



Edited by
Colin Nicholson

Margaret Atwood

Writing and
Subjectivity

Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity

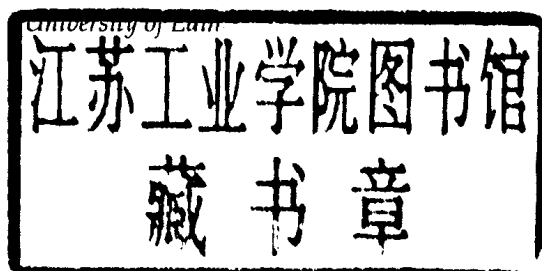
New Critical Essays

Edited by

Colin Nicholson

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Introduction

COLIN NICHOLSON

Talking on BBC television about his successful film *Memphis Belle*, the producer David Puttnam described how his original intention of following the British crew of a Lancaster bomber during the Second World War had collapsed following his failure to raise sufficient funds in the UK. The story centred upon an aircraft's pilot and crew not dropping their bomb-load until they could clearly see their industrial target, located near a children's school. Since the availability of American financial backing was dependent upon American narrative contexts, the finished product consequently centred upon the youthful crew of a celebrated American B-49 Flying Fortress. British alterity was reduced to United States identity and Puttnam lamented the fact that because of this a British story could not be told in the way he had conceived it and in all probability would now never be told. In one perception this is no more than a parable of changed business priorities with Hollywood's bankers claiming the legitimate rights of those who pay the piper. A different frame of reference, though, might recognise it as another incidence of narrative expropriation in a dominant process of cultural displacement. Canadians may well be forgiven for looking on this particular example with mixed feelings.

If England, as the metropolitan centre of an erstwhile empire has to come to terms with a relative loss of control over its own story, then as Britain's last North American 'possession', Canada had already long been struggling to emerge first within and then away from British definitions and determinations. Simultaneously it was encountering the irresistible insinuations of America's commercial priorities, and became economically subordinate to the United States before it had freed itself from dominion status within Britain's imperial dispositions. Canadian history traces a transformation from one colonial mode into another. In any variety of way its ability to tell its distinctive varieties of story has always had to contend with powerful and in some mediums overwhelming discursive economies originating elsewhere. Not surprisingly, then, 'there is in the Canadian word', as Robert Kroetsch puts it, 'a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American.'¹ In such

circumstances the construction of authenticity in Canadian writing is problematised by the fact that centres of power located elsewhere and pursuing their own self-defined priorities authorise certain categories of experience at the expense of others. What the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka has called the 'process of self-apprehension'² becomes fraught with difficulty when the structures of representation are predominantly developed and processed in and for metropolitan centres whose codes of recognition do not extend boundlessly. Over time these codes and the valorisations of experience they purvey generate a complicated dialectic of abrogation and appropriation in post-colonial writing,³ and there now exists a considerable literary record in anglophone cultures around the world which traces these developments. As far as Canada is concerned, on another occasion Kroetsch ironically describes the narrator of T. C. Haliburton's 'The Clockmaker' (1836) as 'an early manifestation of the Canadian personality. The man who exploits social hierarchy by being falsely named into it wants also to be free of it. He wants to have a system that gives him identity and stature, but he wants to be free of that system. This man is surely ready to enter into the Canadian Federation.'⁴ Codes of imperial prescription jeopardise colonial self-definition and in a complicated development from this, writing in post-colonial space then becomes a problem in and for itself. In part it became, in Dennis Lee's words, 'a search for authenticity, but all it could manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity'.⁵

