regret and reproach, it also reflects the poet's efforts to establish a more specifically Canadian paradigm, in terms of both history and aesthetics. Read in conjunction with Atwood's confession that a dream prompted her to write this text, the poems thereby serve to cultivate the sense that Moodie herself, as a wise and reformed Canadian citizen, is auspiciously proffering a message from the underworld.

As the poem "The Double Voice" so poignantly illustrates, Moodie's seven-year sojourn as a settler in the wilds of Peterborough County equips her with an important and irrevocable "other" knowledge that eventually allows her to understand the land outside of its superficial relationship to watercolour paintings and "uplifting verse" (42). The persona who haunts much of the remainder of the collection—the one who lurks beneath the streets of modern-day Toronto—is a woman defined by this "other" voice in all its "glisten[ing]" detail (31). Moodie's duality as a ghostly presence in *The Journals* thus warrants further consideration, particularly because critics have traditionally been so keen to embrace the now familiar account of her mysterious provenance. Not only can Atwood's Moodie be classified as a ghost because of her immortalization in poetry eight-five years after the very real death of Susanna Moodie, but she also undergoes a second death within the text itself (see "Solipsism While Dying"); however, it

is not until the final poem of the collection that the speaker's "wish" to become a "heraldic emblem" (49) is finally granted. The tentative quality of the offset line "maybe" six poems earlier is now much more definite, because Moodie as spectre has indeed come to "prowl and slink" through the city streets (49). As Atwood decrees in the Afterword, this Moodie is a spirit who "refuses to be ploughed under completely" (64). The persona addresses the reader directly here, calling attention to her relentless presence in twentieth-century Canada. "[T]his is my kingdom still," she declares, "I have / my ways of getting through" (60). The message that this Moodie brings to her audience smacks of self-satisfaction; she proudly claims responsibility for making the land as alien to contemporary Canadians as it was for her over a century ago. With the commands "[t]urn, look up," and "[t]urn, look down," she forces readers to acknowledge visibly the vacuous reality of our destructive modern existence (60-61), in part because, as she has already cryptically warned us during her recent resurrection, "at the last / judgement we will all be trees" (59).

A recurring sentiment in Canadian critical and literary discourse is that ours is a country without any ghosts. Part of my project in the preceding discussion of *The Journals* has been to suggest that Atwood was consciously trying to fill this gap with her poetry collection, by configuring Moodie as a national ghost.[12] It is no coincidence that both Moodie and her sister Traill make specific mention of this particular lack in their respective surveys of nineteenth-century Canada. In *The Backwoods of Canada*, Traill famously observes that "ghosts or spirits…appear totally banished from Canada," namely because this country is "too matter-of-fact…for such supernaturals to visit" (128). Moodie similarly recounts a late-night journey through a "dark cedar swamp" with her husband, during which their driver announces that "'[t]here are no ghosts in Canada….The country is too new for ghosts'" (*Roughing It* 267). Perhaps the nation is only mature enough to receive the supernatural by the time Atwood fortuitously publishes *The Journals* in 1970, which just so happens to feature none other than Mrs. Moodie herself as this long-awaited apparition. Taking up Earle Birney's oft-quoted line, "[i]t's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted," Frye decisively contends that "the nostalgic and elegiac are the inevitable emotional responses of an egocentric consciousness locked into a demythologized environment" (*Haunted* 33). Hence Atwood's timely impulse to produce a ghost-like Canadian consciousness in the resuscitated figure of Moodie.

