

WOMAN AS EVERYMAN IN ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE END OF THE NOVEL

Jerome H. Rosenberg

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*.¹

—Henry James

My own view is that my novel is not a treatise at all, but a novel; that it concerns characters with certain backgrounds and habits of mind, placed in a particular environment and reacting to it in their own ways; that it does not exist for the sake of making a statement but to tell a story.²

—Margaret Atwood

But if ever there was an organic piece of writing, a stem of paragraphs growing toward the same flowering, *Surfacing* is it. The end is the book. Question the climax and you are left with a headless stump.³

—George Galt

Gmerging from her mystical state at the end of *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood's protagonist observes, in a seeming anticlimax, "this, above all, to refuse to be a victim."⁴ Like Hester Prynne throughout much of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the nameless narrator of Atwood's novel, it appears, has resolved not to allow the evils of society to gnaw away her newly acquired integrity. Yet, for all the evil of others that is to be avoided, Atwood makes equally clear the fact that it is the narrator's own evil, those destructive forces within herself, that needs to be most feared. Just as the "Americans" in the novel are really Canadians, so too is their destructiveness the narrator's own, as revealed throughout the novel by intimations of her guilt and complicity in their crimes. The narrator firmly asserts this common human bond of evil, noting that "the trouble some people have being German . . . I have being human" (p. 130).

¹Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Selected Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1953), pp. 597-99.

²Margaret Atwood, "A Reply," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2 (Winter 1976), 340.

³George Galt, "Surfacing and the Critics," *The Canadian Forum*, May-June 1974, p. 12.

⁴Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 191. Page numbers for all subsequent quotations will be noted in parentheses.

It is the coming to terms, as best one can, with being human that is the protagonist's goal. An escape into the wilderness is an escape from one's humanity. And, although Atwood has stated that one can, with the proper knowledge, survive in the wilderness,⁵ such is not the position of the narrator, who chooses, rather, to return to civilization. She does so, not as a repudiation of some primitivist impulse, but because, for her, "the alternative is death" (p. 191). Such an alternative is, for example, beautifully, if ambiguously, evoked at the end of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The circumstances of that novel differ, however, from what we have in Atwood's work. Although we need not always believe what an author says about her own work, Atwood has in fact observed, correctly, that those who insist that the protagonist should kill herself are ignoring the novel's development.⁶ To assert, on the other hand, that the narrator has failed to develop, failed to learn anything she might apply to her life, and that, therefore, the conclusion of the novel is itself a failure seems equally inaccurate. Such an idea is approached by Rosemary Sullivan in her generally excellent article, "Breaking the Circle," which appears in a special Atwood Symposium issue of *The Malahat Review*.⁷

Sullivan asks, "what has gone wrong" with the conclusion of Atwood's novel, and argues (correctly I believe) that the narrator "seems to have recognized that she cannot abdicate from history, or from society." I would add that she cannot become anything other than her human self with all its flaws. Her merger with the wilderness, as Atwood has suggested, is at best an hallucination; the heroine's descent from civilization, while mythic in form and following the outlines of the traditional perilous journey,⁸ is after all presented by Atwood as fantasy. In the classical journey, as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the hero travels "through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces" and, upon re-emerging to the conscious world of commonplace reality, loses the superhuman powers attained while on the journey. The actions of Atwood's heroine are similar, but Atwood truncates the myth — unlike the mythic hero, her protagonist does not return with an elixir that "restores the world";⁹ hers is not a completed version of the universal myth. Rather, in what the author has called "a ghost story," Atwood limits the results of such a journey, noting (in interview) that her heroine "is obsessed with finding the ghosts, but once she's found them she is

⁵Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *The Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), p. 12.

⁶Sandler, p. 11.

⁷Rosemary Sullivan, "Breaking the Circle," *The Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), pp. 30-41. The section of Sullivan's article that I am particularly concerned with appears on pp. 39-41; all quotations from Sullivan occur on these pages.