In the 20 years since 1972, when Margaret Atwood published her thematic guide, *Survival*, Canadian literary studies have come a long way. The polemic urgency of that volume, its propagandizing zeal, seems in retrospect out of key with both the nature and scope of the criticism we now read. 'I find that what I've written', Atwood remarks in a prefatory chapter, 'is ... a cross between a personal statement, which most books are, and a political manifesto, which most books also are, if only by default.'⁶ She was writing to a particular context and she knew it. Her mode of direct personal address speaks a conversational intimacy with both her audience and her subject-matter, treating literary texts as ways of talking to each other and to us in a manner now disfavoured by theorising tendencies which defamiliarise and then abolish any communicative functions that might be looked for in poetry and fiction. The rhetoric of *Survival* was designed to meet particular

needs. The 1960s had seen the kind of growth in Canadian writing that signified a far-reaching cultural and political change, and in response to this the country's educational curricula were being propelled into a recognition that a whole subject-area was opening up. Until that transforming decade, little had changed since Margaret Laurence's high-school days in the early 1940s when 'history was taught from the anglophone point of view ... and ... of course literature meant British literature'.⁷ Atwood refers to the 1930s high-school teacher in Carol Bolt's play *Buffalo Jump* (1972) who requires his students to recite the names of all the wives of Henry VIII while a protest march is going past the window: 'He tells them they aren't in school to watch parades, which just about sums up the approach to Canadian history and culture that prevailed for many decades: history and culture were things that took place elsewhere, and if you saw them just outside the window you weren't supposed to look' (S, p. 18).

Many more people are now looking, both inside her own country and beyond, and as far as a wider world of attention is concerned, Atwood's creative output has played a significant part in stimulating contemporary interest in Canadian writing so that her own insistence in *Survival* is now being more readily acknowledged: 'The study of Canadian literature ought to be comparative, as should the study of any literature; it is by contrast that distinctive patterns show up most strongly. To know ourselves we must know our own literature; to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole' (S, p. 17). Curiously, though, and then perhaps not so curiously, as Canadian writing as well as critical approaches to it have developed and widened their scope, it has become fashionable to disparage *Survival* as jejune and strategically unsound. According to Atwood writing a decade after its first appearance, this is nothing new:

Survival was fun to attack. In fact it still is; most self-respecting professors of Canlit begin their courses, I'm told, with a short ritual sneer at it. It's true that it has no footnotes: the intended audience was not the footnote crowd, and it reached its intended audience, which was all those people whose highschool English teachers told them they weren't studying Canadian literature because there wasn't any.⁸

The patterns of image and response that *Survival* explores from an imaginative writer's point of view inevitably relate in part to

Atwood's poetry and fiction: 'several though by no means all of the patterns I've found myself dealing with . . . were first brought to my attention by my own work' (S, p. 14). But what then becomes interesting is the wider act of cultural construction that such a process of recovery entails; and Atwood confesses her surprise at finding 'the concerns of [*Survival*] shared by writers with whom – I found myself concluding – I seemed to participate in a cultural community that had never been defined for me' (S, p. 14). With hindsight it seems reasonable to conclude in turn that the academic sneer to which Atwood testifies might well relate to the fact that the now notorious 'basic victim positions' she proposed as typically encoded in a significant proportion of Canadian writing brought home in uncomfortably clarifying ways a set of cultural attributes and discursive predispositions that registered the shock of re-cognition in part because of the direct and uncluttered ways in which she first presented them. Arguing that 'the major profit from a colony is made in the centre of the empire', she suggests that 'of course there are cultural side-effects which are often identified as "the colonial mentality", and it is these which are examined here; but the root cause for them is economic And if you think Canada isn't a colony (or a collective victim), you'll be outraged by the reiteration of the victim theme' (S, pp. 36, 111): .

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.

Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.

Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. (S, pp. 36–7)

It is not difficult to see how this personalised programme would ruffle the security of prevailing complacencies, particularly within such male-dominated discourses as academic production and reproduction. Yet despite its provocative stance *Survival* was never meant to be prescriptive, still less dogmatic, but rather a pre-

liminary exercise in identification and self-identification: 'it won't explain everything, but it may give you some points of departure' (S, p. 35). Looking back, what has become evident is that beyond its immediate domestic intentions *Survival* establishes parameters, in substance if not in terminology, for much of the recent theorising of post-colonial representations of literary subjectivity, whether Indian, African, Caribbean or Australian. 'If', Atwood writes, 'as has long been the case in [Canada], the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but somebody else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted picture of what he is really like. He will also get a distorted idea of what other people are like' (S, p. 16). Generally concerned to challenge what Roland Barthes might have termed the 'myths' inscribed in literature and literary criticism emanating from imperial centres, a wide spectrum of the work that was to be carried out in the 1970s and 1980s relates in one way or another to Atwood's formulations.

But almost in contra-flow to the clear, expository style of *Survival*, Atwood's creative writing repeatedly puts in question such strategies of representation and location. As far as literary language is concerned, the oppressive relationships of imperial control mutate in post-colonial circumstances, shaping destabilising tensions between erstwhile colonisers and their linguistic centres of origin. Two years after the appearance of *Survival* Dennis Lee remarked that:

The colonial writer does not have words of his own. Is it not possible that he projects his condition of voicelessness into whatever he creates? That he articulates his own powerlessness, in the face of alien words, by seeking out fresh tales of victims? Over and above Atwood's account of it, perhaps the colonial imagination is driven to recreate, again and again, the experience of writing in colonial space . . .

Beneath the words our absentee masters have given us, there is an undermining silence. It saps our nerve. And beneath that silence there is a raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains towards words and that makes the silence a blessing because it shushes easy speech. That cadence is home.⁹

These concerns recur in Atwood's writing. Necessarily, giving shape to Canadian cadence would involve a sustained attempt at

establishing local alterity in the face of metropolitan determinations of purpose and place. 'There is', Atwood writes, 'a distinct archaeological motif in Canadian literature – unearthing the buried and forgotten past', and another of the figures she identifies as a thematic constant in her search for Canadian literary typicality is that of the explorer:

'Exploration' is a recurrent motif in Canadian literature, for reasons that I believe are not unconnected with the 'where is here' dilemma; that is, if a writer feels himself living in a place whose shape is unclear to him, a 'world but scarcely uttered,' to quote A. M. Klein's 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape', one of his impulses will be to explore it, another will be to name it. (Mention of charts or maps – those direction-finding devices which attach names to place diagrams – is one clue that you're dealing with an exploration poem.) (S, pp. 114–15)

As she constructs her own utterance of person and place, foregrounding the intertexts she is herself negotiating, in her fiction Atwood produces patterns of textual archaeology and exploration in self-reflexive ways that connect her work to forms of attention in post-colonial – and postmodernist – writing elsewhere. But the first essay in this collection reads her earlier poetry to connect such archaeologising and explorer imagery with representations of female subjectivity within dominant cultural and social mythologies. As part of the politics of perception being examined, the map-making which several of these poems take as points of departure develops into a repudiation of the mimesis that besides providing a basis for cartographic practice, has traditionally promoted and ordered a stability of perception for the colonisers of textual space both domestically and abroad.¹⁰ The function of mimesis in the representation of particular attitudes towards the reality being so ordered is brought into play, enabling a reading of mimetic codes as part of a signifying strategy whereby values and interests which are in fact specific to a certain place and time are projected as universal. Atwood's poetry specifies a Canadian personality and perception in invitational ways. Then, archaeologising textual production, Judith McCombs examines the ways in which *The Circle Game* (1966) selects and re-orders earlier poetry, revisiting the sites of its concern in a process of metamorphic re-vision. McCombs's detailed tracking of editorial procedures

exposes a series of paired and mirroring feminine identifications, not all of which survive in the book's final form. Chance and design play their different parts as we watch *The Circle Game* move towards publication.

