

The Problematical "I" in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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In one of his famous letters to Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller proclaimed that "writing is life, but what is written is death." Although it is still a striking aphorism on the dichotomy between the vitality of process and the stasis of product ("the written," etc.), it seems almost commonsensical to most of us today. In the thirties, Miller pitched his tent outside the borders of the sedate Empire of Letters and, like a Tamerlaine, waited for it to crumble from within. Instead, the borders have become amorphous and almost limitlessly expansive, eventually incorporating Miller, his iconoclasm, and his anarchistic vitalism. This happened because as a writer he did indeed write and thereby left behind some of "what is written."

The Canadian poet-novelist Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) continues the tradition of writhing within the coils of this same paradox. As a writer of the seventies and eighties, however, she finds it harder than ever to cross beyond the borders of "civilized" rationalism. Even when she strikes out into the wooded vastness of her native Quebec, she finds it trampled over by "American" (her epithet for materialist-rationalist-imperialist) hunters. In "The Reincarnation of Captain Cook," a poem in her *The Animals In That Country* (1968), she depicts the explorer's despair at having come upon (once again) "that country"—the "known/Land," already tamed by man. His failure springs from having acknowledged the names, the maps and the history preceding him.

In later poems, Atwood changes physical direction—via her "Journey to the Interior," her "Descent Through the Carpet" and

her *Procedures for Underground*—always looking for a way out, beyond the realm of structure, stasis and the fixity of man's artificial creations. Repeatedly, no matter how deeply she dives, she has always waiting for her, as if on the other side of the world, the damnable “Lucidities of day.”

Her “Two Headed Poems,” collected in *Selected Poems II* (1987), seem to be a reconciliation to the fact that “Despite us/ There is only one universe...” Her (re)discovery that there is no exit turns her back on herself as a poet. Now she quietly acknowledges that “Language, like mouths/ that hold and release/ it, is wet and living, each/ word is wrinkled/ with age, swollen/ with other words, with blood, smoothed by the numberless/ flesh tongues that have passed across it.”

Inside and out, flux and fixity, female and male, nature and artifice, process and product; the ligaments of Atwood's work are the tension lines between polarities. As she completed her volume of poetry, *Procedures for Underground* (1970), she was already planning her novel *Surfacing* (1972). Indeed, for her, poetry and the novel are not polarities; or rather, they tend to exchange their negative charges. Her poems often have a narrative quality, as if they were boned like little, quintessential short stories. Her novels, meanwhile, are typically modernist: they seem to wriggle in the effort to free themselves from narrativity. The main characters are trans-temporal beasts, living in conflated (poetic) time like their counterparts in Faulkner and Vonnegut. Like Marian, the central character of her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1964), they are unreliable narrators because they lapse suddenly from the objectivity of the natural scientist into deep subjectivity. The voice in her poetry, on the other hand, remains centered, transforming the objective into the subjective with a consistency that makes it reliable.

Poetry, for Atwood, is “where language is renewed... where precision takes place.” It is also the place where, occasionally, she forthrightly debates the problem of narrativity. Like prose/poetry, truth/falsehood is one of her *non*-polarities. (“As for the

sun, there are as many/ suns as there are words for sun; /false or true?") In her novels, not only is there a bifurcation between objectivity and subjectivity, there is a plenitude of meaning ("as many suns as there are words for suns") created by poetic recombinations of the two. In order to preserve this plenitude, she warns us away from the the search for a "true story." It "was lost/ on the way down to the beach, it's something I never had... The true story is vicious/ and multiple and untrue/ after all. Why do you/ need it?"

In *Surfacing*, at least, we do need it; or more to the point we experience the need along with the heroine. Finding it is essential to the exorcism (of the phantom of an aborted foetus) which is the main point of the novel.

The organizing motif, linking the several levels of *Surfacing*, is the journey from the city to the wilderness. There, the characters are confronted with an ordeal, or initiation, and are somehow transformed. Similarly, the unifying theme which intertwines the novel's many levels of significance is that of purification (exorcism), the stripping away of civilization's "false veneer" to cause the "surfacing" of the character's true psychological and moral essence: "layers glued on to him and shredding away, the original surface... scraped down to where he was true."

Just as the heroine plays host and protective guide for her three companions, leading them to her home isolated deep in the northern woods, she leads the reader into the bewildering fastness of her own psyche. Masterful passages detailing how she kills a landed pike, baits hooks with frogs or prepares canoes for portage demonstrate her to be an accomplished woodsman and dependable guide for her friends. But is she equally dependable as a guide for the reader?