⁸See Donna Gerstenberger, "Conceptions Literary and Otherwise: Women Writers and the Modern Imagination," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 9 (Winter 1976), 148-49, for related comments on *Surfacing* and the perilous journey; Sullivan, pp. 37-38, also comments on journey rituals in *Surfacing*, with particular attention to Mircea Eliade's study, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

⁹Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed., Bollingen Series XVII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 246.

released from that obsession"; she "can see the ghosts but they can't see her"; "she can't enter the world of the dead, and she realizes, *OK, I've learned something. Now I have to make my own life.*"¹⁰ The suggestion is that what the heroine has learned is tentative, less an absolute ethical formula from the mystic beyond, more a realization of the strengths and weaknesses of one's humanity. Within the structure of ancient archetypes and mythic patterns that emerge from the contexts of the worlds she creates in her fiction, Atwood is a realistic writer, engaged like Henry James in elaborate studies — or, rather, dramatic depictions — of the nuances of the human mind as it prepares and acts out and disregards fictions that may allow it to cope with an all-too-complex existence. Sullivan, however, argues that "Atwood's decision to write a ghost story might have been a mistake . . . , that Atwood has not taken enough risk." Although Sullivan suggests that Atwood's failure is an artistic rather than a thematic one ("one problem is that Atwood's language fails her") and that the novel fails to achieve its appropriate aesthetic conclusion, the thrust of her remarks is that Atwood does not present the correct sociology, "has not explored the potential of her own vision."¹¹

But what is Atwood's vision? Sullivan suggests, and I would agree, that Atwood's intention has been, or should have been, a creation of a bridge between the nonverbal insights gained in the mystical primitive state and the world of normal, logically-oriented consciousness — a merger leading to a radical revision of social relationships. Indeed, this would seem to be the narrator's intent, if not Atwood's, and it is noted as early as chapter 8 when, in reference to her brother's "drowning," she says, "if it had happened to me I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that; I would have returned with secrets, I would have known things most people didn't" (p. 74). The problem is that such superhuman knowledge cuts both ways — it may allow us, as in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" or Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," to become interpreters of death and perceive a new vision of life, allow us to possess divine knowledge. But, despite Crane's and Whitman's assertions of communal brotherhood, to possess such knowledge is more often than not to define oneself as other, rather than as part of limited humanity; it is to have the pretensions of Hawthorne's Rappaccini or Chillingworth, or Melville's Ahab. Yet it is Hawthorne's unpardonable sin of deliberate alienation from the rest of humanity that Atwood's heroine must avoid — not to remove sin from oneself by perceiving oneself as better than the rest of humanity, but to realize one's inevitable complicity in humanity's corruption, to take responsibility, "to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I

¹⁰Sandler, p. 11.

¹¹Sullivan's argument is somewhat more complex than I have made it out to be, and the context she supplies justifies her conclusions perhaps more than I am suggesting. It is that context, however, that I am disputing, since it leads Sullivan to conclude that Atwood has in some way failed artistically rather than to recognize that Atwood has simply chosen not to write the kind of novel that Sullivan would like to see. I am arguing that, on its own terms, *Surfacing*, though flawed, generally is an artistic success and that its conclusion certainly is.

can do will ever hurt anyone" (p. 191). The narrator realizes that, in the real world, there are "no gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. . . . I regret them; but they give only one kind of truth, one hand" (p. 189). She realizes that, in the real world, there is "no total salvation, resurrection" (p. 189), and that the knowledge one is able to bring back from a submergence into primitive roots can be only partial. Sullivan recognizes the difficulty, observing that "there is an evasion implicit in the attempt to disengage oneself from history, from the inheritance of human culture." But she adds that it is precisely such an evasion that Atwood's "narrator settles for," that "the quest for insight in the novel has been pursued by a process of decreation, a disengagement from time, from history, from language, but no bridge to re-engagement has been discovered."