In his examination of the ghost as *genius loci*, J.M. Kertzer identifies a certain critical and personal pressure on Canadian artists to "rediscover the

land as if for the first time"—to become, in other words, "imaginative pioneers" (78). He briefly cites Atwood's *Journals* as a primary example here, and his subsequent assertion that "[a] national literature half creates and half perceives. It expresses our temperament; it casts and recasts our history; it speaks for the spirit(s) of the nation" is certainly a fitting description for Atwood's collection (71). Kertzer also explains (in paraphrasing the work of the Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder) that "[t]he creative national moment produces a spiritual form, a ghost" (73). I have thus endeavoured to show how the heightened cultural and national concerns of Canada in and around 1967 must be partially credited for the successful generation of Atwood's poems. The closing lines of her Afterword categorically imply that Moodie's reincarnation was long overdue: "Susanna Moodie has finally turned herself inside out," Atwood testifies, "and has become the spirit of the land she once hated" (64). The dream story that opens the Afterword only serves to confirm the prevailing opinion that this re-embodiment was somehow preordained. If Atwood had instead announced that she was visited in person by the ghost of Moodie, perhaps critics would be more sceptical of her intentions. But because the dream world is a universally familiar yet inexplicable space, Atwood's dream narrative has effectively managed to lend a degree of authenticity and believability to her poetic sequence while simultaneously allowing her to elide responsibility as the earthly creator of this ghostly Canadian figure.

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In a 1983 interview with Jan Garden Castro, Atwood asserted: "I never have done academic criticism of my own work, and I never will" (216). Perhaps this claim contains an element of truth, in terms of Atwood's formal treatment of her literary corpus; perhaps it is merely a calculated evasion. In any case, I have tried to suggest throughout this discussion that because Atwood appends a critical afterword to *The Journals*, and because she specifically selects and constructs a literary predecessor as her poetic speaker, she encourages her reader to approach the text overall as an artist's manifesto for twentieth-century Canada. Given the particular historical moment out of which these poems arose, in combination with the gradual "metamorphosis" of Atwood's Moodie from distraught emigrant into "heraldic emblem," it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that Atwood's portrayal of Moodie as a national ghost was entirely unpremeditated, despite her best efforts to imply that, in creating these poems, she was merely complying with Moodie's own "wish" to be remembered and revered. Her poems may or may not have been "generated by a dream."

The important thing is that they have consistently and credulously been read through this persuasive lens. But if this practice is allowed to continue unheeded—that is, if readers maintain an uncritical belief in Atwood's dream as evidence that Moodie's "true" voice is actually speaking to us through *The Journals*—then not only will both Atwood and Moodie suffer a perpetual disservice, but so too will consumers of Canadian culture. While there is nothing inherently wrong with mythmaking, nor with viewing myth as a marker of national identity, both activities must be performed with caution. Without a substantial degree of self-awareness and reflexivity on the part of our critics and canon-makers, Canada's cultural imaginary can become a dangerous and ineffective space. As Atwood writes near the beginning of her collection, "[w]hether the wilderness is / real or not / depends on who lives there" (13). Maybe Canada's population really is composed of citizens and ghosts alike; but it is up to each of us to distinguish between the two groups, and to negotiate our own changing wildernesses, as we navigate through our nation's past and present literary representations.

## Notes

1 See also Carol Shields's *Small Ceremonies* (1976), in which the first-person narrator—a biographer of Moodie—admires her subject's "pleasing schizoid side" (6). Indeed, Shields's protagonist Judith Gill is "enamoured" of Moodie, because in her search for the "real Susanna" she has experienced the "pleasant shock of meeting a kindred spirit" (6-7) who "hovers over the house, a friendly ghost" (53).

2 Jes Simmons, in her Jungian reading of *The Journals*, conceives of the text as "the creative result of Atwood's unconscious being integrated with Canada's collective unconscious, symbolized as Susanna Moodie" (151), whereas I read Atwood's *conscious* construction of her own *un*conscious drives as a formal device that is not only referenced in the Afterword but that informs the direction of the text overall.

3 Virago is a British, feminist press specializing in "little known" women writers. Their edition of *Roughing It* is based on the complete 1852 version of the text, although the editors conspicuously excised all material contributed by Moodie's husband.

4 This article can also be found on the official Margaret Atwood Reference Site (www.owtoad.com) under the title "Writing Susanna."

