

FORM IN ATWOOD'S SURFACING: TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF CRITICAL OPINION

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So much of the critical response to Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* falls into one of two conflicting schools of thought that critics are now beginning to write about the split itself. William C. James identifies it, for instance, as "a continuing disagreement as to whether or not the novel, especially in its concluding resolution, can be said to be affirmative."¹ Although James accurately pinpoints the heart of the debate, its reach is much broader, so broad as to involve and contest the book's central themes and form. The two different schools of thought offer, in fact, two contradictory readings of *Surfacing*. I see this division in the criticism in terms of thesis/antithesis,—terms which call, of course, for a synthesis. I find the key to a synthesis in the form of the novel and in the distinctions between modern and post-modern literary form identified by Frank Davey.² Those critics who articulate the thesis side of the debate see the book as a modern novel; those who articulate the antithesis side see it as more of a post-modern novel. I argue, however, that it lives on the line between the two literary movements, with one foot anchored firmly in modernism, the other in post-modernism. It partakes of both the modern and post-modern characteristics of form that Davey points out, but it is neither a strictly modern nor post-modern novel. Its form demands that *Surfacing* be read as both.

The thesis reading, in its essence, is that *Surfacing* constitutes a *rite de passage* from which the nameless narrator emerges a newly integrated and realized self. This is the more popular reading. Important statements of it come from Josie P. Campbell,³ Sherrill Grace, William

1. William C. James, "Atwood's 'Surfacing'," *Canadian Literature*, No. 91 (Winter 1981), p. 174.

2. Frank Davey, *From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960*, (Erin, Ont.: Porcepic, 1974), pp. 11-23.

3. Josie P. Campbell, "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Mosaic*, 11, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 17-28.

C. James, Catherine McLay, John Moss, Annis Pratt,⁴ and Jerome H. Rosenberg.⁵ Even though each one examines *Surfacing* from a different angle, all are united in the belief that by the end of the novel, the narrator attains the ideal that Atwood called "some kind of harmony with the world,"⁶ a statement to which many of these critics draw attention. Catherine McLay, for instance, sees the novel as an exploration, "of a contemporary problem, the search for unity in a self which has become divided," claiming that the conclusion is "Ultimately, . . . an affirmation of the self in its two faces of mind and body."⁷ Similarly, Sherrill Grace maintains that the narrator achieves "a new and more hopeful wholeness in the final section of the book,"⁸ specifying that "By the end of *Surfacing*, the narrator has succeeded in her quest; she has found what she needs to begin a new, complete, and free life."⁹ The most forceful statement of this reading, however, comes from John Moss. He claims that the narrator "has achieved the integration of head and body, resolving the amorphous parts of herself into a single coherent identity."¹⁰

The proponents of the antithesis reading of *Surfacing*, however, deny the central affirmation that unites the thesis school of thought. This is the less popular reading. Its proponents are Robert Lecker, Eli Mandel, and Rosemary Sullivan. Although they too examine *Surfacing* from different angles, they are united in their belief that the narrator does *not* emerge from her experience a new integrated and realized self in harmony with the world. Eli Mandel states the heart of the antithesis reading in its most concise form. "At the end," he says, "nothing is resolved."¹¹ Rosemary Sullivan specifies that the narrator

4. Annis Pratt, "Surfacing and the Rebirth Journey," in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1981), pp. 139-157.

5. Jerome H. Rosenberg, "Woman as Everyman in Atwood's *Surfacing*: Some Observations on the End of the Novel," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1978), pp. 127-132.

6. Graeme Gibson, "Margaret Atwood," in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1973), p. 27.

7. Catherine McLay, "The Divided Self: Theme and Pattern in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, No. 1 (1975), p. 82.

8. Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Vehicule, 1980), p. 105.

9. Grace, p. 109.

10. John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel: The Ancestral Present* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 130.

