

Atwood's Surfacing and Canadian cultural identity

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Throughout their cultural history Canadians have defined themselves in the negative: in the case of Francophones, in opposition to Anglophones; in the case of Anglo culture, in contradistinction to the culture of the U.S., given that there is no language barrier between the two.

Part of the document *Linking Artists and Audiences*¹ deals with how much Canadians know about their own culture. The supposition is that cultural consciousness reflects citizens' knowledge and recognition of their cultural system and that this consciousness precedes and largely motivates cultural behavior.

Questions addressed by the research had to do with how conscious the public is regarding individual elements of the cultural system; which events, disciplines and personalities were seen as key; and how consciousness varied in line with

¹ Frank Graves (coord.), *Linking Artists and Audiences*. Ottawa, Communications Canada, Ministry of Supply and Services, 1989. I refer here to Chapter 2, "Awareness and Knowledge of Canadian Culture."

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differences between various disciplines and sectors of art and culture.

A key indicator chosen for the research was how much Canadians really know about their culture, in terms of the individuals responsible for cultural production.² During the first phase of the study, subjects were asked about the individuals; in the second they were asked about these individuals' activity.³

There is little doubt that Margaret Atwood is the Canadian literary figure best known abroad. Her books are published in pocket editions which can be found even in airport bookstores, and she is the only contemporary

² The survey involved reading subjects the names of 14 individuals associated with a range of cultural activities. Twelve of these were Canadian, half from the English-speaking sector and half French-speakers. The recognition level was generally moderate. It was highest in regard to performers, especially musicians, and much less for visual artists. It should be noted that the fact that people recognized names did not imply that they were familiar with the given individual's work.

³ Thus, in the second phase questions were more specific: what does the given person do and is he or she Canadian?

Canadian writer who has had more than one book translated into Spanish.⁴

The above-mentioned survey reflected this. While the Quebecois playwright and novelist Michel Tremblay had greater name recognition, fewer people were able to link him with a specific activity. Of the figures mentioned in the survey, Atwood had the highest level of recognition and accurate identification.⁵

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa in 1939, moving with her family to Sault St. Marie in 1945 and, one year later, to Toronto. As the daughter of an entomologist whose specialty was forest insects, she became familiar with the forests of northern Ontario and Quebec. After graduating from the University of Toronto, she carried out post-graduate studies at Radcliffe in 1962. She has been a university professor and an editor, and since the late 1960s has published a constant stream of poetry, narrative and criticism. Her books have been given Canada's most prestigious awards.

Her work is haunted by three concerns: being a writer, a woman and a Canadian. The first implies an ethical responsibility, since a person who writes transmits culture, and his or her work must undergo a transformation from fascination with language to a commitment to things as they are.

The second has to do with a certain degree of alienation. One observes this in the female characters

⁴ An edition of *El huevo de Barba Azul* (Bluebeard's Egg) has been published by Alcor, and *El cuento de la criada* (The Handmaid's Tale) has been published by Seix Barral. Both translations were done in Spain.

⁵ The survey had the following finding regarding writers: 48.9% of those surveyed recognized Margaret Atwood's name (50.4% recognized Tremblay's); of these, 78.1% knew she was a writer (only 45.1% knew that Tremblay is); 93.1% knew she is Canadian. The reliability average for Atwood was 29.4%, as against 16.6% for Tremblay.

who develop as professionals in a consumer society and find themselves in a process of reaffirmation punctuated by ruptures in cultural, as well as personal and intimate, matters.

Alienation is present in the third concern as well, which involves belonging to a two-headed nation, divided into two cultures, expressing itself in two languages which produce, not a duet, but two monologues of the deaf. These three preoccupations give rise to the author's concern for discovering a common mythology, a base which can be shared.

In 1971 Atwood published her second novel, *Surfacing*, as well as her book of criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. In the latter she expounds a thesis which has been the subject of considerable discussion and controversy: that underlying Canadian literature is a feeling of defeat deriving from cultural colonialism; and that the Canadian literary tradition has therefore reflected strong feelings of collective fear. This fear is related to the threat to the survival of that which is Canadian as a distinct and unique cultural expression.

Both texts reveal the need to search for identity. When superimposed, the themes dealt with in each flow into the other, although the means of concretizing them are quite different.

