

# TRAVELLING WITH THE CRONE: *THE JOURNALS OF SUSANNA MOODIE* BY MARGARET ATWOOD

Biancamaria Rizzardi\*

## Abstract

This essay focuses on Margaret Atwood's 1970 collection of poems entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* because it displays, not only at a figurative level, all the characteristic traits of the old woman: her privileged, though painful, relationship with time; her ability to freely live her life in the present and dwell upon life under the shadow of death; her witchcraft, her magical power over time. This collection of poems also presents an allegorical-metaphysical transposition, which involves the younger generation and the cyclical seasonal rhythms: in the end, in fact, the pioneer, Susanna Moodie, is bound to become herself a crone and to face a new generation, which is unaware of time and pain.

*In viaggio con la strega: I diari di Susanna Moodie di Margaret Atwood*

L'intervento si concentra sulla raccolta di poesie *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) di Margaret Atwood in quanto in essa sono presenti, a livello figurativo e non solo, tutte le caratteristiche tipiche dell'anziana: il suo rapporto privilegiato, benché doloroso, con il tempo, la sua capacità di vivere liberamente il presente e pensare il domani nell'ombra della morte, il suo potere magico, da strega, sul tempo. Ed è anche presente la trasposizione allegorico metafisica con la generazione più giovane e con i ritmi ciclici stagionali, il fatto che da ultimo la pioniera, Susanna Moodie, è destinata a diventare lei stessa *crone* e a confrontarsi con una nuova generazione ignara del tempo e del dolore.

## The polysemic wealth of language

On account of her prolific output, Margaret Atwood is universally recognised as one of the most significant voices in the English-speaking world: at this stage she has completed seventeen collections of poetry, five novels, eight short story collections, eight books for children and ten volumes of critical essays. Added to this is the depth and variety of her subject matter. Despite having amply demonstrated her undoubted narrative abilities with the acclaim that has greeted her

\* Università di Pisa.

novels, which have been widely translated, I agree with those critics who claim that the best indication of her talent may be found in her poetic output.

I should point out immediately that one of the fundamental reasons for the great interest aroused by her poetry lies in the particularly polysemic wealth of language that convergent readings of her texts offer, even from apparently irreconcilable interpretative distances.

It is in this perspective that the theme of the journey may be viewed, which I would define as a real 'semantic prism'. It is present right from her first collection of poetry, and becomes increasingly important, volume after volume, eventually finding its ideal setting in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). In this volume, the journey represents both the theme and the substance of the work, conferring unity on the text and transforming it into a long poem. So much so that it could also be claimed that the *Journals* are in actual fact a real 'journey' undertaken by Susanna Moodie. For that again, and in Malcom Lowry's words, are not journeys «Voyages that never end»?

Protected and hidden behind the 'persona' of Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood, in a narration that unfolds through the poems contained in three diaries, tells the story of this 19<sup>th</sup>-century English writer and pioneer. The focus is not on what led her from the Old to the New World, but rather on the journey that, in crossing Canada, brought about her Canadian 're-birth' and from there, her death and even beyond.

It should be emphasised that a qualitative gap exists between the author of *Life in the Clearings* (1852) and *Roughing it in the Bush* (1853), and that of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*: even if potential elements appear in the writings of Susanna Moodie that show why she is given the role of protagonist, it is only by dint of Margaret Atwood's creative imagination that the complete and complex transformation of this pioneer into a symbolic figure comes about, whose myth includes not only her person and the places where she lived, but also embraces an entire country.

This collection offers several points for reflection. These could be categorised by following the tripartite representation of the ages of women previously described by Robert Graves and taken up by Margaret Atwood firstly in *Survival* and subsequently in *Double Persphone*: the maiden and youth; the woman and motherhood; and the old woman, or crone. For reasons of space. I am going to concentrate in particular on the archetype of the old woman, since in the poems in "Journal III", Susanna Moodie displays, and not only at a figurative level, all the characteristics of the archetypal old woman: her privileged yet painful relationship with time; her ability to live her life freely in the present while dwelling on life under the shadow of death; her witchcraft and her magical power over time. This collection of poems also presents

an allegorical-metaphysical transposition, which involves the younger generation and the cyclical seasonal rhythms: ultimately, in fact, Susanna Moodie as a pioneer is herself bound to become a crone that will have to face a new generation.

Overall, in its more typical components, the story of which Susanna Moodie is protagonist appears to be an apotheosis of pure narration: its femininity (narration is female, as in the archetype of the *Thousand and One Nights*, added to the fact that in this specific case it is also entirely Canadian); its gratuitousness (narration is spontaneous, free, unfettered by pre-ordained frameworks, and is an end in itself); its struggle against time and the end (narration is founded on the zero space of death).

