

Notes and Commentary

**MARGARET ATWOOD AND QUEBEC: A
FOOTNOTE ON SURFACING**

by
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Surfacing contains considerable technical advances over Margaret Atwood's earlier fiction. At the same time, however, Atwood remains true to the basic theme which informs all her prose and poetry — the conflict between form and experience — on which she plays many variations. In this conflict, psychic survival depends upon escaping the distortions and constrictions imposed by the accepted ordering of North American society, individual consciousness, inherited language, and ultimately civilization itself. Where *Surfacing* does depart significantly from Atwood's previous writing is its location in Quebec. With Atwood, geography is never a matter of accident; in *Surfacing*, not only is French Canada an essential element in the heroine's search for her past and for herself, but by using Quebec in this way, Atwood places herself within a small but steady stream of English-Canadian writing.

From the publication of Julia Catherine Beckwith Hart's *Saint Ursula's Convent* in 1824, through to the present day, Quebec has maintained a peculiar hold upon the imagination of English-Canadian writers who may not themselves be natives or residents of Quebec or Montreal. For these authors, Quebec is both "us" and "not us." When they write about French Canada they implicitly or explicitly use Quebec to mirror themselves, their conflicts, their ideals, and frequently their sense of dispossession. The nineteenth-century version of this pattern appears most distinctly in the work of historical novelists like William Kirby and Gilbert Parker, who were conditioned by the writing and influence of Sir Walter Scott to define both history and fiction in terms which English Canada could not adequately fulfill. When these writers turned to Quebec they found ample romance, colour and legend to compensate for English Canada's rather staid cultural heritage (hence Quebec as "us"), while at the same time

Quebec was distant and distinct enough for its tales of corruption, infamy and gothic fantasy not to disturb the respectability of Protestant Ontario (hence, thankfully, "not us"). At the end of the century, Duncan Campbell Scott modified and modernized the convention when he used Quebec in his short stories to explore the underside of what Robertson Davies has defined as Canada's "Scotch banker"¹ veneer. In his version of French Canada, Scott creates a mirror for the vagaries of English Canada's suppressed "rather extraordinary, mystical spirit,"² not unlike the way Leonard Cohen returns to the time of the Jesuit missionaries in *Beautiful Losers* and Clark Blaise uses various personas to probe Montreal for the core of Canadian identity in *A North American Education*. Hence when the nameless narrator of *Surfacing* christens Quebec "my home ground, foreign territory" she in fact defines a vision of French Canada which for more than one and a half centuries has formed a subliminal tradition in English-Canadian literature.

In the mental geography of the heroine of *Surfacing* Quebec is simultaneously home and not home: home because it is where her parents have painstakingly built the house on the wilderness island which is the locus of her only true sense of self, but not home because the province really belongs to a mysterious, alien people. From the time of her childhood, the narrator suspects that Quebec enjoys a kind of cultural authenticity that has been forfeited by English, "American" Canada. Unimpressed by her father's eighteenth-century scientific rationalism, she was instead fascinated by the village's "tiny hillside church . . . our parents wouldn't let us sneak up and peer through the windows, which made it illicit and attractive." As a child, she attributed special powers to the unknowable, so that her memory of the one-handed storekeeper who sold forbidden candies is fused with other mysteries of Quebec in a vague but powerful sense of religious magic:

I can see . . . the potent candies, inaccessible in their glass reliquary, and the arm, miraculous in an unspecified way like the toes of saints or the cut-off pieces of early martyrs, the eyes on the plate, the severed breasts, the heart with letters on it.

As an adult, she retains much of her childhood vision of French Canada. When she returns to Quebec at the beginning of the novel, thoroughly alienated from her own gods, she is still intrigued by the sight of "a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever."

¹Peter C. Newman, "The Master's Voice. The Table Talk of Robertson Davies," *Maclean's*, 85, No. 9 (1972), p. 43.

²*Ibid.*, p. 43.

In *Surfacing* Quebec's uniqueness means that, unlike the rest of North America, its mythic identity has some counterpart in the real world. The narrator herself is so accustomed to encountering cultural lies that she is actually annoyed with Madame and Paul for "looking so much like carvings, the habitant kind they sell in tourist handicraft shops; but of course it's the other way around, it's the carvings that look like them." Because they belong to the narrator's childhood experience of French Canada, Madame and Paul acquire special significance as the last living contacts with old Quebec and with the heroine's dead parents. With their children's houses clustered around theirs, they represent a sense of family and community long since lost by metropolitan English Canadians like David, Anna and Joe. Hence it is most appropriate that after making her peace with her ancestors the narrator finally leaves her island not in the powerful speedboat belonging to Evans the American, but in Paul's old homemade boat, "thick and slow and painted white."