11. Eli Mandel, "Atwood Gothic," *The Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), p. 169.

achieves no spiritual regeneration because she is unable to integrate the insights she gains from her descent into a mystical world with normal consciousness. Sullivan claims "no bridge to re-engagement has been discovered."¹² The most forceful statement of this reading, however, comes from Robert Lecker. He argues that in *Surfacing* "there is a parody of all the conventions associated with 'search for identity' literature,"¹³ maintaining instead that the narrator of *Surfacing* "is reminded at every turn about the futility of believing that self definition is possible."¹⁴

In the light of distinctions between modern and post-modern literary form, the thesis and antithesis readings taken together constitute not a true contradiction but rather a paradox. Davey identifies a central characteristic of modernism as its concern for the "humanistic ideal of the well wrought urn." The modern writer, he says, strives to "absorb, structure, organize, and discourse definitely on the universe in his art."¹⁵ The post-modern writer, however, seeks to participate in the variety and inter-relatedness of a world of "diminished central authority and amplified individuals."¹⁶ His is the art of particularity, "phenomenological in content, presenting the unprocessed, pre-reflective phenomena of perception rather than 'rational' reflections of the modernist writer," or, to put matters more simply, an art in which particularity triumphs over philosophy, where "Bare images and stimuli take precedence over ideas."¹⁷ In claiming that *Surfacing* constitutes a *rite de passage*, the thesis critics see it as a modern novel, a well wrought urn rationally structured to chronicle the narrator's search for and discovery of her identity. In denying the validity of this integrated and resolved pattern, the antithesis critics suggest that the book is more of a post-modern novel because it lacks such a definitely coherent and comprehensive structure. However, the strength of both modern and post-modern forms in the novel indicates that it ought to be read as both, and therefore, the contradiction between the thesis and antithesis readings amounts to a paradox, a seeming contradiction that can be resolved.

12. Rosemary Sullivan, "Breaking the Circle," *The Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), p. 39.

13. Robert Lecker, "Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels," in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1981), p. 192.

14. Lecker, p. 191.

15. Davey, p. 21.

16. Davey, p. 15.

17. Davey, p. 21.

The formal characteristics of post-modern literature are evident in *Surfacing* from the very start. The narrator begins:

I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire. But this is still near the city limits; we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success.

I never thought of it as a city but as the last or first outpost depending on which way we were going, an accumulation of sheds and boxes and one main street with a movie theatre, the itz, the oyal red R burnt out, and two restaurants which served identical grey hamburger steaks plastered with mud gravy and canned peas, watery and pallid as fisheyes, and french fries bleary with lard. Order a poached egg, my mother said, you can tell if it's fresh by the edges. In one of those restaurants before I was born my brother got under the table and slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs while she was bringing the food; it was during the war and she had on shiny orange rayon stockings, he'd never seen them before, my mother didn't wear them. A different year there we ran through the snow across the sidewalk in our bare feet because we had no shoes, they'd worn out during the summer. In the car that time we sat with our feet wrapped in blankets, pretending we were wounded. My brother said the Germans shot our feet off.

Now though I'm in another car, David's and Anna's; it's sharp-finned and striped with chrome, a lumbering moster left over from ten years ago, he has to reach under the instrument panel to turn on the lights. David says they can't afford a newer one, which probably isn't true. He's a good driver, I realize that, I keep my outside hand on the door in spite of it. To brace myself and so I can get out quickly if I have to. I've driven in the same car with them before but on this road it doesn't seem right, either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am.¹⁸

At work here are many of the qualities of form that distinguish post-modern from modern literature: inconsistency, incoherence, fragmentation, randomness, non-linearity, unpredictability, variety, and most important, the narrator's phenomenological participation in the course of events. The narrator is in direct, active, and creative contact with the details of her surroundings. She begins the account of her journey to find her missing father *in medias res*. In fact, the reader does not learn that his disappearance has occasioned this journey until fifteen pages later. At the start, the narrator is simply on this road and she can't

18. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Markham, Ont.: Paperjacks, 1973), pp. 7-8. All further references to this work appear in the text.

believe it. She is participating in the process of the moment. Although she later complains that she suffers from a dissociation of head and body, she is nonetheless involved in the here and now, exceptionally alert to what is taking place and has taken place around her. Not only does she observe the general characteristics of the landscape (the lake, the car, the road), she notes the particular changes that have taken place since her last trip through the area seven years earlier (the bypass, the sea-planes for hire). She does much more, however, than just present the reader her observations. She presents a reality that is phenomenological, one that she half sees and half creates. The discrepancies between what was and what is, the malaise that stems from coming back with companions who seem out of place, and of course the very nature of her mind, all cause her to conjure up speculations about her friends (Can David afford a new car?) and her environment (Is the town successful?) as well as memories of her past, all of which she weaves into her narration and observations.

