NARCISSISM IN THE MODERN CANADIAN NOVEL

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> We who are still half alive, living in the often fibrillating heartland of a senescent capitalism — can we do more than reflect the decay around and within us? Can we do more than sing our sad and bitter songs of disillusion and defeat?
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> (R.D. Laing, From the "Introduction" to *The Politics of Experience)*

Few Greek myths have more relevance to our contemporary society than that of Narcissus, whose attempt to love only himself led to failure, despair, and ultimately his death. While it's a complex myth which has provided a fruitful point of departure for much psychoanalytic research, two facets are reflected in contemporary Canadian fiction. Narcissus and his fate symbolizes the destructive nature of self-love, and the complementary possibility of union with nature.

The "drowned poet," whether literally in the case of Shelley or Raymond Knister, or metaphorically with A. M. Klein, Chatterton, and a host of others, has been a recurrent theme in literature for the last two centuries. Milton Wilson illuminates this aspect of Canadian poetry in an article published in 1960, "Klein's Drowned Poet: Variations on an Old Theme."[1] While his treatment stays more strictly within the confines of traditional literary criticism than will my discussion here, my treatment of the Canadian novel will to some extent complement his treatment of Canadian poetry. Drowned characters, if not drowned novelists, are frequent in Canadian fiction. The Narcissus myth provides a framework which suggests reasons for the recurrence of this particular pattern in Canadian literature.

Narcissus was born to the nymph Liriope following her seduction by the river-God Cephisus. As Ovid recounts the myth in his *Metamorphoses,* Narcissus' extraordinary beauty caused many youths and maidens to fall in love with him, but in his pride rejected them

[1]Milton Wilson, "Klein's Drowned Poet: Variations on an Old Theme," *Canadian Literature* #6 (Autumn 1960), pp. 5-17.

all. Finally a rejected suitor prayed that Narcissus might love and never gain the thing he loved. Overhearing the prayer, Nemesis, god of divine vengeance, led Narcissus to a pool of water, where he fell in love with his own reflection. His attempts to embrace the apparent other in the water met with obvious failure, although his watery image appeared to mockingly reciprocate his desire. In despair at the impossibility of uniting himself with his reflection, he gradually pined away and died or, in a later version of the myth by Photius, a patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century A.D., and in a Latin epigram by Pentadius, committed suicide. After his death the gods, taking pity on him, transformed him into a hyacinth.[2]

From the time of Freud, psychoanalysts and social critics have investigated the relevance of the Narcissus myth to our culture and to human development. Considerable disagreement surrounding the interpretation of this term complicates the literature on this subject. For Freud it was "the universal original condition,"[3] with a degree of narcissism conducive and in fact necessary for mental health, although as Grace Stuart indicates, his use of the term is muddled by inconsistency.[4] But more recent research has emphasized its negative face as a potentially pathological condition to be avoided or cured. While Grace Stuart in *Narcissus,* Shirley Sugerman in *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism,*[5] and Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*[6] are far from complete agreement, all regard the myth as expressing the central dilemma of modern man — his inability to love others, and the essentially destructive nature of loving only himself. This condition, as these authors reveal in drawing on thinkers from Kierkegaard to the present day is, if not necessarily pathological, of extreme seriousness. Like Narcissus, modern man rejects the love of others in his search for personal fulfillment only to find that the fulfillment thus achieved leads to despair, and a spiritual if not physical death.

The Narcissus myth illuminates literature of all ages — Grace

[2]For my account of the myth of Narcissus I have drawn mainly on Grace Stuart, *Narcissus* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956).
[3]Sigmund Freud, "The Theory of the Libido: Narcissism," *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis,* (New York: Liveright, 1963), p. 360.
[4]Stuart, pp. 26-28.
[5]Shirley Sugerman, *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).
[6]Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).