5 My own research on *The Journals* indicates this critical attraction to—and uncritical treatment of—Atwood's dream story (as it exists in her Afterword). See, for example, Sherrill Grace (1980), Eli Mandel (1983), Diana Relke (1983), Jes Simmons (1987), Ann Edwards Boutelle (1988), Fiona Sparrow (1990), Jacqui Smyth (1992), Branko Gorjup (1996), Rosemary Sullivan (1998), and Kim Stringer (2002), all of whom mention Atwood's dream in some capacity or another without explicitly questioning its veracity (although some are more distinctly suspicious of Atwood's intentions than are others).

6 The province of Ontario does boast a long history of cultural attachment to the occult. See D.M.R. Bentley's "Boxing the Compass: Ontario's Geopoetics" for a discussion of Ontario literature and its engagement with a variety of hermetic ideas. Michèle Lacombe provides further evidence of this pattern in her more focused examination of Walt Whitman's mysticism and its influence on the early twentieth-century creation of an alternative wilderness resort at Ontario's Bon Echo Provincial Park. Readers should also bear in mind Moodie's own fascination with Spiritualism, a movement which exploded onto the Canadian scene in the 1850s.

7 John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1959) and Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon: A Vision* (1969) are just two of many American examples. Grace also points to Robert Kroetsch's "F.P. Grove: The Finding," from *The Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), and D.G. Jones's Lampman-to-Kate poems, from *Under the Thunder the Flowers Light up the Earth* (1977), as two later Canadian manifestations of this fondness for refashioning literary figures in an attempt at national self-definition ("Moodie and Atwood" 79)—a fact that might once again signal the impact of Atwood's collection on her peers. See also Don Gutteridge's *Coppermine: The Quest for North* (1973) and Florence McNeil's *Emily* (1975), among others.

8 The New Broadcasting Act of 1968 secured CBC's position as Canada's national service provider, and the creation of the Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC) in the same year mandated a higher level of Canadian content for all CBC network programming. 1967-68 also witnessed a dramatic, parliamentary-approved increase in funds to the Canada Council.

9 See Rick Salutin's "1837: The Farmers' Revolt" (1973) for a dramatic parody of Moodie's ineffectual struggles to contend with the formidable Canadian wilderness. Described as "an English gentlewoman of the memoir-writing ilk" (219), Salutin's caricature of Moodie—the laughable Lady Backwash—waxes triumphant after her party's coach is finally rescued from the mud: "[w]e had fought the good fight and won," she dictates to her obedient hired man, "[w]e had been faced with insurmountable obstacles and we had overcome them" (223). In simultaneously lampooning Moodie's unwillingness to get her hands dirty and her eagerness to take credit for any backwoods adventure she does manage to endure, Salutin provides a sarcastic and comedic treatment of this unlikely pioneer, as opposed to Atwood's more serious attempt to capture Moodie's intense psychological distresses in *The Journals*.

10 In *Survival*, Atwood maintains that "the Canadian pioneer is a square man in a round whole; he faces the problem of trying to fit a straight line into a curved space. Of course, the *necessity* for the straight lines is not in Nature but in his own head; he might have had a happier time if he'd tried to fit himself into Nature, not the other way around" (120). She then points to *The Journals* as an exploration of these very tensions, and adds that she personally falls on the side of the curve.

11 Sullivan offers the following excerpt from a notebook kept by Atwood during her years as a student at Harvard: "[e]very country has its national mania. The American is megalomaniac and his fear is of subversion from within; the Canadian is paranoid, fearing invasion from without" (qtd. in Sullivan 126). This statement (written some time in 1962) bears an uncanny resemblance to Atwood's oft-cited edict in her Afterword to *The Journals*, and thus destabilizes the possibility that Atwood's dream of 1965 is what caused her to develop these reflections on Canada's own "national mania."

12 While the editors of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* special issue on haunting in Canadian literature (Spring 2006) reference Atwood's critical work of the 1970s as an attempt to "fill in this supposed emptiness by exhuming ghosts and providing evidence of a past, a history, and thus a culture" (Goldman and Saul 646), they do not explicitly acknowledge *The Journals* as a related instance of this search for "a new Canadian mythology" (647).

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