

# The Postcolonial Novel

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upon this statement, with an autobiographical observation in passing, by noting:

As in South Africa, the only dominant anti-white colonial front is militant black nationalism, one which, like Fanon's opinion about 'the black man', unwittingly confirms colonial domination by using blackness in its denotation of biological essence as a conceptual schema for liberation. In the setting of this novel, this premise provides for the creation of female inferiority in the same way that apartheid created black diversity.<sup>41</sup>

While critical consensus has not been reached concerning the theme of gender and race articulated in conjunction with questions concerning 'insanity' or 'madness' in *A Question of Power*, there is some agreement that the novel 'is one of the most intense examinations of this theme',<sup>42</sup> with Adetokunbo Pearse arguing that '[n]o work in the corpus of African literature dealing with the theme of madness . . . captures the complexity and intensity of the insane mind as does Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*'.<sup>43</sup> More recent assessments of Head's impact have remarked on the ways in which her writing has influenced theoretical developments. As Maxine Sample puts it, Head's 'fictional and autobiographical writings of more than fifteen years, shaped by her experience of exile from South African apartheid, offer much to scholars in the areas of postcolonial literatures, cultural studies, and feminism'.<sup>44</sup> This is not to suggest some kind of textual seam to be mined, more a complex space of intellectual and political engagement that can help elucidate theoretical ideas. For example, in engaging in a feminist reading of Head, Margaret E. Tucker's use of Cixous is not unidirectional, as Natasha C. Vaubel explains:

... Tucker does not so much use Helene Cixous' theory to explicate Head's creative writing as vice versa. . . . Cobham points to Head's 'interlocution with Cixous' and suggests that 'African women writers . . . occupy within their cultures the intellectual space that in the West has become the province of critics and theoreticians. That is, they use their creative writing to participate in a discourse replete with political, sociological, and theoretical aspirations – as well as didactic overtones – that in Western cultures would differentiate the work of the critic from the artist.' She calls for a reassessing of 'the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the two genres (of Western critical theories and African literatures) . . .'.<sup>45</sup>

It is my contention that, as with the other novelists studied in this book, Head's work does lead to precisely such a powerful and at times profound 'reassessment'.

## 6 Recoding Narrative

### Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

A 'distinct feminist voice' has long been heard in Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* (1972).<sup>1</sup> It is a voice which articulates issues of gender, subjectivity, madness, nationality, ecology and narrative power. Often read in conjunction with Atwood's work of literary theory, *Survival*,<sup>2</sup> which was published in the same year, it is possible in retrospect to see how *Surfacing* created a schema through which key feminist and other critical debates in Canada could take place. M. Prabhakar regards this schema as a 'blue-print of revolt' which in effect facilitates a quest for freedom and autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is important not to perceive the novel as therefore formulaic; in its critique of gender relations from a feminist perspective, the novel also performs a deeper destabilizing critique, as Erinç Özdemir argues: '... the novel valorizes femininity against masculinity, while at the same time it paradoxically dramatizes a desire to destroy all dichotomies and dualistic thinking'.<sup>4</sup> The tension between these two movements can be seen in the historical range of the novel's reception: early feminist readings tended to focus on the valorization of femininity, whereas more contemporary theorists perceive a more dynamic attack upon binary concepts and structures. Regardless of the critical approach taken, most readers are aware of the importance of language in the novel, especially as a tool of oppression and possible resistance to, or subversion of, patriarchal power structures. As Özdemir further argues:

Writing, literary and otherwise . . . [is] a subversive tool for women in trying to create a space for a feminine, 'heterogeneous *difference*' outside the static closure of the binary oppositions that underlie patriarchal ideology. . . . Significantly, Atwood has her heroine in *Surfacing* say, 'It was the language again. I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine' (100). She is depicted as enacting a painful but determined search for another language, one that would allow non-destructive relationships with others and nature. Such a language would preclude the reductive and alienating relationships of domination and subordination reflected by the subject-object split that characterizes the syntax of our current language.<sup>5</sup>

The quest within the novel – where the protagonist is attempting to find her missing father – is thus first of all an attempt to gain a self-reflexive knowledge of the power-relations that define the protagonist's identity, an identity which will in turn be rejected or shed like a dead skin. Given that

the novel is at first narrated from the perspective of the identity which is eventually rejected, there is not only a thematic shift in the novel, but a narrational shift; the earlier 'version' or subjectivity of the narrator-protagonist is later regarded as 'unreliable'. An ironic tension is created by the narrator-protagonist's journey (into nature and self-identity), as Linda Hutcheon observes: 'This trip into nature, into the literal and symbolic landscape . . . is the voyage of a woman and an artist; it is her attempt to find her self (moral and psychological), her past (personal and gendered), and her identity (private and national).'<sup>6</sup> One of the problems in regarding the novel as a schema is that readings can appear too distant (applying a theoretical straitjacket to the text) or too close (simply following one interpretive thread). Is there a way of reading Atwood's novel which balances the two approaches? One possibility is to maintain an awareness of narrative strategies and structure, as well as having a theoretical focus. In what follows I propose that Atwood's 'unreliable narrator' functions in myriad ways, but, overall, she offers a challenge to more traditional ways of reading, and writing, fictional texts.