Differently emphasised, Dennis Cooley's essay appropriates some of the idiomatic and colloquial modes of address that characterise *Survival* to focus upon the role of voice in Atwood's poetic personae. These sometimes querulous, sometimes fearful speakers strive to control their narratives in contexts of evasion, fragmentation or disguise. *Power Politics* (1973) is the volume mainly under consideration here, as Cooley traces an 'I' under siege and questing for more secure locations in space. Uneasy correlations between identity and place compose a continuing motif as the first-person pronoun encounters, at first gingerly – even caustically – but then with increasing confidence, a recurrently masculine 'you' held in nervy counterpoint. And these frontiers or boundaries are spatial and as well as linguistic, as David Ward's account of the early novel *Surfacing* (1972) makes clear. Mapping is both ontological and topographical, making an approach to the text through Arnold van Gennep's classic in comparative ethnography, *Les Rites de passage* (1909) peculiarly resonant. Van Gennep's three moments, of territorial separation, transition and incorporation, broadly coincide with the novel's tripartite structure, and as his analysis proceeds, Ward incorporates in turn Kristeva's work in semiotics to expose strategies of becoming through myth and ritual. These processes of self-construction connect with Peter Quartermain's reading of the same novel's images of place and landscape as an attempt to locate and identify a sense of self at once personal and cultural. Tracing the tense-shift from present to past, the narrator's own past is seen as surfacing through a time-loop of discovery. Memory is duplicitous, and an unstable sense of personal past contrasts with an ability to 'place' others in the narrative. *Surfacing* operates successfully as both mirror and map. Its sharp reflection of national mythologies in the text's unfolding yields a teasing combination of complex narrative and vivid regional locales.

In post-colonial experience the concept of an autonomous, self-determining subjectivity, and more emphatically of female subjectivity, is additionally problematised by the diversity and volume of role-constructions, and particularly of gender-constructions, inscribed in writing from the 'home' country. For a country whose constitution was repatriated (the term itself

maintaining a whole set of subordinating assumptions) as recently as 1982, these pressures can assume defining significance, and literary form can itself encode a prescriptive writ constraining and containing attempts at differential composition. *Lady Oracle* (1976) plays intertextual games with Gothic forms and the expectations of popular romantic fiction in an effective challenge to generic and other hierarchies. Eleanor Rao's essay reads the novel as a comic deconstruction of codes of reading as well as of writing. Atwood's protagonist Joan Foster is a divided self, publishing under a pseudonym and presented in a narrative that separates her cheerful public voice from a silent one that is itself double-edged, being both discontented and desiring. Rao concedes that Atwood habitually involves her fiction in aspects and elements from other genres, other modes, and in that sense *Lady Oracle* is characteristic. But the novel which followed it, *Life Before Man* (1979), is not, and this prompts Janice Kulyk Keefer to consider why a story of deracinated, lower-middle-class urbanites, isolated and miserably pressured by the mundane, should also have proved so remarkably popular with a reading public.

Keefer brings a writer's attention to bear upon what she terms the 'minimalist form of naturalism' of *Life Before Man*, as well as its adoption of multiple forms of consciousness – male and female – 'to register overlapping and often contradictory perceptions of a rigidly controlled number of perceptions'. Locating the novel in the field of Atwood's fiction, Keefer discriminates its peculiar and compelling qualities. But different *Life Before Man* certainly is, not least for Atwood's temporary abandonment of her customary concerns with prior systems of signification. By contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) composes Puritan New England mores into a disturbing precursor for its oppressive dystopia, and the text's ancestral voices are exposed by Mark Evans to a historicist reading of some of those seventeenth-century actualities signalled by Atwood's named dedicatees for this novel. Sources in the past for *The Handmaid's Tale*'s unnerving descent into a present thinly veiled as future are brought to light. Recursive structures differently conceived are the subject of Sherrill Grace's inventive treatment of Atwood's recurrent use of an autobiographical 'I'. Grace's reconsideration of what constitutes feminist autobiography focuses upon *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988) to test our gendered assumptions concerning identity. Identifying the traditional autobiography as a central object of parody in *Lady*