An Exercise in Representing Memory: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Résumé: *Le discours du roman contemporain est, le plus souvent, contaminé par le facteur politique. "Surfacing" (1972), de Margaret Atwood, appartient précisément à cette tradition. Ce roman traite, explicitement ou implicitement, la question du nationalisme canadien et celle de l'idéologie féministe; toutefois, elles restent à l'arrière-plan sans s'imposer comme thèmes en elles-mêmes. Elles ne servent qu'à générer la construction progressive du personnage au premier plan, à appuyer la formulation d'une politique de l'écriture qui est encore influencée par la doctrine moderniste. L'accent est mis sur le monde intérieur, le monde au-delà de la matérialité, sur la mémoire et son pouvoir de faire revivre le passé et de donner, ainsi, de nouvelles significations au présent.*

Mots-clés: *roman, discours, représentation, identité, mémoire*

Introductory lines

For Margaret Atwood, the literary representations of Canadian national identity gravitate around two core notions: survival and the victim. [2004: 34-39] The novel *Surfacing* – published in 1972, the same year as her groundbreaking literary history, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* – is proof of the fact that she not only identifies them in the writings of others, but that she exploits them herself. The victim takes the shape of the central, unnamed female character, whose life story is forwarded via the narrating "I", while survival breathes through each and every detail forming the intricate web of the events narrated. Survival and the victim outline the politics in the novel and the novel's politics:

- Canadian extremist nationalism – embodied by one of the four characters, David, who loathes the "bloody fascist pig Yanks" [2007: 3] and whose present seems to be very much under the influence of the colonial past; the positive side to the mosaic of Canadian life is contaminated in his eyes by the forces of Americanization;
- feminist ideology – is the driving force behind the novel discourse; although not explicit, it is supported by the fact that the standpoint adopted is that of a woman, that her experiences are placed under the lens, that all the commentaries made and the thoughts reflected

converge towards the idea that gender roles are socially constructed;

- covert metafiction – on the one hand inscribed in the novel's autobiographic, subjective, inner-oriented form (parodying the myth of women's writing) and, on the other hand, self-reflexive, built in the mirror of the film the male characters are making, with David as director: "He wants to get shots of things as they come across, random samples he calls them, and that will be the name of the movie too: *Random Samples*. When they've used up their supply of film […] they're going to look at what they've collected and rearrange it." [2007: 4]

Within this threefold postmodernist political frame, the novel progresses in a modernist fashion, as a journey inwards, to the fluid inner dimension, where memory serves to allow the flavour of old spaces acquire fresh significance, to resurrect the past and imagine the future, endowing the present with new meaning.

Analysis

The storyline is relatively simple. Four friends travel north to the island the protagonist had lived her childhood on and spend a few days in the almost unreal natural setting, picking wild fruit, boating, fishing, camping. Entering another dimension, with a powerful impact on the mind, transformations take effect and the reader is suddenly confronted with a fantastic world of confusing and unsettling visions, spectres, apparitions, which play tricks on the eye/ the "I" and disturb any claims to certainty.

The trip that the main character goes on together with her boyfriend, Joe, and their friends, Anna and David, is doubled by the one down memory lane that the young woman makes on her own, as she returns, twenty odd years later, to the remote island in the Quebec region where she grew up, in search of her father, whose mysterious disappearance imposes the experience on her. Inside the car, she grapples with the defamiliarising quality of the enterprise; like a proactive Woolfian Mrs Brown [1], "I watch the side windows as though it's a TV screen. […] Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory." [2007: 5] The pieces of the real world puzzle stubbornly refuse to fall back in place. They never have been coherent, it seems. The disparate fragments, staged to a certain

extent, form a kaleidoscopic representation of the historical, national and personal self, undecipherable to others, impossible to carry across.