#### READING SURFACING

Since its initial publication, *Surfacing* has been an immensely popular book, both with critics and with general readers. Part of this popularity stems from the fact that it is a novel that successfully plays games with the reader, undermining, tricking, even teasing the reader with the novel's 'faulty' or 'unreliable narration'. The notion of an 'unreliable narrator' is *de rigueur* within postmodernism; indeed 'unreliability' could be thought of as the defining feature of a postmodern narrator, simultaneously deconstructing the possibility of a *reliable* one.<sup>7</sup> Unreliability can be equated with what is known as the linguistic turn, whereby any statement is perceived as being merely an interpretation within an infinite range of different interpretations. Put differently, any statement is merely perceived as a construct within an infinite range of different constructs: there can be no 'reliability' if there is no solid space of actuality and singularity. Atwood's narrator-protagonist is, crudely speaking and literally, *unreliable*; however, in terms of a general reader-response, the narrator is received and interpreted in a definable sequence: first she is reliable; then she clearly becomes seen as unreliable; then clearly she is reliable again. This sequence can be articulated another way: the reader doesn't realize at first (i.e., in a first reading) that the narrator is lying; then the reader realizes something is amiss, that certain statements don't make sense, or contradict one another, and so on; then the reader learns, *through the narrator*, the 'truth' about her past. For example, the following examples shift from the first to the third positions in such a sequence:

We begin to climb and my husband catches up with me again, making one of the brief appearances, framed memories he specializes in: crystal clear image enclosed

by a blank wall. He's writing his own initials on a fence, graceful scrolls to show me how, lettering was one of the things he taught. There are other initials on the fence but he's making his bigger, leaving his mark. I can't identify the date or place, it was a city, before we were married. . . .

...  
I turned the ring on my left-hand finger, souvenir: he gave it to me, plain gold, he said he didn't like ostentation, it got us into the motels easier, opener of doors; in the intervening time I wore it on a chain around my neck.<sup>8</sup>

Read purely in isolation, each set of statements carries as such its own normative values. The first memory sequence is a 'crystal clear image' even though, according to the grammatical reading, such an image is created by the narrator's 'husband' not the narrator, and the image cannot be spatially or temporally located. The second set of statements shifts from the mark-making of the first to the symbolic powers of the wedding ring, yet, in explaining those powers, the narrator is also undermining her status as a married woman: she is revealing her marital status to be a performance or a lie. The question of normativity is central to notions of reliability/unreliability, but is not always straightforward. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan takes a common-sense approach to the entire subject, stating that a 'reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator . . . is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect.'<sup>9</sup> Of course, Rimmon-Kenan is aware that things are not always this simple: reliability has to be defined through a process of negation, because the unreliable narrator is easier to define, and therefore the reliable narrator is what the unreliable narrator is not. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that there are 'sources' of unreliability, the main ones being 'the narrator's limited knowledge, his [*sic*] personal involvement, and his problematic value-schema'.<sup>10</sup> In extreme opposition to these sources we find the most reliable type to be a 'covert extradiegetic narrator, especially when he is also heterodiegetic'<sup>11</sup> — in other words, a narrator outside of the story-world, who doesn't make personal, value-laden comments about the story-world. Such an approach as Rimmon-Kenan takes, while open to the ambiguities and exceptions to the rule, does not really get to the heart of the shift from the reliable/unreliable binary opposition to that of postmodernism, where unreliability not only rules, but is dissolved in the process (*all narrators are necessarily unreliable*). Unexpectedly, given the dominance of contemporary theory, it is Wayne C. Booth who can tell us more about the concept of 'unreliability' in his early work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

