

*Surfacing to Survive*  
*Notes of the recent Atwood*

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RECENTLY, in an Indian critical journal, *The Literary Half-yearly* of Mysore, I published an article on Margaret Atwood which was based on her six volumes of verse, and her first novel, *The Edible Woman*. The article appeared in July, 1972, but I had already written it and sent it off to Hallvard Dahlie, who was the guest editor of the issue involved, at the end of 1971, just before I vanished into the islands of the South Pacific on a journey during which I was detached from all concerns with Canadian writers and writing until I returned in June, 1972. When I left Canada and, indeed, for some time after my return, I was unaware that Margaret Atwood had written or was in the process of writing the two works which she published towards the end of 1972, her second novel *Surfacing*,<sup>1</sup> and her very idiosyncratic work of Canadian criticism-cum-social-history, *Survival*.<sup>2</sup>

I mention these circumstantial details since I discovered — after these two books appeared — that the last paragraphs of the piece I wrote in *The Literary Half-Yearly* contained one of those almost prophetic insights that arrive too rarely in a critic's life; having been written with the intent of summarizing Atwood's achievement up to and including her last volume of verse, *Power Politics*,<sup>3</sup> they could easily serve, with a little rewriting, to introduce an article concerned — like the present — with *Surfacing* and *Survival*.

The original article as a whole can obviously best be read where it first appeared, but for reasons I shall develop —

quite apart from any personal satisfaction in having the right hunch — I would like to repeat that conclusion. I had been sketching out the web of correspondence I found in Atwood's work; I ended thus:

There is much more to be said of a complex and subtle poet, but perhaps the most important thing left unsaid is implied by Margaret Atwood herself in one of the poems of *Power Politics*.

Beyond truth,  
tenacity: of those  
dwarf trees & mosses,  
hooked into straight rock  
believing the sun's lies & thus  
refuting/gravity  
& of this cactus, gathering  
itself together  
against the sand, yes tough  
rind & spikes but doing  
the best it can (p. 36)

Here is not merely *an attitude to life that is evident in all Atwood's writings — an attitude appropriate to an age when survival has become the great achievement*. Here is also the metaphor that expresses a personal poetic, even a personal ethic. To be (tenacity) is more certain than to know (truth); *one does the best one can, shapes one's verse like one's life to the realities of existence, and in this age they are the realities that impose a defensive economy*, poems close to the rock, poems spiny as cactuses or calthrops.

I quote these paragraphs not because of any particular pride in having stated what might be obvious to any practiced critic, but because the elements that impressed me in these poems (and which I have emphasized by italicizing my own statements) suggest a continuity and a consistency in Atwood's work — and work divided among many genres — which is unusual among writers of any kind and especially among younger writers. For when I read Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, and her topography of the Canadian literary consciousness, *Survival*, what impressed me was the extent to which these recent books — published almost simultaneously in the autumn of 1972 — developed in more discursive forms the personal ethic, linked to a personal poetic, which I had found emanating from the poems

of her latest book of verse (though assuredly not her last, for so many of her poems have appeared recently in journals that one expects a new volume every season.) I found the continuity, the sense of an extraordinarily self-possessed mind at work on an integrated structure of literary architecture, not only interesting and indeed exciting in so far as it concerned Margaret Atwood herself, but equally interesting and exciting as an index to the development of our literary tradition; a generation, even a decade ago, it would be impossible to think of the Canadian literary ambience fostering this kind of confident and sophisticated sensibility.

The titles of Atwood's most recent books are themselves of immense significance. *Surfacing*; *Survival*. In each case the soft French prefix in place of the hard and arrogant Latin *super*, and in each case a word that suggests coming out to the light with gasping relief. Margaret Atwood's confidence lies in continuation, not in triumph. She has not written — and is unlikely to do so — a book called *Surmounting* or *Surpassing*. "We shall overcome" is a hymn of the American resistance, an underdog's paean to Manifest Destiny; it has no place in the Canadian resistance.