Because we experience the entire story through the medium of the heroine's own internal monologue, addressed to herself rather than to us, we "overhear" a narrative which makes little overt distinction between reverie and objective observation. Events, including apparent transformations in other characters, undergo a

process of distortion which tends to become more and more exaggerated as the novel progresses.

As in *The Edible Woman*, the trustworthiness of our heroine-novelist is in question. And this forces the reader to bring into play a higher level of aesthetic awareness than is usually necessary when the narrative remains literal. Even when the narrator lapses into what society would call a “breakdown,” the reader is able to distinguish the logic separating the literally true (and there is always much which stays firmly in this category) from that newly “surfaced” truth springing from the heroine’s altered state of consciousness. This discriminatory ability becomes activated as we slowly uncover the keys to the author’s diegesis, her poetic unity.

Because they remain consistent throughout, we know all geographic and place descriptions to be part of the literal truth, as are the heroine’s stunning natural observations (“deerflies with iridescent eyes and stings like heated needles”). Similarly, those passages with the feeling of real woodsmanship, mentioned above, may be accepted as literal narrative. But what of her perceptions of human relationships?

We know we can take dialogue at face value; it is undistorted phenomena entering her stream of consciousness from the outside. Therefore, we can accept as true the revelation of David and Anne’s marriage as unstable and conflict-ridden. This is so because it comes to us through their own dialogue. On the other hand, we have reason to seriously doubt our heroine’s perception of her three friends (in Chapter Nineteen) as plotting to deceive her about her father’s death. And, we know we are in the realm of completely subjective perception when she looks at them for the last time, seeing only “their false skins flapping” and hearing them “chitter and sizzle like a speeded up tape.” (Chapter Twenty-five)

We know the second of these, the “plot”, to be false because of a lack of internal corroboration. It is an aberrant perception which does not fit the “feel” we have gained for the characters. The

horrific vision in the third instance, however, can have its literal truth rejected while still being accepted as a newly "surfaced," poetic truth. This is a product of that "higher aesthetic awareness" mentioned above, which comes into play when the reader gains possession of some of the semiotic keys to the novel. The manner in which the author maneuvers the reader into this other awareness will be briefly explored below.

The early part of the novel is strewn with prefiguring images which return to haunt the reader when they are met again in other contexts deeper in the book. Therefore, the terrain already covered becomes portentous in retrospect and the images, every time they appear again, give each subsequent scene a subtle, *deja vu* menace. The image may be a seemingly innocent detail, like the "cherub with part of the face missing," which becomes progressively more eerie each time it reappears. Or, it could be a seemingly misplaced detail, like the "lying in the bottom of the canoe," which appears in several contexts before finding its ultimate embodiment as the setting for the scene where the heroine revives memories of her abortion. Such prefigurings alert the reader to a "spatial form" to the novel. They point to patterns which exist simultaneously, quite apart from the temporal sequence of the story. As if to acknowledge such patterns, the heroine says, "it seems I've always known everything; time is compressed like the fist I close on my knee... I hold inside it the clues and solutions and the power for what I must do now."

Perhaps the most overt sign for the reader that the heroine's narrative contains falsehoods and "nonliteral truths," as well as literal narrative, is the manner in which she misleads us (herself?) about her own past. That she herself feels a lack of "omniscience" about that past, that she feels anxious about the quality of her memories, is both a brilliant piece of realism and another means by which the author distances the reader from a literal dependence on the narrative. A third of the way into the book, the heroine announces her anxiety: "I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they are my own... not memories of

other people telling me what I felt, how I acted.”

The simple present tense characterising Parts One and Three (Part Two, unaccountably, is in simple past) allows the heroine to commute back and forth between “present” and “past” almost imperceptibly, as if to assert the truth of her maxim: “the past, inside the skull, it is the same thing.”

Sometimes this “commute” is achieved by the cinematic device of “cutting on action” to a matched, similar action (this time, in the past). In the “now” of the story, Madame (Paul’s wife) “lifts a cube of sugar from the tray,” but it is “He” (a memory of the heroine’s former husband) who “peels the advertisement paper from the sugar and lets one square fall into the cup.” The heroine’s narrative is studded with sentence constructions featuring secret passageway into the past, into memory: “We begin to climb the hill and my husband catches up with me again, making one of his brief appearances...” The present everywhere seems to be unevenly distributed over a bulging subsurface of pastness: “I glance up at him and his face dissolves and reforms, he used to be about eight...”