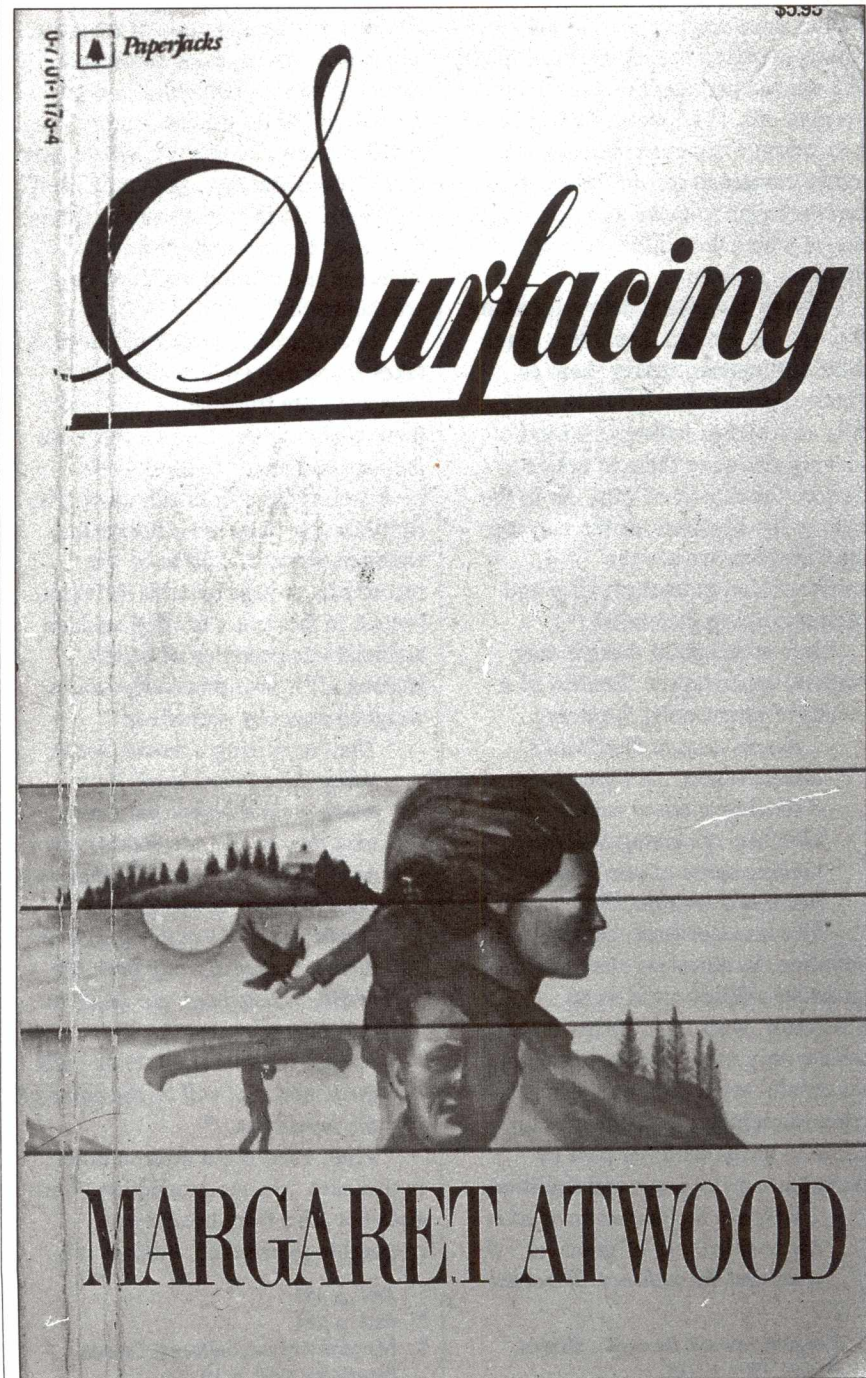
Surfacing is the story of an initiation rite, the search for identity through the recovery of memory. The novel's female narrator/protagonist is a character with no name, an unnamed "I" who, in the course of a voyage both physical and symbolic, finds herself—through confronting others as well as her own past.