Thus, while *Survival* is certainly a polemical work, it is concerned with elucidating and perhaps eventually changing states of mind rather than with directly provoking action. It is really an application to the whole field of Canadian writing of the ethic worked out in Atwood's poetry, though the ethic is modified; "Beyond truth, /tenacity" indeed, but tenacity becoming a kind of truth, since ultimately it teaches us the reality of our condition; by being resolutely what one is, one comes to know oneself.

This is not evident on first opening the book, for *Survival* is one of those mildly exasperating books in which a brilliant intelligence has been unable to put the brakes on its activity and has run far ahead of the task it has undertaken, so that all readers get more than they bargain for,

and the disappointed are probably as numerous as the gratefully surprised. It was planned originally with utilitarian intent as "a teacher's guide for the many new courses in Canadian literature," and vestiges of that intent survive in the lists of recommended texts, "useful books" and research resources which in themselves form a kind of survival course for one's interest as they intrude on the ten essays on aspects of the Canadian literary personal which form the essential substance of the book.

Atwood presents, and supports with much shrewdly chosen evidence, the proposition that our literature is still scarred and mis-shapen by the state of mind that comes from a colonial relationship. All Canadian attitudes are — she suggests — related to the central fact of victimization imposed or at least attempted, and she lists and grades these attitudes, from "*Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim*" (which objectively considered is the ultimate in victimization), to "*Position Four: To be a creative non-victim*," the position of those whom Atwood tells "you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors)" (pp. 36-39).

Such numerological schemes, even when they are propounded by serious authors (e.g. Jung's Psychological Types and Toynbee's and Spengler's lists of cultures and civilizations) have always a flavour of perverse absurdity, as if the author were aspiring to Pythagorean guruhood, and Margaret Atwood's inclination to carry her propaganda for Canadian literature as a form of national salvation into the schools and lecture rooms suggests that the assumption might not be wholly unjust. But the absurdities of the intelligent are always worth observing for the serious things they reveal, and there is plenty of sound argument, together with a proportion of rather splendid nonsense, in *Survival*.

It is the colonial situation, Margaret Atwood suggests, that has made Canadian writing, whether it has sprung from an attitude of denial or a recognition of experience, a literature of failure; it reflects an attitude to life that aims no higher than survival. The French Canadians recognized this fact and turned it into a self-conscious way of life, with its doctrine of *La Survivance* as the national aim; the English Canadians recognized it explicitly in their pioneer literature and implicitly in their literary identification with animals, whom typically they see as victims, and whose triumph can never be other than survival, since they cannot surmount their natures to be other than animals who live on to face another danger and, if they are fortunate, another survival.

In her argument — which of course is much more intricate than this very brief paraphrase could suggest — Atwood has indeed isolated a familiar Canadian syndrome. We have no heroes; only martyrs. (Any other people would have written an epic about Dollard at the Long Sault rather than Brébeuf; would have made a folk hero out of Gabriel Dumont, not Louis Riel.) We pride ourselves with puritan smugness on our ironic modesty. With an inverted Pharisism, we stake what claim to moral superiority we may propose, not on our successes, but on our failures. All this of course has been recognized and commented on in a desultory and somewhat embarrassed way by other writers, but none of them, before Atwood, has stoically recognized and gathered these scattered insights, and, in a manner now becoming customary among Canadian critics, has built them into a scheme which provides an alternative, or perhaps a supplement, to those constructed by Northrop Frye and D. G. Jones. The main difference between her and Jones and Frye is that their maps are descriptive, charts for explorers; hers are tactical, tools in a campaign, charts to help us to repel a cultural invasion.