Such a condition, with past and present interpenetrating in casual promiscuity, easily drifts toward miasmatic incoherence, that condition in storytelling where everything and anything is true simply because nothing is false. But author Atwood does not permit this to happen, by investing her heroine with a passion for distinguishing the true memories from the false (“I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it out like an alibi.”). A moral vigor, a passionate clinging to honesty, is one of the heroine’s unchanging character traits throughout. At one point she reassures herself, saying, “I’ve always felt safe here, even at night.” But then she checks herself, “No, *that’s a lie*, my own voice says out loud.” Even after embarking on her ultimate psychic voyage, this trait remains in tact. “She hates men,” David declares after she has rejected his advances. “I leafed through all the men I had known to see whether or not I hated them,” is her characteristic, scrupulous response.

Yet, despite her desire to be rigorous, the heroine never masters the disordered, self-contradicting jumble of memories. That they are out of control is a source of tension to both the heroine and the reader. At times she plays with the truth intentionally, mentally doodling with it, as with her brother's "drowning." At first we are led to believe that the boy had indeed died, because (in Chapter Three) she leaves us with a last image, that of his "face upturned, eyes open . . . sinking gently." Later even after we know he had been rescued, she continues to embellish the memory, superimposing later memories about asking her father "would he be in the graveyard?"

Most dramatic (and unnerving) of all is the manner in which memories of traumatic experiences, long suppressed, struggle toward the surface through heavy layers of self-deception. The resurfacing of one such memory constitutes the single most important plot development in the novel, culminating the theme of purification. This is the issue of her previous marriage and child, the "true facts" of which remain in doubt right up to the end. It might be argued that internal evidence does not unconditionally eliminate the possibility that the former husband and baby whom she "left in the city" are real. It seems apparent to this reader, however, that they are fabrications, smiling paper masks she uses to hide from herself a truth too full of shame, pain and guilt to be confronted directly. It is when she is dealing with this particular subject that her trustworthiness as narrator becomes a source of intense suspicion.

Faithfully going through the motions *as if* there really had been a former husband, she accuses her parents of never having forgiven her because "they didn't understand my divorce." In Chapter Ten, she goes so far as to give a bogus account of her wedding, an account featuring the prefiguring "cherub-with-part-of-the-face-missing" At the same time, the description includes an ominous, "misplaced detail": from another doorway, she senses "the chill of antiseptic." This, itself, is a prefigurement of the "literally true" story she is yet unwilling to confront.

Even more violently suppressed are the true facts about the baby. Until the climactic vision, "lying in the canoe," the reader has no reason to suspect it had been aborted. Her earlier description of birthing as "taking the baby out with a fork, like a pickle out of a jar," striking for its grotesqueness when first uttered, now becomes a clear prefigurement. From the beginning, we know she considers herself an emotional cripple, deadened to love. In an astounding phrase, she describes her predicament thus: "The trouble some people have being German... I have being human." Clearly, the reference to "trouble" here is a reference to guilt. Confession of guilt ("It was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it.") to herself opens the way to ritualistic atonement and eventual purification.

The abortion had thrown her into disharmony with herself, her fellow humans and Nature. Having allowed herself "to be cut in two," she found "the other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal." Her "breakdown" symptoms, with their seemingly aberrant perceptions of reality take on a logic here as the means by which she restores the harmony of the Whole, the unity of Self and Nature.

To make herself whole, she has to surrender totally to that "other half," that half which was "through with pretending to be civilized," that half which "no longer has a name," which emanates directly from the id with "rules" and rites of its own to be followed.

Its enemy is everything "American"—as elsewhere, the code word for the corrupt, death-dealing civilization lurking below the false, "metallic" patina of deceit. The partisans of this civilization are themselves tainted by its soulless machine mentality and are themselves on the way to becoming something soulless, something that "clanks heavy with weapons and iron plating."

"From every rational point of view I am absurd," she observes. "But there are no longer any rational points of view." Not at least while she is still undergoing the rites of purification, rites which cause "feeling to seep back into me." Sensibility, the ability to feel,

is here a form of salvation and renewal in itself. The rites therefore are a success; she has succeeded in reclaiming the essence of her lost humanity, a part of her which itself had been slowly reifying into a machine.

The novel concludes at a moment of ambiguity. Has she permanently become something "other" or will she join her "wild" half to her old city half, picking up her old life on a higher, more spiritualized plane? But to do the latter would suggest that the goal of the whole process was directed toward a form of psychiatric "functional normality," i. e. the "normality" of the compromise with reality which was the "happiness" goal of Eric Fromm's psychotherapy. Marcuse reviled Fromm for this goal and, one suspects, Margaret Atwood would too.