The narrator is a young woman who earns her living modestly as an illustrator of children's books. These books imitate the European mythical tradition, inhabited by fantastical beings (fairies, elves) which have turned into commonplaces for what

adults believe children's imagination to be. Thus, her work consists of illustrating a double falsehood: a literature which is translated and then imposed on its readers. She lives in the city with a ceramic artist. Their relationship is ambiguous; for reasons which remain unknown to us

they find it impossible to make a commitment to each other.

The novel's action is detonated by a piece of news: the narrator's father, who lives in the northern forests in a French-speaking area, has disappeared. Faced with the task of putting the family's possessions in



order, she decides to go with her companion, Joe, as well as a couple they have recently befriended, David and Anna, who have a car.

The circumstances in which she must return imply a certain failure; the very fact of having to go home implies a defeat. It is doubly difficult to do so without being married (which would mean the disapproval of her parents as well as their neighbors), without having acquired the status expected of any woman her age. For her traveling companions, in contrast, the trip is like a vacation. They even take along a movie camera to record the sights. In fact they plan to make an experimental movie which they intend to call *Random Samples*.

Everything they encounter along the way, as well as when they reach their destination, strikes them as exotic. As completely urban beings, they experience nature as a kind of scenery allowing them to create a fiction: the fiction of film. As in the case of the illustrations the narrator does at work, we see the confrontation between reality and pseudo-art as a falsehood.

It is at this point that we may begin to superimpose *Survival* as a means of interpreting *Surfacing*.

*...the solution to the Child's dilemma was often seen to involve a coming to terms with the past. One way of coming to terms, making sense of one's roots, is to become a creator....*⁶

The narrator finds herself in this situation. In narrating she is doubly an artist: a failed artist as an illustrator, working to order on texts whose only value is commercial; a successful artist as she relates a situation which will allow her to come to terms with her past by reevaluating her roots and tradition.

...there are two factors involved in the production of a "great art": the artist and the audience. The artist

*acts as vision or tongue, giving shape to patterns in which the audience may then recognize itself, for better or worse: "identify" itself. ...the artist is both representative man and leader; in his work is made visible all that is best and worst in a society. He is us.*⁷

Thus the narrator, as she tells the story of this trip in search of her identity, of a recuperation of memory which includes ancestral times and mythic spaces, is doing this not only for herself but for the community. Yet Atwood notes that this is possible only to the extent that the community itself is receptive to the artist's work. If it is not, then "as artists, deprived of audience and cultural tradition, they are mutilated."⁸

In *Surfacing* this lack of tradition takes shape as a vicious circle: the characters are frustrated artists, since there is no tradition to back them up; they are bad artists because their motivations are artificial, hollow. The film *Random Samples* is the perfect example, since it seeks to be the record of a voyage towards the exotic (which in fact is not exotic); such an artificial interpretation of reality, starting off from a preconception, is weighed down by prejudices.

*They're making a movie. Joe is doing the camera work, he's never done it before but David says they're the new Renaissance Men, you teach yourself what you need to learn. It was mostly David's idea, he calls himself the director: they already have the credits worked out. He wants to get shots of things they come across, random samples he calls them, and that will be the name of the movie too....*⁹

Thus, even if not done to order, in this case, too, the production of art does not arise from the need to respond to experience. Instead, it is

something pre-fabricated and therefore doomed to frustration.¹⁰

The only valid effort is thereby the narration itself. This is in line with another of the aspects Atwood notes in her essay, when she explains that those who write about the impossibility of creating in an insensitive and therefore hostile environment are in fact already engaged in creating. In describing things and herself, the narrator is shaping an identity. The product of this act is a novel which falls within a tradition that, while recent, is nevertheless genuine and thereby implies a cultural identity one can join.

This tradition, which Atwood describes in *Survival*, shows up in other aspects of her novel *Surfacing*. One example is the connection established between the characters and nature.¹¹ Atwood maintains that the portrayal of nature as a monster is a constant in Canadian literature. In *Surfacing* this aspect is related to issues of mental health.

The narrator goes crazy when she comes in contact with the forest and the lake. The solitude implied by the inevitable confrontation with her self causes her to become almost paranoid. When she tries to find out about her father's disappearance, what is ever-present is the specter of the kind of madness caused by spending long periods in isolation during the winter. Nature turns menacing.