Booth, in a chapter on 'Confusion of Distance', refers to an analogous situation to that of Atwood's *Surfacing*: James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Both narratives have unnamed narrators, but *The Turn of the Screw* does not 'resolve' the status of the narrator's statements, whereas *Surfacing* does. Booth runs through the standard arguments for and against the reliability

of the narrator in *The Turn of the Screw*, i.e., those arguments that attempt to analyse the psychic 'deficiencies' of the narrator, and those that take her judgements at face value; the resulting 'unintentional ambiguity of effect' found in such modern novels is seen as endlessly proliferating.<sup>12</sup> An examination of 'confusions of distance' created in earlier eighteenth-century fiction enables Booth to prepare the way for his analysis of modern fiction. He argues that there are a number of causes that problematize the question of distance, these are: 'Lack of adequate warning that irony is at work'; 'Extreme complexity, subtlety, or privacy of the norms to be inferred'; and 'Vivid psychological realism'.<sup>13</sup> In relation to *Surfacing*, the latter cause is of most interest, because it appears from this perspective to diminish the capacity for sound judgement in the reader, and it is the one that Booth argues creates sympathy for protagonists who may not morally deserve it: 'The deep plunges of modern inside views, the various streams-of-consciousness that attempt to give the reader an effect of living thought and sensation, are capable of blinding us to the possibility of our making judgements not shared by the narrator or reflector himself.'<sup>14</sup> The pre-eminent form for such a 'deep plunge', according to Booth, is autobiography: '... let us finally bind the reader so tightly to the consciousness of the ambiguously misguided protagonist that nothing will interfere with his [*sic*] delight in inferring the precise though varying degrees of distance that operate from point to point throughout the book.'<sup>15</sup> Resisting the relativism of infinite co-present interpretations of any one text, with especial reference to Joyce's work, Booth is reminding the critic that certain 'factual' bases must exist in a text for judgements to be grounded. While this appears immensely outmoded after postmodernism, it is not outmoded in relation to a general theory of functional perception:

When the novelist chooses to deliver his facts and summaries as though from the mind of one of his characters, he is in danger of surrendering precisely 'that liberty of transcending the limits of the immediate scene' — particularly the limits of that character he has chosen as his mouthpiece. . . . it is enough to say that a fact, when it has been given to us by the author or his unequivocal spokesman, is a very different thing from the same 'fact' when given to us by a fallible character in the story. When a character speaks realistically, within the drama, the convention of absolute reliability has been destroyed, and while the gains for some fictional purposes are undeniable, the costs are undeniable too.<sup>16</sup>

Put simply, Booth is saying that in the above situation we no longer have the capacity to distinguish between ironic or factual narrative; to move beyond these categories, we no longer know whether any statement made by the restricted narrator is true or false because it is necessarily coloured by that narrator's perspective. Of course the ultimate position taken is that all statements can be read ironically and that all statements lose factuality; the suspicion of 'grand narratives' is another way of putting this. Such a leap, from the particular to the general, may miss the point that it is the

mechanism for making a judgement that has been degraded. From a post-colonial and postmodernist perspective, such a 'degradation' is a liberation; as Booth puts it, 'The convincing texture of the whole, the impression of life as experienced by an observer, is in itself surely what the true artist seeks.'<sup>17</sup> In other words, the 'partiality' of the perspective is also equal to the entire inner experience of that perspective, and this subjectivity is now the aim, rather than prior notions of objectivity. But still, Booth points out that critical debate continues to be generated by indeterminate narrative structures and mechanisms of judgement, whereas if they were to be simply celebrated (the celebration of 'play'), debate would presumably come to an end. In attempting a genetic explanation of unreliable narrators, via their authorial, archival traces, Booth suggests that the 'inconscious' narratorial agent ultimately overtakes artistic intention and common sense. Ambiguities are generated and then let out of authorial control.

This above analysis appears to be the complete opposite to the way in which Atwood's *Surfacing* is constructed: ambiguities are carefully managed throughout the text, and are deliberately placed, interwoven and eventually critiqued by the narrator. As Thieme notes:

The reader has to proceed a considerable way into the narrative before s/he is able to gauge the nature of this consciousness and assess the extent of its reliability. The mode of narration is interior monologue. The protagonist relates events and describes her reactions in the present tense, but frequently includes episodes from her past life after the manner of the stream-of-consciousness novel. The ordering and inclusion of these flashbacks is determined by an associative logic and what the reader learns about her is very piecemeal. But from very early on there are details which raise doubts as to her reliability. Thus she speaks of her brother having drowned, but we later discover that he did not really do so.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, there is a paradoxical reversal here: Booth is attempting to ascertain distance between the author's artistic vision and the unreliable narrator's problematic handling of that vision; within postmodernism, the 'author' is decentred and reduced to having the same status as any other subjective character or narrator. Yet, and this is crucial, Atwood is praised for her authorial control of the unreliable—reliable narrator, at a time when intentionalism fundamentally has no meaning, i.e., the author's artistic vision is perceived as being as subjective as the unreliable narrator's artistic, moral, psychological, etc., vision. Booth worries about loss of authorial control, whereas contemporary critics celebrate authorial control during a period when the death of the author has already supposedly occurred. Finally, for Booth, it is not so much ambiguity and indeterminacy that are problematic, it is that the mechanisms for making judgements have themselves been blunted as such by an expectation that ambiguity and indeterminacy are all that one can expect to read or ever find within a text. In contrast to *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Andrew Gibson, for example, ponders the development of a postmodern ethics in his *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*. One of the essential differences between the two eras of narrative