As one would expect, the narrative that issues from such a narrator is non-linear and unpredictable in its variety. In fact, I hesitate to call it a narrative at all. It is more a collage of narration, observation, speculation, and recollection. The narrator's mind wanders from one to another without a set purpose or an ordered design. Her written narrative moves from one to another in accordance with the patterns of association that are taking place in her mind at the moment that she observes, speculates, or remembers. What she says, therefore, does not conform to a fixed notion of temporal linearity or even logical linearity; what she will say is almost impossible to predict.

Also, interspersed throughout the collage are occasional moments of inconsistency and incoherence, most notably when the narrator recounts, between two personal recollections, the episode that took place before she was born. How does she know that her brother then slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs? She does not attribute it to a source; she relates it as if it too were a personal memory. Can it be so? If yes, how? If not, where does the information come from? None of these questions is answered. So the reader is left wondering where this recollection originates and how it fits into the narrative. It seems to be inconsistent with the first person point of view that has been established and therefore not to cohere with what else is being told.

Furthermore, the collage is shot through with fragmentary images seemingly chosen at random: the Ritz movie theatre with the R burnt out of its sign, canned peas that are as watery and pallid as fishes,

the waitress's shiny orange rayon stockings, David reaching under his car's instrument panel to turn on the lights. Certainly, these images fulfill such traditional literary objectives as actualizing the setting or helping to reveal character, but here there seems to be no underlying principle that generates them and unifies them. Yes, they all spring from the consciousness of one particular person, the narrator, but they do not hover about an idea or motif, or proceed according to an evident plan. They come not only from different environments but also from different periods of time. In other words, they seem not to be helping to order the reality that the narrator is presenting but instead to be emphasizing its discontinuous and phenomenological variety.

Finally, it should be noted that the sound of the narrator's own syntax reinforces this sense of fragmentation and randomness. Throughout the novel, she presents her reality in staccato phrases strung together with semi-colons and commas: "But this is still near the city limits; we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success." Such choppy rhythms correspond with and thereby emphasize the discontinuous and non-linear way in which the narrator tells her story.

These qualities of post-modern form are by no means confined to the opening of *Surfacing*. As the novel proceeds, in fact, it becomes more and more evident that the narrator is approaching the disappearance of her father with almost no plan for what to do about it. She simply goes to his cabin, all the while phenomenologically responding to her surroundings. In accordance with her unplanned and unstructured course of action, her narrative continues its unpredictable, non-linear, fragmentary, and occasionally inconsistent course. When the narrator finally descends into a state resembling madness near the end of the book, these post-modern qualities are even more prevalent and more forceful. From start to finish, then, it is through just such means that the novel comes into being.

Yet *Surfacing* is not a post-modern novel. In the first place, it is not primarily concerned with the central thematic issue of post-modern literature, the process of writing itself. Even though the narrator believes that the shortcomings of language contribute to her predicament and vows never to teach her unborn child any words, *Surfacing* is not, as Louis MacKendrick puts it, "fiction whose subject is fiction in the making, the creative process in action."¹⁹ Perhaps it is this absence of post-

19. Louis K. MacKendrick, "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 11 (Summer 1978), p. 10.

modern theme that has blinded most critics to the qualities of post-modern form evident in *Surfacing*.

