

*James Harrison*

### **The 20,000,000 Solitudes of *Surfacing***

For a novel which deplores the separation of head from body and deprecates a purely cerebral existence, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is a remarkably cerebral work. This, notwithstanding its extensive reliance on poetic and other linguistically subliminal techniques. Indeed, it is the way Atwood deploys precisely such resources which is so intelligent. To take just one example, the tense of the narration shifts from present to past to present in the book's three sections, so as to mirror the narrator's preoccupation with exploring her past and whatever may "surface" from its depths, or coping and eventually coming to terms with the present and the immediate future. But the tense changes and the divisions between the sections do not quite coincide. The present tense spills into the first four, and wells up again in the final three paragraphs of section two. Life's unstructuredness is meticulously built into the structure.

Much the most obvious devices that Atwood uses are recurring images, symbols and motifs. Indeed, a good case could be made for their being the vehicle for the novel's major statement. Some, like the narrator's mother's leather coat, operate strictly as motifs, in a cumulative and evocative rather than a symbolic fashion. Others, like frogs, are so explicitly symbolic as to verge on allegory. And almost all echo, complement, and generally interact with one another, whether discretely, over many chapters, or in great nodal clumps like the following:

I lie down, keeping the moon on my left hand and the absent sun on my right. He kneels, he is shivering, the leaves under and around us are damp from the dew, or is it the lake, soaking up through the rock and sand, we are near the shore, the small waves riffle. He needs to grow more fur.

"What is it?" he says. "What's wrong?" My hands are on his shoulders, he is thick, undefined, outline but no features, hair and beard a mane, moon behind him. He turns to curve over me; his eyes glint, he is shaking, fear or tensed flesh or the cold. I pull him down, his beard and

hair fall over me like ferns, mouth as soft as water. Heavy on me, warm stone, almost alive.

"I love you," he says into the side of my neck, catechism. Teeth grinding, he's holding back, he wants it to be like the city, baroque scrollwork, intricate as a computer, but I'm impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry.

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god. I will never teach it any words.<sup>1</sup>

So many of the novel's threads are pulled together at this point: the title image of surfacing, of course, the untrustworthiness of words, the desirability of hair or fur. (One remembers how Joe is shaggy and inarticulate throughout the book, whereas David teaches Communication and combs his hair "to cover the patches where it had once grown" (p. 93); how the women in men's magazines have "skins as bald as inner tubes" (p. 112); how the gods are furred, but their frightful parody, the stuffed moose family at the gas station, are "dressed in human clothes . . . , waving an American flag" (p. 13).) The most marked feature of the passage, however (underlined by the embryo's two clasping halves), is its plethora of dichotomies: right/left, sun/moon, land (air)/water, civilization/nature—all of them, arguably, variations on the book's male/female orientation. Indeed, some see Atwood as above all concerned in this book with an antagonistic male/female confrontation, and more specifically with man's exploitation of woman—when, that is, she is not preoccupied with American exploitation of Canada. Or is one a metaphor for the other? Why else should David be made to suggest that the most fitting national symbol for Canada would be the split beaver? Or are both, perhaps, metaphors for that problem to end all problems, man's exploitation of nature, so senselessly epitomized in the killing of the heron?

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a

thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. It must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them. (pp. 116-117)

Clearly all three of these themes are important to the novel. Equally clearly, however, the book cannot merely be read as being about aggressive American men exploiting passive Canadian women. Not when the Americans who killed the heron turned out to be from Sarnia and Toronto; not when the narrator discovers that she too is a killer. Life is less black and white than we sometimes think. But it needs no voice from the dead to tell us that, nor even, perhaps, that "Americans" exploit women, Canadians, and the planet they inhabit. It will be the contention of what follows, therefore, that, though the book incorporates all the truisms appropriate to its various dichotomies, its major concern is quite other than to polarize life along the conventional lines these suggest, or even to depolarize it.

To return briefly to David's "split beaver for ever," his proposal comes in a passage which might well shockingly confirm some readers' impression that the book is mainly about sexism and male chauvinism. Yet the narrator's shock is of quite a different kind. She recalls seeing, as a child, the pencil drawings in the cabin of an abandoned log-boom tug-boat, and being horrified when told what the shapes she took for plants or fishes really were. "I was shocked," she adds,

not by those parts of the body, we'd been told about those, but that they should be cut off like that from the bodies that ought to have gone with them, as though they could detach themselves and crawl around on their own like snails. (p. 119)

This is just one instance of a kind of fragmentation or multiple alienation which is far more characteristic of the book than the confrontation usually implied by dichotomy. It is fragmentation rather than polarization which is the underlying nightmare of the novel. Even the pervasive head/body dichotomy can just as easily be seen as a particular manifestation of such dismemberment. This much Atwood makes perfectly clear in the following extract:

Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb;

numb. At school they used to play a joke, they would bring little boxes with cotton wool in them and a hole cut in the bottom; they would poke their finger through the hole and pretend it was a dead finger. (p. 108)

Similarly, very early in the book, the narrator recalls in quite another context her horrified fascination with dismemberment fantasies in general:

This arm devoid of a hand was for me a great mystery, almost as puzzling as Jesus. I wanted to know how the hand had come off (perhaps she had taken it off herself) and where it was now, and especially whether my own hand could ever come off like that; but I never asked, I must have been afraid of the answers. Going down the steps, I try to remember what the rest of her was like, her face, but I can see only the potent candies, inaccessible in their glass reliquary, and the arm, miraculous in an unspecified way like the toes of saints or the cut-off pieces of early martyrs, the eyes on the plate, the severed breasts, the heart with letters on it shining like a light bulb through the trim hole painted in the chest, art history. (p. 27)

All this is not to deny that the separation of head and body constitutes a valid dichotomy, and one, moreover, which lies somewhere near the heart of the book and which is deliberately presented as, in some ways, an alternative version of the split between man and nature. Thus the narrator as a child suggestively perceives coins as discs with "leaves on one side and a man's head chopped off at the neck on the reverse" (p. 85). However, the major effect of dividing head from body is not to set up two warring factions. It is to create barriers, to fragment that which should be whole, and to leave each half consequently impoverished. The most arresting image of such apartness, detachment, and sterile isolation has a man's torso copulate "while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room" (p. 165). The paragraph as a whole describes the denaturing of woman, which results at least in part from male exploitiveness. But he too, torso and head asunder, is denatured, impoverished. Fragmentation, alienation between the two halves, unwholeness, are far more terrifying corollaries of the book's many such dichotomies, surely, than the danger of one half's dominating the other. Certainly, in a passage such as the following, Atwood deliberately relates separateness of head and body to other separatenesses or solitudes which are not necessarily twofold:

At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase, or the village where I could see them but not hear them because I couldn't understand what was being said. Bottles distort for the observers too: frogs in the jam jar stretched wide, to them watching I must have appeared grotesque. (pp. 105-106)

Thus to be trapped in the head is to be like a frog or an embryo in a jar—those pervasive images of death throughout the book. Conversely, frogs swimming in the lake, “kicking like a man swimming” (p. 64), are least restricted, least compartmentalized of all. Not only do their heads, since they have no necks, extend “directly into their shoulders” (p. 76); they themselves, being amphibious, bestraddle the dichotomy of land (air)/water. By contrast, embryos and fish drown in air, men in water.

Mirrors too, like jars, can trap (p. 175), and photographs freeze (p. 107).

When I've unravelled the reels I open the back of the camera. The film coils onto the sand under the water, weighted down by its containers; the invisible captured images are swimming away into the lake like tadpoles, Joe and David beside their defeated log, axemen, arms folded, Anna with no clothes on jumping off the end of the dock, finger up, hundreds of tiny Annas no longer bottled and shelved. (p. 166)

Time and again such images of segregation and of imprisonment, whether in jars, in visual likenesses, or in words, overlap. And language is perhaps the greatest trap of all. Nor is it merely a question of unilingual solitudes, as in the quotation above. All language imprisons, especially through its nouns. Where “there are nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment” (p. 181), there is presumably less divisive fragmenting of experience into static categories and concepts.

Words, then, are what the narrator will never teach her unborn child. Together they must learn “the other language.” But this is only one instance of her total rejection of barriers in this final section of the book. When she finally finds herself exiled from the garden by the old gods, those new presences she senses in her life, she realizes this is because it is fenced, with that further, unseen barrier of a “two-foot-deep moat” filled with broken glass to keep out burrowing woodchucks and skunks. “The garden is a stunt, a trick. It could not exist without the fence.” And “They can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed” (p. 180).

The cumulative effect of the new taboos which are revealed to her one by one—no paper, no food from cans or jars, no utensils or tools of any kind, no clothes, no house—is, of course, to remove the last, great barrier, the alienation of man from nature. Henceforth she must grow fur, even as “they” are horned and furred. Ceremonially, almost, she peels off her wet clothing in the baptizing lake. But the new life she thus enters is not a rebirth; rather, it is an unbirth, a return to the matrix or womb of all life. And as she loses her own, separate identity, she becomes mystically aware of the undifferentiated nature of all the forms of life around her, with whom she will share a common existence, no longer cut off and alone:

Slowly I retrace the trail. Something has happened to my eyes, my feet are released, they alternate, several inches from the ground. I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark.

The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment.