Stuart makes an intriguing case for Othello and King Lear as narcissistic figures, and draws on Tolstoi, Ibsen, Meredith, Hardy and others to buttress her argument. But if she is overly liberal in seeing narcissism in literature wherever she looks, Herman Melville is one author to whom she refers who makes explicit connections with the Narcissus myth in his writing:

> And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.[7]

Like Ahab many protagonists of fiction and drama reject community to seek the meaning of their lives in relatively solitary search, even if this search is generally more earth-bound. And like so many modern protagonists, Ahab finds this search doomed to failure. As Paul Zweig comments in *The Heresy of Self-Love,* "Ahab's madness lies at the extreme limit of that madness from which all men suffer: the madness of self."[8]

If the protagonists of most modern fiction are in fact concerned with grasping the "phantom of life," they would be unlikely to express it in such romantic terms. Narcissism in contemporary western art and life is interwoven with the alienation and despair which are particularly strong in our modern culture — although it is hard to escape the nagging suspicion that this itself might be a narcissistic position. It adds to our feelings of self-importance if we imagine our society to be in an unusual state of crisis. Still, it does seem that the fascination with the narcissistic personality and the way the Narcissus myth can be drawn on to reveal this personality has helped shape the structure of much modern literature. I am less interested here in psychoanalyzing supposedly narcissistic figures in Canadian fiction than in investigating the manner in which the Narcissus myth influences the choice and treatment of symbols, images, and characters in different works. When psychoanalysis like Grace Stuart approach literature, their particular perspective often distorts the literature they view; linking the discussion more closely to

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[7]Quoted in Stuart, p. 24.

[8]Paul Zweig, *The Heresy of Self-Love: A Study of Subversive Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

the myth gives a more objective referent to serve as a check on enthusiastic speculation.

Artists are no less subject to the narcissism of our present age than the rest of the population; they are only more adept at turning it into art. One result of this narcissism is the frequency of novels with the artist as protagonist. From James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* to more recent works like Iris Murdoch's *The black Prince* and Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives,* the artist has been a frequent protagonist of modern novels. There are, it is true, other possible explanations for this. Sharon Spencer in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* sees this development as a way for the artist to write himself back into the novel in a manner more appropriate for readers for whom the omniscient novelist is not as an acceptable a convention as it once was. As she argues, the modern artist has a peculiar suitability to modern fiction: "For their unusually keen powers of perception, but more especially for their ability to disarm reality and to make it easily mastered, the intellectual and the artist are the 'heroes' of much modernist fiction."[9]

While Spencer illuminates the question from an historical angle, her views are complementary to the mythical perspective provided by Narcissus. While by no means limited to Canadian literature, the myth does have a particular application to the Canadian artist, for it not only expresses the destructive effects of self-love, but also symbolizes union with nature, that *éminence grise* of Canadian literature. While Narcissus cannot merge with nature through embracing water, after his death the gods transform him into a hycinth. Narcissus, who in his life rejects everyone, becomes in his death a part of the all-embracing process of nature. So the myth represents both the perils of isolation and the possibility of community. In a literature in which the opposition between man and nature is a persistent obsession, the Narcissus myth affirms the possibility of healing this schism. Critics of Canadian literature including E.K. Brown, Northrop Frye, and D.G. Jones have commented at length on the garrison mentality and the ways this has inhibited the development of certain aspects of Canadian literature. There is general agreement that in the more successful literature nature is not an opponent of control; it is possible, like Margaret

[9]Sharon Spencer, *Space, Time, and Structure in the Modern Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

Atwood's Susanna Moodie or the narrator of her novel *Surfacing,* to acquire "wolf's eyes" through which we can see nature on its own terms. As D.G. Jones argues in *Butterfly on Rock,* many recent writers are venturing beyond the restrictions inherent in a garrison mentality. Many artists who have learned to embrace the wilderness outside the garrison and the wilderness within themselves employ elements of the Narcissus myth in their work. This myth supports the exploration of possibilities of healing the rift between man and nature, whether external nature or human nature.