Nevertheless, even in form, *Surfacing* is not a post-modern novel. Although they are by nature opposed to the formal characteristics of modern literature—which Davey identifies as rational, controlled, ordered, structured, and integrated—the formal characteristics of post-modern literature evident in *Surfacing* eventually fall into a patterned structure. Despite the narrator's active and creative involvement in the process of the moment, she finally achieves a comprehensive, ordered vision of her life. Despite her non-linear, fragmentary, and inconsistent narration, her account finally coheres into an integrated whole. Yet even though such a patterned structure is the distinctive quality of modern literary form, *Surfacing* is not a modern novel either.

It is not, because its pattern runs completely counter to the norm. In *Surfacing*, the process of organization that leads to an integrated whole runs in the exact opposite direction from that usually found in a modern novel. Atwood does not create a narrator who gradually constructs a vision that imposes a comprehensive order on her universe, she creates a narrator who destroys one. The novel *begins* with an elaborately patterned structure, the controlled and integrated order that the narrator has imposed on the reality of her own life. The movement of the novel is not a progressive development toward full realization and integration of the self, but instead the progressive exorcism of false selves.

Initially, the narrator presents herself as an only child whose older brother drowned just before she was born. She claims to have been married, to have given birth to a baby boy, to have abandoned her husband and child, and finally to have been divorced from her husband who maintains custody of their son. Most important of all, she has come to believe these lies. She has fully assimilated this false version of her past, which she herself invented, into her present psyche. It is indeed an elaborate structure, a well wrought urn. She wears a wedding ring on occasion, claiming that "it's useful for landladies" (p. 23). She recounts an image-filled description of both her wedding (pp. 87-88) and the birth of her child (p. 80). The reader even sees how the subterfuge has, in turn, taken hold of her. In a conversation she has with her friend about how to keep a marriage together, Anna tells her that she is lucky not to have had any children. The narrator then thinks:

She doesn't have any herself; if she did she couldn't have said that to me. I've never told her about the baby; I haven't told Joe either, there's no reason to. He won't find out the usual way, there aren't any pictures of it peering out from a crib or a window or through the bars of a playpen in my bureau drawer or my billfold where he could stumble across them and act astonished or outraged or sad. I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget. (p. 48)

In this passage, the narrator strays close to the truth. She has no pictures of her child, of course, because it does not exist. What she has fabricated into a birth was really an abortion. Here, the narrator is no longer claiming to have abandoned her son. She says, to the contrary, that he was taken from her. Then she stumbles dangerously close to reality, calling it a section of her own life sliced off from her, her own flesh cancelled. The reader sees, though only in retrospect or a second reading, that the truth is too much for her to bear. Because she cannot cope with the reality of what happened, she *must* forget. To do so, she constructs a slightly more bearable version, one that she can live with, one that she comes to believe is the truth itself.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator attempts to expand this false personal history that she has created to save herself from its true harshness. She tries to fabricate her family into others by calling them "they" and divorcing them from herself. Immediately, however, she says "That won't work. I can't call them 'they' as if they were someone else's family. I have to keep myself from telling that story" (p. 14). This recognition marks a turning point. The narrator can no longer continue to build up an autobiography of lies to believe in. The elaborately controlled and integrated order that she has imposed on the reality of her own life has reached its height when the story begins. The novel traces its demise.

By the end of Part I, the narrator has begun the process of deconstruction. Thinking about the difference between life in the city and life in the bush, she wonders how she has been able to live in the city for such a long time, not feeling safe there. Here on this island in the bush, though, she remembers that she always felt safe, even at night. Immediately, however, she corrects herself, forcefully. "*That's a lie*, my own voice says out loud. I think hard about it, considering it, and it is a lie" (p. 73). Again, the narrator stops herself from contributing anew

to the false but more pleasant version of the past that she has invented. This time she goes even further. Recognizing that she herself is the only source for the authentic version of her past, she resolves to pursue her memories honestly and faithfully.

One page later, she takes the important first step toward the destruction of the protective system she has fabricated; she admits that her brother did not drown, that their mother saved him. On several previous occasions, as in the very opening of the novel, she has made references to her brother which reveal the two of them alive at the same time much later in life. Because of the inconsistency, something has to give way; either these references or her claim that her brother drowned before she was born must be false; both cannot be true. Her claim fails. At their dock, she states quite simply, "This was where he drowned, he got saved only by accident" (p. 74). Thus she attacks the weakest of her fabrications first.