### **Woman (linked to the concepts of identity-generation)**

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is unmistakably a woman-centred book. Not only is the protagonist and narrator a woman, but the story is filtered exclusively through her point of view. This choice however is not so much an emblem of feminism as an attribute that conditions its vision. Men only appear as secondary figures, the expressions of a certain kind of character or way of being or interpreting reality, rather than as in-depth psychological studies. From the moment they set foot in Québec, her companions stubbornly attempt to bring everything new they find on their path into the framework of European thought and Euro-centrism; that is, into the dominant cultural systems. In other words, to use an expression dear to Foucault, everything is slotted into their 'epistemes', whose principal purpose is that of assigning names to things and, by so doing, appropriating them in the traditional sense of a rationalisation. Another crucial aspect of these epistemes is inserting things into a hierarchical framework with precise meanings, which then subjugates them to the men that have named them. Her other travelling companions choose names in order to rename this new cultural reality they have come in contact with by drawing on a supply of ready-made images: metaphors and stereotypes that the colonial West uses as methods for processing the information with which it is bombarded in the New World.

In the poems in "Diary I", this woman who comes from civilisation does indeed consider the rivers, forests and swamps she encounters on her travels as obstacles to be overcome, sources of adversity against which she must fight; but right from the beginning she does not react like the other pioneers. She sees and feels that she is 'different' to her other travelling companions:

They deny the ground they stand on,  
pretend this dirt is the future.  
And they are right. If they let go  
Of that illusion solid to them as a shovel,

- open their eyes even for a moment  
to these trees. To this particular sun  
they would be surrounded, stormed, broken

in upon branches, roots, tendrils, the dark  
side of life as I am ("The Planters": 26).

to the inhabitants of the place,

The people I live among, unforgivingly  
previous to me, grudging  
the way I breath their  
property, the air speaking a twisted dialect to my differently-  
shaped ears  
[...]  
go back where you come from ("First Neighbours": 22).

to her husband,

My husband walks in the frosted field  
an X, a concept  
defined against a blank;  
he swerves, enters the forest  
and is blotted out.  
Unheld by my sight  
What does he change into  
What other shape  
Blends with the under –  
growth, wavers across the pools,  
is camouflaged from the listening  
swamp animals ("The Wareman": 28).

This condition of hers – that of being at a complete remove from the world surrounding her – finds vivid representation in the linguistic metaphor: «I am a word/ In a foreign language». ("Desembarking at Québec": 16).

In other words, Susanna Moodie does not want to colonise the imagination of whoever comes into contact with her; but in a certain sense she is in her turn colonised by 'barbarians'. «I am/ eaten away by light» ("The Planters": 26). Therefore she will be on the side of Caliban.

To Susanna Moodie's demystifying eyes, her companions exist in an unreal space outside time, of an entirely rational order: «the others leap, shout/ Freedom!» (“Desembarking at Québec”: 16). Despite knowing that utopia is an illusion, Susanna Moodie is a prisoner of this adventure: like Aeneas, she cannot rebel against a destiny that has been mapped out before her. There is a difference that affects the entire affair in a decisive manner: the story that is told is not that of a man, but of a woman. One of the most important themes highlighted in Margaret Atwood's work is the defeat of men, or rather, the defeat of that conception of the world based on Cartesian coordinates, which is founded on rationality and predicated on the visible and tangible: clear-cut ideas that find their fullest expression in European civilisation, which for Margaret Atwood is typically masculine. So an alternative remains – the Alternative. Starting with the subject, a woman: totemic body, oracular image, mystical crux, mantic presence – a White Goddess. In fact, it will be the pioneer who, through a painful process of initiation similar to giving birth, will rid herself of the rational superstructures of civilisation and, like the ancient inhabitants of the forest, the Indians, will achieve the fusion of human with nature. One of the crucial points of Susanna Moodie's journey, which marks the rite of passage inherent in her making herself fit for the earth, is beautifully rendered in the poem, “Death of a young son by drowning”. Here, the descent into the womb of the natural world, re-establishes the centrality of the ‘I’ by means of the act of death, because birth, like death, is a moment of convergence between man and nature. The death of the son has redeemed the mother who now, enriched by the metamorphic experience of mediation between wilderness and surface, makes of the son's dead body a conquering totemic body.

By the end of her journey Susanna Moodie will therefore have undergone a profound metamorphosis: she will have changed into the water, the air, and the earth of her new country: she will have completed the slow and painful process of transformation into the elements characterising that primitive world.