This link to nature is also present in the two most significant events that befall a human being: birth and death. The narrator—whose relation to maternity is rather tortuous, since throughout the book she is conflicted about having had an abortion¹²—can resolve this conflict only insofar as

¹⁰ In fact, the movie is never completed, since the narrator throws the film into a lake in a fit of rage.

¹¹ See Chapter Two, "Nature the Monster."

¹² The conflict is a two-way one, since it is also present in her relationship with her mother; that is, when she finds herself in the role of daughter.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Survival*.... Canada, Anansi, 1991, p. 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*. Canada, Paperjacks, 1990, p. 10.

she reconciles herself with nature, with the forest and the lake, and ceases to think, believe and feel that the city represents a better way of life.

Death takes shape in the figure of the father, corresponding to what Atwood calls the tradition of futile heroes, unconvincing martyrs and other sad ends, where death is referred to as a casual incident.¹³ The father suffers death by water, as he is anchored to the bottom of the lake by the weight of a camera. Why this happened is never resolved; the novel never makes clear what he was doing there. This is a death which seems useless, but which does have a purpose: it is the means by which the narrator acquires an identity of her own.

But human beings do not appear only as victims of nature; nature is also the victim of human beings. This is a highly significant aspect of the novel, since this is where we most clearly observe the definition, through opposition, of the point made at the beginning of the text.

The characters' destination is an area inhabited by French Canadians. The narrator recalls her childhood among them as well as the fact that her family was different and, to a degree, discriminated against—they were regarded as strange. So they are the others, the Anglos who left the city in search of a healthier life, one which would be closer to nature. The daily life of her childhood is described through this relation, which defined her family as exceptional or different.

Language plays a crucial role in demarcating this difference. Language is the immediate expression of a culture and world-view:

There are no dirty words any more, they've been neutered, now they're only parts of speech; but I recall the feeling, puzzled, baffled, when I found out some words were dirty and the rest were clean. The bad ones in

French are the religious ones, the worst ones in any language were what they were most afraid of and in English it was the body, that was even scarier than God.... I learned about religion the way most children then learned about sex....¹⁴

Those who most violently assault nature are tourists from the south. The rivers are drained and the trees chopped down for them, so they may take over the land and spread death: they come to hunt and fish. The narrator describes these predators in their motor boat, adorned with their flag: they are Americans. ("Bloody fascist pig Yanks," David calls them.¹⁵) She recognizes them because they leave traces of their passage through the woods: animals killed for no reason except the pleasure of hunting down a victim. They represent another kind of otherness: the lack of respect for a nature which does not belong to them but of which they feel themselves to be owners, since in the final analysis everything exists for their satisfaction. A paradox is that the Americans turn out to be Americanized Canadians.

It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference.... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do.¹⁶

Thus annihilation is another form of otherness. At the first level, in relation to nature; at a deeper level, in relation to identity. This is a whole;

absorbing an alien world-view means death in every sense: killing nature, ceasing to be oneself, making others' values one's own, losing respect for oneself and that which surrounds one.

It is from this angle of vision that *Surfacing's* narrator finds herself once again, in harmony with the environment. In the novel, acquiring identity is associated with recovering memory, with submerging in the landscape, in family roots and personal history, to come back to the surface accepting life. The narrator reconciles herself with the past in order to face the present. This is acquiring an identity, building through recovering.

In her novel, Atwood thereby proposes creativity as a means of forging identity. If there is no long-standing tradition, then roots must be strengthened so they will eventually become firm. In the novel's deliberately open ending, the narrator finds herself amidst a nature which demands nothing of her. "The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing."¹⁷ The choice is made; she will stay in the forest and give birth to her child there. For her, reconciliation with motherhood also means reconciliation with nature, which has no reason to be hostile if one joins together with it.

Reflecting themes that preoccupied Atwood in the 1970s, both *Surfacing* and *Survival* hit the nail on the head: from different angles, they raised questions about Canada's cultural identity. The forms differ, but the conclusion is the same: traditions are forged through what they produce. Conscious of her responsibility towards her cultural community, in these two texts Atwood showed two ways in which Canadians can affirm themselves, no longer through opposition but in a positive way: through creation ✕

¹³ See the book's eighth chapter, "The Casual Incident of Death."

¹⁴ *Surfacing*, p. 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.