Margaret Laurence is one of the many recent Canadian novelists whose work embodies elements of the Narcissus myth. Buckle Fennick in *The Fire-Dwellers* is a particularly isolated character who literally can make love to no one but himself, his highest sexual pleasure masturbation while another watches. Eventually he commits suicide. But if he is obviously a narcissistic character, others of her characters suffer from less fatal strains of this modern illness. All the protagonists of her Manawaka novels experience a degree of alienation and despair, and the difficulty of combining loving relationships with personal freedom that also characterized Narcissus. Hagar Shipley of *The Stone Angel* and Morag Gunn of *The Diviners* are particularly shut up within themselves, although both, particularly Morag, struggle towards life and community in a way which Buckle Fennick or Brooke Skelton of *The Diviners* has deteriorated too far to attempt. Morag Gunn or Morag Dhu — Black Morag — as her friend and lover Dan McIlwraith calls her, suffers from the Celtic melancholy which results from her spending much time within her own thoughts. But while the deaths of Christie and Jules — in the latter case hastened by suicide — fascinate and move her, and the passing nature of human experience is never far from her thoughts, she has sufficient ties with those around her to counteract any pull towards a suicidal end.

Narcissus' father was the river-god Cephisus; as Hugh MacLennan's *Seven Rivers of Canada,* Laurence's *The Diviners,* Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands,* and other works suggest, rivers are frequent symbols in Canadian literature. As the main routes by which explorers probed the wilderness of our country, rivers exercise a strong pull on the Canadian imagination. As Northrop Frye suggests, "The best paintings of Thomson and the Group of Seven have a horizon-focussed perspective, with a line of water or a break through

the hills curving into the remotest background."[10] The traditional association of rivers with time and death both suggest links with the Narcissus myth. The narcissus flower secretes a substance with medicinal properties which are narcotic; narcotics often lead to an escape from time, at least temporarily, which is certainly related to a narcissistic attempt to avoid time's debilitating effects and death. The river whose description opens *The Diviners* is clearly associated with time, which, like the narrative structure of the novel, flows into the future but also ripples back into the past. In *Badlands* the river carries its characters back into time, as Kroetsch takes a more distanced point of view to satirize his characters, particularly William Dawe, who is characterized by self-seeking attempts to defy time and its effects. In a similar manner to Hazard LePage of *The Studhorse Man,* who persists in his anachronistic attempts to flog his services to indifferent customers until he meets with his destruction, despair and suicide attend Dawe's attempts to gain immortality through attaching his name to the perfect dinosaur specimen.

Rivers, and water generally, have pervasive connections with the artist and his work. George Woodcock, in his article "The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction," suggests possible reasons for this affinity:

> The imagery linking writing with water is of course copious. The poets draw their inspiration from the fountains of the muses on Mount Helicon and from the Castalian spring sacred to Apollo at Delphi. We think of their poetry as flowing, we talk of streams of consciousness in fiction, we associate Shakespeare with a river — the Avon — he left in youth, and see a special significance in the association of Coleridge and Wordsworth with the Lakes; we find a particular appropriateness in Shelley's death by drowning (the drowned poet has even become a dominant image in Canadian verse), while we remember with a special poignancy that Keats described himself as "one whose name was writ in water."[11]

The myth of Narcissus can be used to support Woodcock's approach. Narcissus' association with water, both through his father (the river-god Cephisus) and his attempt to embrace his reflection,

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[10]Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 10.

[11]George Woodcock, "The Human Elements: Margaret Laurence's Fiction," in David Helwig, ed., *The Human Elements* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1978), p. 158.

contributes to his suitability to an artistic setting. If Narcissus is the artist, his reflection in the pool is his work of art which is so apparently like the artist; yet, when we as readers naively try to grasp it as something tangibly reflecting its creator, we find that its essence is spiritual and intangible. Or from the artist's point of view, his art leads him on in a futile but necessary attempt to find some way in which his exact being can be embodied and embraced. The number of artists who have succumbed to this sense of futility and ended their lives through suicide is too numerous to need comment. As Woodcock points out in his article on Margaret Laurence, the element water is associated in classical psychology with the melancholic disposition and in literature with the artist, which suggests an affinity between the artist and a melancholic humour which could lead to suicide.