The entire structure falls to pieces near the end of Part II when the narrator goes diving to find one of the Indian rock paintings that her father was mapping out at the time of his disappearance. Near the bottom of the lake, at the base of a cliff, she discovers what the reader assumes to be her father's dead body, but at the time the narrator only states, "It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (p. 142). After she flees, panic stricken, to the surface, the image forms again in her mind. At first she thinks it is the image of her drowned brother, but she has previously renounced this lie and she now discards it again, saying: "it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it; it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise" (p. 143). In other words, she is taking the important step of admitting that she has been disguising reality. She is now on the verge of stripping away the crucial illusion that lies at the heart of the subterfuge she has been living.

What she recognizes is, of course, an image of her aborted fetus. She describes it as being curled up in a bottle, "staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills." She says that when she awoke from the operation and saw the bottle, "I knocked it off the table, my life on the floor, glass egg and shattered blood, nothing could be done." But now, not even this illusion can stand. She immediately re-establishes the truth by stating, "That was

wrong, I never said it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished" (p. 143). Finally, after having acknowledged the reality of her true past in all its horror, she openly admits that she has constructed a false reality to protect herself from it.

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now. (pp. 143-44)

With this recognition of and acceptance of reality, the narrator exorcises the last of her false selves. She has now rid herself of the modernistic order she had imposed on her life.

Surfacing is, then, a kind of well wrought urn, but a uniquely different one. The integrated and resolved pattern that Davey identifies as a distinctive quality of modern literary form runs, here, completely counter to the norm. The book is structured to lead not to an order imposed on reality but instead to an order stripped away from reality. The coherent and comprehensive pattern is the exact opposite of that usually found in a modern novel. However, just as the post-modern qualities of form do not suffice for the book to be considered a strictly post-modern novel, its modern qualities of form likewise do not suffice for it to be considered a strictly modern novel. The result is a book that straddles the boundary between the two, refusing to be classified as entirely one or the other. Thus, the post-modern qualities of form evident in *Surfacing* are not as striking as those in the fiction of, say, Hubert Aquin or Robert Kroetsch, because they are tempered by a more traditional modernism. Its modern qualities of form do not prevail, however, as they do in Atwood's other fiction, because they, in turn, are compromised by the post-modern qualities. Both sides of the line are crucial to *Surfacing*. The book is a fusion of modern and post-modern literary form, demanding to be read as such. Examining it as entirely one or the other leads to an incomplete analysis. Thus, both the thesis and antithesis critics fall short. The book must be seen as neither one nor the other, but both.

The most productive result of synthesizing the contradictory readings offered by the two opposing schools of thought is the light that

doing so sheds on the controversial conclusion to *Surfacing*. To the thesis critics, the ending marks the emergence of the narrator as a newly integrated and realized self in harmony with the world; but to the antithesis critics, the ending marks no resolution whatsoever. According to the argument I have presented here, though, the ending constitutes, paradoxically, a beginning. The narrator has stripped herself of all illusions. For her, now, there are no rules, there are no gods, "No total salvation, resurrection" (p. 189). She will, however, live. She says "The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented" (p. 191). For her, in other words, the known avenues of life are blocked, but she will proceed, making her own way as she goes. She says "withdrawing [from society into the wilderness] is no longer possible and the alternative [living a so called normal life in the usual way] is death" (p. 191). She must find her own way, a new way, from where she is now, nowhere, ground zero. Thus, it is not the case that she has found her self, nor is it the case that nothing is resolved. She has exorcised her false selves and she is now ready to develop, not to find, her true self. She has reached a resolution that is a starting point. She will go to Joe because he is in something of the same state. He, too, "isn't anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (p. 192). At the end of the novel, he is standing on the dock, "which is neither land nor water" (p. 192). To the question posed by Eli Mandel, then, "What will be the narrator's first words to Joe?" I answer: "Let's begin."

Montreal