In developing a thesis that fits so many facts in our life and literature, Atwood presents a salutary vision of a peo-

ple who express their nature mainly in struggle against frustration of some kind or another. It is a vision that cannot be accepted in literal totality. There are Canadian writers who do not fit into the pattern in any real way, like Robertson Davies; others, like Purdy and Layton, only partly belong. And preoccupations — even obsessions — with survival and failure are not peculiar to Canadian literature. Survival is the core of a recurrent mythic pattern, exemplified in many literatures and a multitude of works from the *Odyssey* and the *Book of Job* down to such classics of a colonizing (not a colonized) culture as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Coral Island* and *Kim*. Any number of modern writers in countries of all kinds display the survival-equals-failure syndrome. It dominates most of Orwell's novels, for example, and Orwell showed himself a model Canadian — according to Atwood's schema — by remarking that every life, viewed from within, is a failure.

Margaret Atwood would — I am sure — answer that it is survival without triumph as the only way out of failure that is the characteristic Canadian predicament and the characteristic theme of an astonishingly high proportion of Canadian writing. And, even if we must deny universal application to her thesis in Canada, it is impossible to dispute that the poets and novelists of failure and survival are too haunting and too numerous not to give a special flavour to our literature.

Yet criticism is such a Protean activity, so necessarily conditioned by the need for empathic understanding between the critic and every single author he discusses, that no critical map of the literary terrain of a country or a time can be accepted as more than a frame of reference, a usable hypothesis, at least in so far as we are seeking enlightenment on the books and authors which are its nominal subjects. Once we recognize that criticism is as much about the critic as it is about what he criticizes, we realize that even our best critic, when he is not reacting directly to a poem or a book, is merely offering an apparatus construct-

ed so subtly that in itself it is a work of literary artifice, relevant mainly to the creativity of Northrop Frye. In the same way, the prime importance of *Survival* to the reader — if not necessarily to the writer — is perhaps not what it says about Canadian books, much of which we can learn in other places, but the fact that it develops in another form the themes and insights that have emerged from Atwood's practice of poetry.

For when we read *Survival*, when we seek to distil the spirit that inspires it, we go down below the polemics, and come to a mental toughness and resilience that resembles the dwarf trees of Atwood's poem in all their improbable tenacity; we come to a defensive strength very much like that of "this cactus, gathering/itself together/against the sand," and this tenacity, this defensive strength are, in Atwood's vision, the reality one begins by recognizing. But beyond this recognition of one's place, one's predicament, beyond the mere will to continue there exists the journey of self-discovery that begins at the basic levels. Recognition, self-exploration, growth. This is the pattern of hope that at the end of *Survival* Margaret Atwood presents for Canadian literature, and through its literature for the awareness and the life of the Canadian people. Let me quote two passages:

I'm not saying that all writing should be "experimental," or that all writing should be "political." But the fact that English Canadian writers are beginning to voice their own predicament consciously, as French Canadian writers have been doing for a decade, is worth mentioning. For both groups, this "voicing" is both an exploratory plunge into their own tradition and a departure from it; and for both groups the voicing would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. (pp. 244-45)

The tone of Canadian literature as a whole is, of course, the dark background: a reader must face the fact that Canadian literature is undeniably sombre and negative, and that this to a large extent is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the natural sensibility . . . when I discovered the shape of the national tradition I was depressed, and it's obvious why: it's a fairly tough tradition to be saddled with, to have to come to terms with. But I was exhilarated too: having bleak ground under your

feet is better than having no ground at all. Any map is better than no map as long as it is accurate, and knowing your starting points and your frame of reference is better than being suspended in a void. (pp. 245-46)

And let me end with the two questions which Margaret Atwood leaves to her readers:

Have we survived?

If so, what happens *after* *Survival*? (p. 246)

One could dip through *Survival* picking many other passages that have roughly the same intent as these; what seems to me important about them is that they present the process of thought out of which *Survival* developed as a kind of journey of exploration and realization; an attempt to come to terms with the reality of the writer's environment, or rather the reality of her culture which means also the reality of herself. And once that reality is established, once the darkness has been recognized and the eyes have become accustomed to it, then, as Margaret Atwood also says, you can see the "points of light — a red flower, or a small fire, or a human figure . . . in contrast to their surroundings: their dark background sets them off and gives them meaning in a way that a bright one would not" (p. 245).