Narcissus died when he found that his love for himself could reach no consummation — either, depending on the version of the myth, by pining away or suicide. Pining away is an unlikely death in any novel, but suicide is not. I have mentioned Buckle Fennick's suicide in *The Fire-Dwellers,* and William Dawe's in *Badlands,* but a partial account of suicides and related misadventures in recent Canadian fiction includes Jules Tonnerre's suicide in *The Diviners,* Leola Staunton's attempted suicide and then lack of resistance to her death in *Fifth Business,* Boy Staunton's probable suicide by drowning, also in *Fifth Business,* the protagonist's father's death (also by drowning) in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing,* Joan Foster's faked suicide (by drowning) in *Lady Oracle,* Michael Hornyak's ambiguous death by fire and water in *But We Are Exiles,* Jonah Bledd's supposedly accidental drowning in *The Words of My Roaring,* Jeremy Sadness and Bea Sunderman's ambiguous death or disappearance at the close of *Gone Indian,* and Hazard Lepage's death at the hoofs of his horse Poseidon at the end of *The Studhorse Man.* The last four novels mentioned are by Robert Kroetsch. While Narcissus did not die by drowning, it is a poetically just end for someone in love with his own reflection.

If the frequency of suicide in Canadian novels is a well-known statistic, the extent to which the Narcissus myth informs and shapes individual novels remains to be demonstrated in detail. I will discuss Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* in this context. Robert Kroetsch has been particularly concerned with narcissistic figures throughout his novels, while Margaret Atwood's

concern with nature, especially in *Surfacing,* illuminates as well the secondary meaning of this myth for Canadian fiction, that of possible union with nature, which is a way out of the narcissistic dilemma of isolation.

While most of the characters in *Surfacing* drift toward despair and spiritual death, the narrator struggles painfully, but with some success, towards establishing bridges with others and a consequent commitment to life. In her past she has never been close to her family, and is little closer now to the three "friends" with whom she journeys to investigate her father's death. As a child her constant moves have re-inforced her position as an outsider, like "one who didn't know the local customs, like a person from another culture."[12] In the novel she eventually realizes that she has become shut up within her head, and must re-establish links with her physical body and her instinctual nature before she is able to enter into a true relationship with physical reality, those around her, and herself.

It is almost a re-enactment of the Narcissus myth when she dives into a lake — not directly in search of herself, but her father, who is a crucial piece in the puzzle of her identity. But before she does she sees that "My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head" (*Surfacing,* p. 141). Unlike Narcissus, she sees her shadow rather than her reflection; "shadow" suggests the Jungian term for that irrational part of her which she must and does confront in her effort to achieve personal wholeness. Her father remains underwater, ensnarled in his cameras, symbols of his misguided attempts to impose rational order on the flux of nature. His plunge remains purely narcissistic; his attempts to see in nature and the Indian carvings a reflection of a rationalistic outlook that will re-inforce his own terminates with despair and suicide. Or, conversely, his death may be one of those which, as R.D. Laing says, "are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable."[13]

The narrator, however, emerges from her plunge into the lake — or her unconscious — with an added awareness which soon transforms her life. The conception of her child with Joe in a state as

[12]Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Don Mills, Ontario: Paperjacks, 1973), p. 72.
[13]Laing, P. 37.

close to nature as possible affirms her acceptance of life, compensating for her previous abortion. She is now prepared to make the attempt to move out of her previous isolation to a life with Joe, however fraught with possibilities of failure that might be. As the narrator realizes at the novel's end: "To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (*Surfacing,* p. 192).

But if there is some hope at the end for the narrator's breaking the confines of her narcissistic straitjacket, there is less for her three friends, who remain essentially static. While Joe and Anna both feel the need to love, their attempts to do so meet with frustration and despair. The narrator is disturbed by her lover's "capacity for death" (*Surfacing,* p. 147), his mangled pots evidence of his drive towards self-destruction. Anna is caught up in the masochistic half of a sado-masochistic relationship, desperate that with the fading of her youthful looks she will lose what little love her husband David has left to give her.

"We are the ones that don't know how to love, there is something essential missing in us" (*Surfacing,* pp. 136-137) comments the narrator about herself and David, Anna's husband. Unlike Anna and Joe, they do not even feel the need to love. While the narrator progresses beyond this life-denying state to a vision of her proper place in nature and humanity, David remains incapable of love, incapable of any sexual relationship that is not a purely physical imposition of his self on another. The film that he and Joe are attempting to make, like the photographs taken by the narrator's father, represent a parallel attempt to impose an irrelevant human viewpoint on the non-human world.