Sullivan thus goes too far, I believe, when she asserts that "this is [therefore] an alienated book," with "*no release . . . from the burden of the self, no commitment to a sustaining other that is meaningful*" (my italics). Sullivan argues that "the heroine's visionary experience of nature *might* have proved the basis for a radical revision of her perception of the relation of self to other and to community as well How to become human is an ethical question the novel sets itself, and Atwood's ironies are a form of artistic evasion of that question." But one wonders what the critic would have Atwood do. Atwood is like Henry James, who leaves the characters of *The Golden Bowl* set in an emotional limbo, playing their peculiar games of "power politics." The attainment of knowledge has altered their relationship in some way; but Atwood, like James, is less concerned with the results of this alteration, more concerned with the getting there, with the journey traversed. James has written of *The Portrait of a Lady* something that applies equally to *The Golden Bowl* and, by extension, to *Surfacing* as well: "The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished — that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation — that I have left her *en l'air*. — This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity — it groups together. It is complete in itself — and the rest may be taken up or not, later."¹² Atwood in *Surfacing* has completed her novel. The life of her narrator may not be over — Atwood realizes this fact, but has said that "I don't know what she's going to do. I fill in what I know, and after that anybody's guess is as good as mine."¹³

But, for all her ironies, Atwood has provided the way — she has shown us how to become human; there is no evasion: the narrator says of her relationship with Joe, "we will have to begin" (p. 192). Artistically, however, it would be disastrous for Atwood to go beyond this climactic and tentative beginning to attempt the task of explicitly revealing a radical redefinition of human relationship — disastrous because such utopianism, as I think Atwood

¹²Henry James, *The Notebook of Henry James*, eds. F. O. Matthiessen and K. B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 18.

¹³Sandler, p. 12.

realizes, is unattainable and cannot be successfully articulated — if for no other reason than that, even in the context of this novel, language is an imperfect instrument and is recognized as such. Any attempt to convey such a vision is doomed to failure. By leaving us in a protean environment — Joe “only half-formed,” the protagonist balanced between retreat (to the animal state and death) and return; the dock “neither land nor water” (p. 192) — Atwood leaves open and possible that radical vision; and, dramatically, the last scene of the novel becomes, for the protagonist and us, a decisive moment.

Sullivan is correct, therefore, when she observes that, at the end of the novel, when “the narrator is returned to the present . . . [and] regeneration seems possible, . . . there is a terrifying starkness to this present.” Such starkness is appropriate for a moment in which a human being, stripped of all remnants of civilization (whether by insanity or divine revelation), returns to the world of meaning as captured by the ordering capacity of the human mind, reflected in language. But Sullivan errs in saying that the starkness represents an “absence of meaning” which creates an effect of “radical alienation from continuity, from tradition, from the inheritance of meaning stored in language, from the metaphor of immortality” — a world in which there is no mediation from past to present, “where the individual must start again from nothing, essentially alone,” unable “to postulate an acceptable definition of . . . community,” thus calling “into question the cultural affirmation of the novel.” The heroine is not alone; Joe is present — not only that, but present, the narrator notes, as “a mediator”; language has not been removed — “for us it’s necessary,” for us *humans*, the narrator realizes, “it’s necessary, the intercession of words”; and the past — it too is here, in the figure of the possibly conceived child, “the time-traveller,” brought “from the distant past five nights ago . . . , the primaeval one,” who “might be the first one, the first true human” (pp. 191-92). It is tentative, this triumph — certainly — but what else could it be? To come to the devastating realization of one’s sins, finally to *feel* emotion (earlier the narrator envies Joe his pain), to lose one’s innocence and become a part of corrupt humanity (just as James’s Maggie Verver does in *The Golden Bowl*) must, of necessity, make one hesitate. It is this hesitation, this “tensing forward,” that concludes the novel on its appropriate aesthetic, poetic, dramatic note.

Atwood is true to her character in a way that a novelist must be. At the very least Atwood depicts her character as the story requires; more broadly, through her protagonist, she presents us all as we are and probably must be in an imperfect world, balanced precariously between the fall and the final day of judgment — constrained by the limitations of psychological and social influences, yet envisioning the possibility of something better. As Donna Gerstenberger notes, “Atwood has left us in this novel more than a sociological record; there are here hieroglyphics by which human beings may find their ways beyond the old confining myths of nurture. She has engaged

our attention at the levels of myth and language in a way that enlarges our conceptual horizons we should examine our world a little differently because we have experienced *Surfacing*.”¹⁴ Perhaps that “little” difference is enough; perhaps it is all we can expect.

Miami University (Ohio)

¹⁴Gerstenberger, p. 150.