> We're nearly to the village already, the two roads joining here but widened […] past the flat cliff where the election slogans are painted and painted over, some faded and defaced, others fresh yellow and white, VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN, along with hearts and initials and words and advertisements. THÉ SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE, QUÉBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVEZ COCA COLA GLACÉ, JESUS SAVES, mélange of demands and languages, an x-ray of it would be the district's entire history. [2007: 9]

The movement forward in space and backward in time deconstruct the conception that the North is progressive, looking towards the future. "The future is in the North, that was a political slogan once; when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the north but the past and not much of that either." [2007: 3] The figure of the father – absent, but overpowering – thus introduced as a pertinent voice of memory, not only supports the political vein of the novel (in a manner which brings Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* [2] to mind); it attains symbolical values, used to draw character and represent nuances. Joe is masculine and close to nature: "From the side he's like the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction." [2007: 2] She loves and hates him; attracted to him, pregnant by him, she hesitates to commit and be subdued. David, however, stands for authority and control. He is unfaithful, insensitive and demanding of his wife, Anna, treating her like a servant but claiming to be in love with her. ""Somebody break me out a beer." Anna brings him one and he pats her on the rear and says "That's what I like, service."" [2007: 30] Stereotyped into father, lover, husband, friend, man makes the world go round and establishes rules for the mechanism to work efficiently, though monotonously.

Dominance and patriarchy are emphasised by the novel's dichotomic structure along the lines of woman versus man, rural versus urban, nature versus civilisation, past versus present, night versus day, water versus land. In this game of opposites, in which the feminine "I" attempts to escape masculinity, the latter prevails. The search for the father triggers acceptance of norm, alluded to in the otherwise open ending, with

the protagonist's decision of returning to the here and the now after the painful incursion into the there and the then.

Arranged in concentric circles and seemingly propelled by a succession of ripples, the narrative renders the I's becoming/ her involution. Trapped in the past she has conjured intensely, she cannot stop sliding backwards to the beginning of time and to the verge of sanity. Having already left the big city for the countryside and her comfortable flat for a wooden cabin, she now breaks all ties, abandoning the civilised world altogether and, after a grotesque ritual of striptease, returns to the lake, the woods and the state of a primordial creature.

> When nothing is left intact and the fire is only smouldering I leave, carrying one of the wounded blankets with me, I will need it until the fur grows. The house shuts with a click behind me. I untie my feet from the shoes and walk down to the shore; the earth is damp, cold, pockmarked with raindrops. I pile the blanket on the rock and step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper. They sway beside me, inflated, the sleeves bladders of air. [2007: 171]

The image reminds of Sylvia Plath's in *Lady Lazarus* [3], a poem which is observable in the novel's palimpsest. With her clothing goes her social identity, her profession, her skill of illustrating books of fairy tales; so do all the other roles she performs on a daily basis, all the other tasks she is expected to take on. The wilderness gradually grows on her. She is integrated, undistinguishable from it: a thing, a place, a referent without a word. She learns to speak the language of its silence. Once having become a part of nature, articulate speech is deemed unnecessary. So is coherent thinking within universally recognised grammatical conventions.

> The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word
> I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning
>
> 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. [2007: 175]

Hunger and cold, fear and weakness induce hallucinations which reunite her with her father, assumed to have gone mad and to have left the safety of his home, empty following the death of his wife. Even if she does not actually find him, she lives through a similar experience and finally understands the flight from palpable reality, the escape from the ties of society. The revelation does not bring her nearer to fellow human beings. On the contrary, it makes her question the ways of the "civilised" world and leads to the conclusion that her newly acquired condition is preferable. "That is the way they are, they will not let you have peace, they don't want you to have anything they don't have themselves. I stay on the bank, resting, licking the scratches; no fur yet on my skin, it's too early." [2007: 180]

Having crossed the ultimate frontier, from the outside she looks in on her previous cage. Lurking behind the tress in her safe haven, she can see the people searching for her. It feels as if she were seeing herself searching for her father. She has become that dream. She is her father, she is unreal. The tables have been turned and now she is the hunted game, the victim fighting for survival.