The novel communicates an intense concern with man's attempts to control and humanize, and thus falsify and destroy nature. From the stuffed moose dressed in human clothing at the novel's opening, to the murdered heron, to the man-initiated flooding of the lake, the novel comes down strongly against this new anthropomorphism which would create a nature in its own image. Man's insistence on humanizing results in narcissism, as he thus sees things only as they might be useful to man. The narrator's efforts to break out of this restriction to a more open relationship with the world around her would in other ages be heroic. At the end of the novel she has at least the possibility of a more complete life with Joe — he may not be quite a Joseph, and the narrator is a long way

from a Mary, but their child, conceived in harmony with nature, is getting the most advantageous start that can be imagined in the terms of the novel.

The anguished portrait of man's self-love and its destructive effects in *Surfacing* are given a comic twist in *Badlands,* although the difference is more due to the author's greater distance from his material in *Badlands* than any difference in their characters' spiritual health. In much of his work Robert Kroetsch probes the minds of the compulsive do-ers who like Hazard LePage of *The Studhorse Man* act out their neurotic patterns regardless of their relevance to the world around them. These characters' narcissistic obsessions are affirmed even more through the many images and symbols relating to the myth in many of the novels. In no case is this more directly so than with William Dawe and his band in *Badlands.*

It is a motley crew that drifts down the Red Deer River through the Badlands in search of — in Dawe's case, at least — the fame he imagines would accompany the discovery of a perfect specimen. But this compulsive drive to create a past in his own image blinds him to the pulsating life that surrounds him in the nature of the present. Ironically, they become like the country they pass through, while yet feeling so detached. Dawe's hunchback is "like a butte,"[14] and the men become increasingly identified with many of the dinosaurs for which they search. The vestigial front limbs of the dinosaurs, which cause them to run erect like men, partially closes the historical gap between them; after his fall Dawe, with his leg in a cast, seems to be turning into one of the dinosaurs for which he is searching. By the end of their quest, all the men are merging with the dinosaur speciments they have resurrected. As they move down the river "they had become reptilian, had become the creatures of which they would possess the dead bones" (*Badlands,* p. 240). Identities disappear; egos merge with the nature around them and with each other.

But Dawe's overbearing egotism can bear no threats to his identity, which he continually asserts against the concentration of nature on the species rather than the individual. He dreams of his discovery of a perfect specimen which he will call the Daweosaurus, but even his successes eventually lead him to despair, for they only turn him back into himself and ultimately pointless research. Finally

[14]Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Don Mills, Ontario: Paperjacks, 1976), p. 56.

he disappears in his canoe, presumably to commit suicide by drowning.

The attitudes of Dawe and Web to the past further reveal their narcissism. Web's statement that "There is no such thing as a past" (*Badlands,* p. 4) implies there is nothing but the present, nothing but a narcissistic preoccupation with immediate physical gratification. Dawe, to be sure, is concerned with the past, but only as it reflects his ego. His interest in dinosaurs is only in immortalizing himself through the "Daweosaurus magnicristatus" (*Badlands,* p. 36) rather than attempting to re-create the past in its own terms. His unrelenting egotism leads him to entrust a young and inexperienced Tune with the use of explosives to unearth the perfect specimen. Indirectly his "maniacal obsession" is responsible for Tune's death as well as his own.

McBride and Grizzly balance the narcissistic preoccupations of Web and Dawe. Dawe cannot swim a stroke (*Badlands,* p. 39), and Web, the next most egotistical male on the trip, hates water (*Badlands,* p. 74). But McBride, the sane dirt farmer who falls in the river as they are running some rapids, spends a good part of the night in the water, and emerges naked and stinking from his encounter with a skunk, but otherwise functional. McBride is capable of losing his personal identity, at one point "hardly knowing his own body from the soft and comforting earth" (*Badlands,* p. 46). It is little wonder that he is incompatible with the ego-driven Dawe and Web, and soon parts company with them. "McBride was hardly to be distinguished from his own shadow" (*Badlands,* p. 50), perhaps as in *Surfacing* used here in a Jungian sense to indicate the integration of his conscious with his unconscious nature.

Grizzly has an oriental lack of concern with his individuality, harmonizing with nature more than the other men on the trip. His frequent and successful fishing suggests his harmony with the depths of both nature and himself. And the encounter with the bear which has given him his name, although a more tumultuous affair, is one from which he has emerged almost miraculously unharmed.