### **Narration (linked to concepts of the memory-construction of the individual and national identity)**

It is relatively easy to identify Susanna Moodie as one of the many characters in universal literature afflicted, as the definition by Stephen King has it, by the ‘Sheherazade Syndrome’: that is, forced to tell her own story in a race with time in order to keep death at bay. Just like the oriental princess before death catches up with her, and in a story that as the end approaches becomes more and more laborious, Susanna Moodie – often in barely more than a murmur

and at the cost of great weariness – recounts her tale to her readers, who are also those of an important generation that will leave its mark on Canadian history. And yet, what differentiates Susanna Moodie from Sheherazade or any others, making of her such a highly original character in the panorama of compulsive narrators under threat of death, is the fact that, above and beyond the circumstances of the story, she has reached the end of her existence. In her narrative, therefore, all the characteristics of popular oral narrative traditions are present, allied with the wish – which may be termed ‘testamentary’ – to pass on her experience to future generations. In this way biography and autobiography are conflated; fact, myth and legend overlap and, ultimately, these stories become History with a capital ‘H’, which is shared by all mankind. Susanna Moodie, especially in the poems in “Journal III”, belongs to the popular tradition of story-telling old women who, through lyric fiction become, as Margaret Atwood herself tells us in “Afterwords”, «the myth of the spirit of the earth that she once hated» (115). Hidden and protected by the persona of Susanna Moodie, the elderly narrator bears the traces in her fragile and ravaged body of centuries of history, which she passes on through the story to her Canadian readers. This is why her stories, her story, may be framed above all as the basis of Canadian mythology. In this sense, it is through Susanna Moodie that Atwood becomes aware of her cultural identity and accepts her national history, as well as her own place in all this. As Homi Bhabha states, «It is the development by means of incommensurability that structures all identity narratives and all acts of cultural translation» (509). Indeed, Susanna Moodie’s story may easily be read as an act of ‘cultural translation’ and, undoubtedly, an act of translation in the sense of ‘transculturation’, or the passage from one culture to another.

It is no coincidence that at the beginning of the narrative Susanna Moodie/Margaret Atwood, in introducing herself to the reader, feels that she must supply a prologue, a real ‘riddle’ that once solved will enable an in-depth reading of the text in the direction she wished for:

I take this picture of myself  
and with my sewing scissors  
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eye were,  
every-  
thing appears (12).



In these lines of verse, the exclusion of the capacity of the eyes to see in favour of total vision, while it enables Susanna Moodie to break the closed circle of the senses, also restores to the poet the role of seer, of the prophet, of Tiresias.

And so it is that at one of the interpretative levels of the text, telling the story of Susanna Moodie's journey means telling the story of the first pioneers, of all those people that came from other places and different traditions, with different mentalities and cultures, who suddenly find themselves face to face with the wilderness, untamed nature, and primitive chaos. In this way, by going over and telling the story of the traumatised Canadian psyche at its first impact with reality, it provides the distinctive elements of its identity. It is therefore the history of Canada, retrieved by means of the experience of a person like Susanna Moodie who is at the same time real and symbolic, and who through this process of being uprooted and reborn, lived and triumphed.

### **Death (linked to the concepts of ageing - late life creativity)**

Susanna Moodie is a 'Benjaminesque' story-teller, whose story gains in authoritativeness on account of the presence of death, for which the way is paved throughout the work, but is only actually narrated in the third part of the *Journals*. For her, an Englishwoman thrown in at the deep end of a lacerated and hostile Canada, death – not only her own but that of her whole world, her children and companions – is literally «the natural story wherein all her stories lie» (Benjamin 259).

As confirmation of this double tie linking death and narration, most of the lyric poems contained in *Journal III (1871-1969)*, as Margaret Atwood herself tells us, were written after she fortuitously found a photograph of Susanna Moodie, which shows her when she is old, insane, and worn down by weariness and suffering.

In fact, the final part of *The Journals* may be categorised as an ideal diary made up of lyric poems that do not deal with death but with dying: the old woman at death's door who does not attempt to elude her own passing, who knows and waits patiently, and who is therefore an individual of a completely different type. We are dealing here with the interior aspect of what is 'experienced' dying, with the right to die without dissimulation.

What Benjamin writes on the authority conferred on a story about death would anachronistically appear to be a reflection dictated by a reading of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*:

Just as, as life drains from us, within man a series of images are set in motion – vistas of himself in which he has met himself without noticing –, so too does the un-

forgettable resurface suddenly in his expressions and his eyes, giving everything that concerns him the authoritativeness that, dying, even the basest wretch possesses for the living that surround him. This authoritativeness is at the root of what is narrated (Benjamin 258).