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word  
I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

Even this, however, is too particularized, too imprisoning an incarnation, from which she must free herself:

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (p. 181)

Poetic even to the lack of terminal punctuation, this marks, of course, the apotheosis both of her search for the roots of her being, back beyond father and mother to what she and they and all life came from and are, and of her insanity. Not to acknowledge, not even to be able to distinguish the self, is true madness—by the standards, at all events, of western culture. Now, to some such a statement may of itself seem to be a full, perfect and sufficient indictment of western society; and Atwood's handling of the way her narrator both needs and is ready to experience the old gods is highly critical, by implication, of a society whose excessive emphasis on individual fulfilment and individual gratification has locked its members in individual and sometimes very lonely lives. Nevertheless, she does not totally reject the assumptions of that society. For her next words are: "I have to get up, I get up. Through the ground, break surface, I'm standing now; separate again." Note that it is to separateness she surfaces; that the act of surfacing, emerging, becoming, is an act of separation, an assertion of identity, a birth.

There are, by my count, four surfacings in the novel. The first (p. 111) is a brief description of coming round from an anaesthetized state—probably the same one men use to prevent the mother seeing or hearing anything while they "take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (p. 80). If so, it is the mother, not the child, who surfaces, and surfaces, moreover, from a fabricated experience into a fabricated, synthetic state of being—a "scrapbook, collage. . . ." (p. 143).<sup>2</sup> The second (pp. 142-44) occurs when the narrator encounters the

submerged body of her father, which has not yet surfaced because of the heavy camera (!) around its neck, and this releases the true version of what has happened, of the abortion, allowing it to surface within her memory. This at least is a surfacing or rebirth into truth, though in neither of these first two cases is the verb "surface" used. In the third instance, already quoted, the narrator feels, at the moment of Joe's orgasm, her "lost child surfacing" towards its long-delayed birth—that most decisive and irrevocable of all assertions of separate identity. And in the fourth, she who a moment before felt merged, drowned in her environment, surfaces into separateness. The title verb and central image of the novel would appear to be working counter to the negative connotations of fragmented isolation hitherto noted, as, seeming to agree with Matthew Arnold rather than John Donne, yet without the former's melancholy resignation, Atwood almost claims it to be the inescapable human condition to be separate, to be alone, to be an island.

Significantly, immediately following this experience the narrator is able to see her mother, and a little later a figure whom she first takes to be her father, then what her father saw, and lastly what he has become. It is her own feet, however, that fit the footprints she discovers where he was standing. And the next morning "the rules are over"; she can go where she likes, eat what she likes, do what she likes. She has learnt all there is to be learnt from the episode; she has accepted and understood her father's gift (the drawings that led to her lost child, her lost self, and the lost gods), her mother's gift (the picture she herself drew as a child, which led to the new child), and the gift of the gods (the knowledge of oneness with nature, and of her separateness from it). Henceforth she is on her own, whole once more, a source of life not death, and herself. To remain on the island longer would be to make the same mistake as her father: to isolate herself from the human world, yet remain unable, this side of death, to achieve true unity with nature. She is ready to return. "I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons; I re-enter my own time" (p. 191).

To what, then, does she return? "Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (p. 146), she had earlier said. But language is all we have, as humans, to achieve wholeness. It is still to be mistrusted; Joe's chief asset is still that he does not use it glibly, as David does. But at last, reconciled to her irreducible human separateness, she can say: "If I go with him we will have to talk. . . . For us, it is necessary, the intercession of words." At last language is seen as that which holds people together as well as that which divides them. There is no assurance of success, but at least Joe has returned, to stand "balancing on the dock

which is neither land nor water." At least she knows that "what's important is that he's here, a mediator, an ambassador, *offering me something*" (p. 192, my italics).

In the light of all this, the last sentence of the book—"The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing"—is by no means as pessimistic as some readers have felt it to be. Trees are not separate; they are parts of an indivisible totality of which the narrator had a momentary vision. And parts of a whole have no need to ask or give. But people, however much they may yearn at times for the womb, are not, ultimately, involuntary parts of a whole. They are separate entities. And that their separateness entails a need and an ability to ask and to give is both its curse and its glory.

Similarly this book is not, ultimately, about man's alienation from nature. Initially such dichotomous abstractions serve as mirrors of, and in the end they become irrelevant evasions of, the frightful solitudes inhabited by David and Anna or a nameless narrator and her equally nameless married lover, and the only slightly less terrifying solitudes imprisoning the narrator and Joe. Ultimately the book is about the alienation of men and women from men and women, about their inability to ask and give the right things—and about the hope, finally, that they may perhaps learn to do so.

#### NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Don Mills, PaperJacks, 1973), pp. 161-162. All other quotations from the same source, page numbers in the text.
2. The description of David on p. 152, after his unsuccessful attempt to seduce the narrator: "... he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affiches*, verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away..."