The two Annas are even more directly opposed to the petty strivings of Dawe. The identity of their names suggests their lack of ego; as Anna Yellowbird tells Anna Dawe, she has named all her children Billy Crowchild. Anna Dawe, it is true, is William Dawe's daughter in an emotional as well as a physical sense. A virgin at forty-five, she has been deeply inhibited by an inability to love which

her father has inflicted on her. But the novel is as much about her journey as it is about her father's. From her opening circular statement "I am Anna Dawe" (*Badlands,* p. 2) which expresses her inability to get beyond the confines of self, to the close, in which she hurls her father's field notes to the wind, she progresses to a greater awareness of her links with the world in a way which her father does not. Her Beatrice is Anna Yellowbird, who guides her to the source of the Red Deer River and a new understanding of the nature of her life.

In Section 38 of the novel, titled "Losing Time," Anna Yellowbird makes love to William Dawe, who like David in *Surfacing* has previously experienced sex only as an expression of the male predatory or acquisitive instinct. But in his liaison with Anna, although he tells himself that he must "conquer" (*Badlands,* p. 195), Anna Yellowbird effortlessly asserts her own way. Dawe finds

> that at each moment of entry into the dark, wet heat of her body the outside world was lost, and he, in a new paroxysm that erased the past, spent each night's accumulated recollection in that little time of going in; the motion that erased the ticking clock, the wide earth.
>
> (*Badlands,* p. 195)

While Web rejects the past, and Dawe approaches it with his rational values, Anna Yellowbird lives outside time in a way which enables her to have an intuitive relationship to those elements of the past which are of value to her present. The temporary loss of a rational relationship to his present and his past both intrigues and disturbs Dawe, but ultimately has little effect on his ironclad ego.

But Anna Yellowbird remains a character more suggested than described, as Kroetsch appears to have trouble articulating her character beyond a vague archetypal presence. Like the shadowy Mrs. Wilcox of *Howard's End,* her lack of particularity draws our attention to her symbolic nature. But unlike Mrs. Wilcox her symbolic nature has insufficient weight. Web and Dawe are such comparatively vivid characters that it is easy to imagine the author's sympathies are more with them. While a close reading indicates that the novel says otherwise, the author portrays a greater amount of sympathy for Dawe and Web than an objective consideration of their characters in the novel's terms suggests they should receive. Thus the novel suffers from inconsistency between its presentation of the characters and its implied structure.

The peculiar depth and richness of the Narcissus myth link us with the past while at the same time providing us with a special understanding of our present. It makes literature more than an artifact to be examined in isolation from life. It helps show how literature grows out of the past, modifying the eternal problems to the special expression most suited to our particular needs, while at the same time it provides a link with the future through the search for patterns that express enduring elements in the human condition.

Perhaps then, as Laing states in the epigraph to this essay, it is indeed possible to do more than "sing our sad and bitter songs of disillusion and defeat." In both *Surfacing* and *Badlands* the authors take us through despair and death to a position of limited but definite hope. In both cases the myth of Narcissus provides a context for both the despair and the hope. At the end of each novel the two Annas of *Badlands* and the narrator of *Surfacing* have established a harmony with nature and themselves in an analogous manner to Narcissus' transformation to a hyacinth.

If, as Christopher Lasch argues, our present society has carried "the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self,"[15] then it would seem that those novels which emphasize the search for personal fulfillment are at the end of at least one phase of modern fiction. Margaret Laurence especially reflects the contemporary mood in her protagonists' relentless search for freedom, while Margaret Atwood, especially in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing,* also stays generally within the contemporary mainstream of art and social thought. Robert Kroetsch, while retaining the basic pattern of personal search, employs forms which draw him away from concentration on character to the creation of complex patterns of suggestion.

With still other novelists like Matt Cohen, George Bowering, or Michael Ondaatje, Canadian fiction is moving away from the quest to content and forms which may more accurately express the world into which we are moving. The myth of Narcissus may soon play out its final movements, but there will be other myths from the past which will help make the future just slightly less strange.

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[15]Lasch, p. 21.