Thus, in *Survival*, we meet, stated in expository terms (and with a personal narrative implied in the exposition) the ideas we have already absorbed osmotically from the reading of her verse, and we recognize that in part at least *Survival* is a work of self-examination, an attempt to reduce to rational terms — almost to homiletic terms — the emotions, the insights which Margaret Atwood had already expressed metaphorically in the poems and in *The Edible Woman*.

It is with this almost Buddhistically self-examinatory inclination of Atwood's in mind that we have to consider her second novel, *Surfacing*. In every way — complexity of action, range of characters, variety of themes, use of metaphor and fantasy — it is a much sparser and more concentrated book than her first novel, *The Edible Woman*; more



than ever one is reminded of the "cactus, gathering/itself together/against the sand . . ." The large screen of urban Canada, with its obvious possibilities of farce and caricature, is abandoned; so is the Gothic fantasy with which the theme of emotional cannibalism is enacted in the earlier novel. The social criticism is less diffuse, more pointed. And thematically, there is a surface resemblance between *Surfacing* and *Survival* at which the reader is tempted to grasp, perhaps at his peril.

Certainly *Surfacing* concerns survival, and, like the book *Survival*, it is concerned with Canadian victims to such an extent that one can identify among its fauna a majority of the types of victim described therein. As major characters, or drifting but ominous shadows, there appear victim animals (a heron and some fish and frogs), victim Indians (it is too far south for victim Eskimos), victim sham pioneers (it is too late in history for real ones), victim children, victim artists (the chapter heading "The Paralyzed Artist" in *Survival* perfectly describes Joe the frustrated potter in *Surfacing*), victim women and victim French Canadians. That leaves out victim explorers, victim immigrants, victim heroes and victim jail-breakers, all featured in *Survival*, but it may be a point in the novel that the narrator contains all these missing roles, since she is an explorer of her own past, she is a migrant into a new self, she is as much a heroine — and a martyred one — as the novel admits, and she is breaking the jail of her imprisoned spirit.

A further link between *Survival* and *Surfacing* is of course the fact that in both books Canada is the victim of a sickness of colonialism, symbolised in the first paragraph of the novel by the white birches which are dying, as the elms have already died, by a disease that is "spreading up from the south . . ." (p. 7). That disease is personified by the Americans who are ravaging the Canadian wilderness, but its pervasiveness is only revealed to us completely when we realize that the heron whose death is central to

the action has been wantonly killed, not by Americans, but by Canadians who have become undistinguishable from Americans.

One can overstress these didactic elements which *Surfacing* has obviously absorbed from the fact that, round about the same time, Atwood was developing the ideas she expounded in *Survival*. One might invert the comparison and suggest that certain personal elements in *Survival* are there because of the fictional preoccupations that carried over from the writing of *Surfacing*. For, like *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* is the account of a *rite de passage*; it is a novel of self-realization and hence of life-realization. Yet it also appears to possess what has so far missed the critics — at least those I have heard discussing the book with a solemnity I find it hard to associate with the Margaret Atwood I know: an element of self-criticism, almost of self-mockery. But let me leave that point while I sketch out the general scheme of *Surfacing*.

The narrator is a young woman who has heard of the disappearance of her botanist father from his cabin on a lake somewhere in the Shield country, and who goes there with three companions — her lover Joe and two self-styled *emancipés*, David and Anna. It is a journey into her past, for she has not been to the lake for nine years and has been estranged from her parents — except for visiting her dying mother in hospital — for that long; it is also a journey, though she does not realize this to begin with, into her real self. She is significantly nameless; she names the other characters, and they name each other, but all of them refer to her only as “you”. She is a failed painter, as Joe is a failed potter, David a failed rebel and Anna a failed wife.