This should be compared with the poem, “Solipsism while dying” (92). A merciless level of introspection allows her to dissociate stereotypical notions and overturn dichotomies, while the search for meaning remains a kind of quest that manages to be both heretical and ethical. “Solipsism while dying” is a cold and lucid description of dying, with neither complaints nor regrets, fully accepting of an event that is part of a naturally occurring rhythm. The skeleton, ears, mouth and hands are now sounds, voices, words and lights. Susanna Moodie’s last word is «ToroNTO», perhaps in memory of the Indian meaning of the term, which is ‘meeting place’.

In addition to this, the narration extends beyond the protagonist’s death: in “A Bus Along St Clair: December”, we see her in the rather grotesque guise of the old woman who contrives to be both furious and protective, on a Toronto bus, and she has now become the spirit of the land she once hated and is intent on conversing with her readers. Beneath this iconology, half traditional-half domestic, lies an all-seeing penetrating eye (the prediction in the prologue comes true in full) that is not put off by physical obstacles; everything is judged in the tones of a cutting prophecy. Yet again Susanna Moodie is capable of distinguishing the real from the utopian, reality from illusion.

I am the old woman  
 Sitting across from you on the bus,  
 her shoulders drawn up like a shawl;  
 out of her eyes come secret  
 hatpins, destroying  
 the walls, the ceiling

Turn, look down:  
 there is no city;  
 this is the centre of the forest

your place is empty (“A Bus Along St Clair: December”: 110).

Furthermore, Susanna Moodie’s narrative acquires even greater authoritativeness from its being told exclusively through female voices. Filtered through Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood ultimately transmits a moral that it will fall to the readers to make known to others, to their own people. In this way, pure narration, story in the Benjaminesque sense of the term, does not finish,



«since», as Benjamin himself concludes, «there is no story that does not also carry the question of its continuation» (264). It is interesting to note how the elderly storyteller leaves a living, almost corporeal 'moral'. Her story does not finish. There is always someone willing to listen to it, someone ready to be charmed and listen to her song of tomorrow: willing, that is, to call into question their own identity, aware that the future is more important than the past. Her story has a mythical value, it offers a testimony to wisdom and communicates the archetypal creativity of the wise old woman.

god is not  
The voice in the whirlwind

god is the whirlwind

at the last  
Judgement we will all be trees ("Resurrection": 108).

In the conclusion of her study on the mythical Crone, Barbara Walker writes:

the Crone can represent precisely the kind of power women so desperately need today, and do not have; the power to force men to do what is right, for the benefit of future generations and of the earth itself (175).

With her example, this is precisely what Atwood's Crone does. In her narration on the point of death and beyond, her awareness of her imminent demise does not transmute into sweeping gestures or an overhaul of her life, but opens magically towards the future in a decidedly emblematic manner. In those who are left behind, Susanna Moodie's death leaves the same sense of aperture towards the future, through a dextrous play of symbolic references, both magic and philosophical. No longer do objects, with their capacity to endure beyond the end, suggest continuity and life beyond death; rather is it the situations themselves and natural rhythms that do so.

If the stone bestiaries in medieval cathedrals, or the paintings of the great deformeders from the past – Grünewald, Bosch and Bruegel – may be said to contain a proto-awareness of Other, the resultant vision always achieved an equilibrium with the blinding light of a deeply-held and apparently incontrovertible truth that enabled fleeting descents into hell. In the modern era, where the tendency described by Margaret Atwood prevails of inspiration from the depths, the Baudelairian descent into the *gouffre* of conscience – «au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver de nouveau» – becomes the itinerary of poetry, in an obsessive attempt to contend with the ghost of the *Doppelgänger* that it gives

rise to, as occurs in Poe, Hoffmann, Melville and Dostojevskij, right up to Faulkner, Kafka and the greatest 20th-century poets.

From this derives the attitude, bestowing a unique touch on Margaret Atwood's writing, which enables her to take on the telling of the ultimate moments and beyond in Susanna Moodie's life, thus passing beyond the limit posed by death. The death of the 'person' occurs in a narrative context that is the most suitable one for presenting, by means of the subsequent metamorphoses, the many facets that make up this character. Time in life is therefore broken down and expanded in order to go beyond death, the representation is deformed by a post-modern gesture, the character's epic-lyrical journey does not accept the truncation, and the gaze flies beyond the cut off point.

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