> They may have been sent to hunt me, perhaps the others asked them to, they may be police; or they may be sightseers, curious tourists. Evans will have told at the store, the whole village will know. Or the war may have started, the invasion, they are Americans.
>
> They can't be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket. […] They won't be able to tell what I really am. But if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree. [2007: 177]

Eventually, hunger drives her to the cabin, to civilisation, to the present once again. While avidly eating yellow beans out of a can with her fingers, she ponders on her recent encounter with the distant past, realising that her childhood's materiality is lost and that both her parents inhabit a realm beyond reach, deserving to be left in peace, to be preserved as memories. As for herself, in the broken mirror on the wall she sees emerging from the darkness

> a creature neither animal nor human furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the

> deep sockets; the lips move by themselves. This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity.
>
> That was the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, when we can no longer cope. They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature. [2007: 184]

An ancient, more troubling version of Virginia Woolf's *Lady in the Looking-Glass* [4], the silent reflection formulates relevant anthropological judgements. The overall memorable pronouncement made resumes Margaret Atwood's politics and poetics, offering food for thought on a number of contemporary issues. It posits that the we are stereotyped by the they. Whether "we" means women, writers, free spirits challenging the mainstream or just sensitive people with a gift for reading in between the lines, it may be translated as a caveat against conformity to imposition, acceptance of the yoke, complacency in the face of power structures.

Reinforcing the position adopted, outlining the protagonist and shedding new light on the narrative strategy, the last chapter fills the void left by the father with the image of the "I" as mother and directs the apparently sterile quest of the self towards fertile ground.

> I bring with me from the distant past five nights ago the time-traveller, the primeval one who will have to learn, shape of a goldfish now in my belly, undergoing its watery changes. Word furrows potential already in its proto-brain, untravelled paths […] It might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed. [2007: 185]

The fictional, imaginary exercise in representing memory through the relativisation of truth, the subjective treatment of time and the blurring of spatial coordinates finds in birth and the promise of new life the perfect metaphor. The unborn baby of the unnamed woman will come into the world for the first time suggestively, as the protagonist has returned from the past, as the reader has surfaced after having been immersed into the depths of the stream of consciousness. Its future paths will have already been trodden on by others. The circle thus closes, but the cycle continues. Without necessarily being a positive thing, the ending announces yet another beginning.

Ending lines

Rewriting the Canadian identity and juxtaposing the result with the Anglo-American intertext, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* traces intriguing geographic spaces and mental territories resonant of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath among others. It is part of the great tradition in twentieth century writing, a successful experiment with the limits of fiction, an inquiry into the nature of politics and a skilful exercise in representing memory. Plunging beneath the surface of things, the novel recreates a universe where primitivism, violence and madness reign supreme. In this harsh but liberating underworld, the individual drops the mask, reconsiders her true potential and engages in the battle for survival. The victim becomes the victor only when the rite of purification is completed, a deep understanding of the self is reached and a new being emerges. Surfacing, the latter is reborn and adapts faster, empowered by the personal and collective memory stored.

The whole fantastic process described reflects the act of reading itself. The text's message lies hidden in between the lines. Decoding it involves careful analysis of its allusive, ironic, parodic elements. It is at once challenging and rewarding, inviting at self-scrutiny, at going against the flow of human thought.

Notes

[1] Written as a reaction against the Edwardian novel and its incapacity to represent the complexity of character, always in the making, Virginia Woolf's essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* introduces the passive, ordinary Mrs. Brown, the perfect character to be placed under focus, standing between the past and the present, while the film of life evolves beyond the window of the train carriage.

[2] Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* foregrounds the image of the father and the politics of identity construction – represented via the Nazi dictator and the holocaust situation, to accentuate the threat posed by the influence of hereditary markers.

[3] A dark, suicidal poem in which dying is a form of art, *Lady Lazarus* by Sylvia Plath features a woman symbolically peeling off successive strata of skin to satisfy the crowds watching the show staged for the voyeur of the consumerist society.

[4] In Virginia Woolf's *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* (subtitled *A Reflection*), Isabella Tyson meditates on the blandness of her life, and in doing so she becomes immersed in her thoughts – the final level of textual emphasis.

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