“I” is indeed in the state of inner atrophy which Marian reaches in *The Edible Woman* when she loses the power to eat; if Marian cannot assimilate physical food, “I” cannot absorb or generate feeling. She describes herself as being nothing but a head, untouched and untouched. And yet,

through the events that explode out of her return to the scene of her childhood, she is able to recover herself as a whole being.

It is a process of surfacing, but before that of submerision. The metaphors of drowning and near-drowning recur constantly. Her brother is almost drowned as a child; her father, she finally discovers, has drowned accidentally in searching for Indian cliff paintings on the rock walls that fall sheer into the lake; her own point of crisis occurs when, diving in an attempt to locate the paintings, she encounters the floating corpse of her father, weighted down by his camera. The surfacing in this instance becomes almost literally a rising from death into life.

By this time other realizations have surfaced in the narrator's mind; about her own childhood as she has relived it through returning to the lake island, reshaping it and re-ordering the characters nearer to true relationships as she calls it up into memory; about her companions whose pose of liberation is reduced to a cluster of behavioural clichés borrowed from the Americans they pretend to despise; about the pollution of every kind that man takes with himself into the wilderness; above all about that monstrous indifference to the suffering of other living beings which echoes through Atwood's poems as the greatest of human crimes. Faced with the dead heron:

I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human. In a way it was stupid to be more disturbed by a dead bird than by those other things, the wars and riots and the massacres in the newspapers. But for the wars and riots there was always an explanation, people wrote books about them saying why they happened: the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted. (pp. 30-31)

"I" must shed all she has acquired, must unlearn adulthood, must return through her childhood and beyond humanity, become like the victim animals, as she is in the crucial chapter of the book when, having fled from her com-

panions and allowed them to depart, she lives naked on the island, surviving like a beast on wild roots and mushrooms, until the delirium that is panic in a dual sense passes away from her. Then she returns, like Marian after she has eaten the cake that is her surrogate self in *The Edible Woman*, to a consciousness beyond beasthood, beyond the animistic world of primitives and children. The gods have departed; she is alone, with the child she now wants growing in her womb. "The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (p. 192). One senses, as the novel ends, that benign indifference of the universe of which Camus speaks. There is not hope; the narrator has gone beyond that recourse of the weak. But there is sanity. Doug Fetherling has reproached me with not appreciating the mystical in Atwood. But I find no mysticism here, any more than I find it in the purest, most intellectual forms of Buddhism. What I do find, as I find in that true Buddhism, is a courageous coming into the light of reality.

So there is sanity in this ending, and there is no mockery in it, of self or of other. Yet at the same time there is mockery in all that part of *Surfacing* where "I" is still that detached observing head which feels nothing and has prejudices but no passions. "I," as head, detects with a bitter satiric eye the shams of her companions, the fact that under their anti-American skins they are Americans. But "I" as ultimate narrator, who we must assume to be "I" in the form she takes in the final sane pages of *Surfacing*, and who is perhaps nearer to the author than the unregenerate "I," implicitly mocks her own attempt to find a nationality that will fit a villainy which is universal where man survives. And in so doing she casts an ironically oblique light on *Survival* itself, which is indeed a work with a villain, colonialism.

So, if we consider Atwood's most recent books, *Survival* and *Surfacing*, and observe them in relation to her poems and especially to *Power Politics*, we see the versatility with

which her intelligence plays over the horizons of her perceptions. In the poems these perceptions are expressed with metaphorical tightness and conciseness; they become sharp goads to the feelings. In the essays that form *Survival* they are transformed into discursive nets that entrap the reason. In *Surfacing*, the perceptions are projected in a strange winter light of feeling, until, passing through the destructive element of satire, they are etched with the lineaments of myth. No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972). All further references appear within the text.
- <sup>2</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972). All further references appear within the text.
- <sup>3</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971). All further references appear within the text.