The narrator's refusal to accept as genuine the trite folk tales she has been commissioned to illustrate reveals the sort of cultural authenticity she wants Quebec to have. For her, English Canada has no genuine folklore; its children's literature consists of "Humanoid bears and talking pigs, Protestant choo-choo trains who make the grade and become successful," which she can illustrate quite fittingly as "fake Walt Disney, Victorian etchings in sepia, Bavarian cookies, ersatz Eskimo." But she wants Quebec's traditions to be recognizably unique and preferably gothic:

This isn't a country of princesses, The Fountain of Youth and The Castle of the Seven Splendours don't belong here. They must have told stories about something as they sat around the kitchen range at night: bewitched dogs and malevolent trees perhaps, and the magic powers of rival political candidates, whose effigies in straw they burned during elections.

When she speculates that "There should be a *loup-garou* story in *Quebec Folk Tales*," the narrator is in fact asking French Canada to fit the conventions used by William Kirby, Susan Frances Harrison and Duncan Campbell Scott. The heroine of *Surfacing* ultimately admits that she has constructed her version of Francophone culture entirely from the outside: "the truth is that I don't know what the villagers thought or talked about, I was so shut off from them"

The narrator's severance from the community is emphasized most dramatically by her inability to speak its language. In Quebec, the token school French learned by English Canadians serves only to widen the gap between the two cultures; "memorized passages of Racine and Baudelaire" fail to equip the Anglophone even to buy hamburger without embarrassment. But it is this very confrontation with the foreign language of her

home territory that initiates the heroine's suspicion of verbal language which is so integral to her later plunge through the layers of pre-verbal, irrational experience. The novel's assault on the deceiving conventions of accepted language begins with the communication problems between the narrator's parents and Madame and Paul. For the heroine's mother and Madame, the only available medium is meagre verbal form — "Il fait beau" and "'ow are you" — words whose literal meanings are overshadowed by their significance as ritual greetings, and which therefore are as devoid of real content as the word "love" which Joe keeps trying to impose on the narrator. But the narrator's father and Paul begin to find a way beyond the falsities of public language when they evolve the private language of their exchange of vegetables. In *Surfacing*, the barriers and deceptions implicit in inherited linguistic structures, and in English Canada's lack of a language distinct from that of the Americans, are underscored by the very concrete communication difficulties between Anglophones and Francophones which form a background to the narrator's attempts to distinguish actual meaning from facile verbal form.

The ways in which Quebec is "not home" for the heroine of *Surfacing* emphasize the extent of her alienation from her past, her present life and her emotions, but the fact that Quebec is still very much her home means that in Lower Canada she can recover her buried life. Because Quebec is where both the narrator and her parents lived the most valuable parts of their lives, it is also where the narrator can confront and come to terms with all her ghosts. During her days of isolation she turns her back on rational civilization in order to probe the levels of her own psyche. She penetrates the surfaces of her personal life to realize truths about her parents and her fabrications regarding her affair and her abortion; beyond her personal past she encounters the ghosts of the land and its original inhabitants who left the rock paintings; beyond humanity she reaches towards her most primitive evolutionary ancestors — frogs, fish and trees — until she finally arrives at the beginning of life itself, the goldfish foetus of her just-conceived child.

Just as the Quebec wilderness is the place where the narrator strips away her own false surfaces, it is also the place where she learns to see through the façades of her friends and the culture they represent. Hence Anna is literally unmasked when she has to go without her make-up; under close scrutiny her apparently perfect marriage turns out to be a union of hate; the more David rants against the Americans, the more he speaks their language and becomes one of them.

As the heroine of *Surfacing* discovers, not even the protection of language, religion and tradition can save Quebec from the Americans. Because Quebec used to be so distinct, the marks of Americanization are here much more visible than in English Canada. Wherever she looks, the narrator finds signs that her childhood version of Quebec is being violated

by Americans and Canadians who have assimilated the "American" values of material progress and self-centred ecological destruction. The road to the village has been straightened and shortened; the gas station is decorated with stuffed moose, one waving an American flag; the village economy depends on catering to American holiday fishermen, "businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages." At first the narrator assumes, like David, that in the wilderness the Americans are easy to identify. They are the ones who scare away the fish with their souped-up speedboats, who violate the game laws by catching far more than they can eat, and who want all their camping equipment to be automatic and collapsible. But in northern Quebec, Americanism reveals itself to be not a nationality, but a state of mind. When the narrator's party and the Ontario fishermen mistake each other for Americans, the narrator suddenly realizes that in North America it is impossible to be non-American: "If you look like them and talk like them and think like them you are them . . . you speak their language, a language is everything you do."

In *Surfacing*, Quebec is shown to be rapidly learning the American language that has already infiltrated the rest of Canada. One result is that the province is acquiring new territory in the mental geography of English Canadians. In the 1970's Quebec can still, as the novel's heroine demonstrates, fulfill its traditional role as the location of genuine Canadian experience and identity. But in addition Anglophones can find in Quebec's recent cultural revolution a mirror for their own frustrated and far more diffuse quest for national identity. In all of *Surfacing*, perhaps the most cogent connection between English and French Canada is the confusion of messages — English, French and American — painted on the rocks outside the village:

VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN . . . THÉ SALADA, BLUE
MOON COTTAGES 1/2 MILE, QUÉBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU,
BUVEZ COCA COLA GLACÉ, JÉSUS SAVES.