theory represented by these two books is that of postmodernism's problematization of 'the mimetic premise'.<sup>19</sup> As Gibson argues: 'Of all the unexamined assumptions on the basis of which a traditional ethical criticism of fiction proceeded, one of the most crucial was the assumption that, in fiction, ethics and representation are inseparable. Such an assumption makes it impossible for a novel to have an ethical dimension outside its mimetic project.'<sup>20</sup> It is precisely at the limits of representation, the boundary-blurring moments, the aporetics of a text, and through the text's exploration of the 'unrepresentable' that a postmodern ethics emerges: that is to say, once the ethical project is redefined, then Booth's worries can in the main be set aside. In *Surfacing*, the issue of *who* controls representation is essential to the novel's ethics: mark-making, map-making, linguistic and filmic semiotics, symbols and hallucinatory signs all compete for control of the text itself; the novel is suspended as such between competing modes of representation, where the various language systems form another constellation. But this is not a purely relative network, rather, the constellation provides the tools for perception, via aesthetic and ideological modes. Crucially, the issue of reliability/unreliability is dependent upon the notion of experience, and how this in turn affects mechanisms of judgement and perception.

Different types of experience are brought together in *Surfacing*, such as those of childhood, adulthood, adultery, abortion, problematic relationships, neuroses, fantasies, feminism, fascism, and so on. Each type of experience can be explored via competing critical models, i.e., those which it is argued have the *capacity* to explore/explain the experience's effects to the full. But thinking about *all* of the experiences as bundled explosively together, the novel registers as being an exploration of the concept of experience itself. The narrator, far from being overtly unreliable, meditates upon her selectivity concerning the experiences she will share: 'I have to keep myself from telling that story' (14). At the level of perception, she theorizes that all of her experiences existed as a displacement of other experiences. Early on in the novel, she thinks of her childhood as a time of peace, for example, as well as being a displacement of what was happening in the world: '... I had a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, flecked grey newsreels I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems' (18). The narrator realizes not only that later, retrospectively applied knowledge colours her notion of the past, but that the immediate experience itself is always already a negation of the ongoing catastrophe of humanity's pain and self-destruction. Experience is not something composed of immediate, chronologically progressive sense-perceptions; rather, it is multi-temporal. Shuli Barzilai explores this: 'A structural analogy may . . . be drawn between the assumptive pronouns of *Surfacing* and the double or multiple images forming one photoplate. In terms of the road unwillingly taken, they represent

points of intersection where someone or something in the present meets with someone or something previously encountered.'<sup>21</sup> My suggestion is that this process occurs as a constitutive, not unusual or exceptional, process in the novel. Barzilai argues that here 'temporality is canceled out so that individuals inhabiting the zones of then and now might be convened.'<sup>22</sup> Another way of putting this cancelling out is that chronological progression is 'under erasure' in the deconstructive sense, where the notion is both held in place and temporarily crossed-out or suspended to examine the further complexities of a concept or a process. In *Surfacing* examples of temporality being under erasure, thus revealing the necessary multi-temporal aspect of experience, occur constantly (they may in fact simply make up the fabric of the novel itself): for example, in chapter two:

But Madame doesn't mention it, she lifts another cube of sugar from the tray by her side and he intrudes, across from me, a coffee shop, not city but roadside, on the way to or from somewhere, some goal or encounter. He peels the advertisement paper from the sugar and lets one square fall into the cup, I'm talking and his mouth turns indulgent, it must have been before the child. He smiles and I smile too, thinking of the slice of cucumber pickle that was stuck to the top of his club sandwich. A round historical plaque, on a supermarket wall or in a parking lot, marking the site where a building once stood in which an event of little importance once took place, ridiculous. (23-4)

The narrative present – sipping tea with some old family friends – is conjoined with a strong memory. In narrative theory, this could be thought of as a flashback, or analepsis, except that the narrator uses the word 'intrudes', suggesting that the present is being uncontrollably muddled with the past. Again, from a traditional critical perspective, this passage is presented via an unreliable narrator: she is talking about an event that may or may not have happened (and a child who was aborted), although the event itself is not singular or stable: it is presented as a montage. The event happened either on the way to or from 'something', with the reader's retrospective knowledge suggesting that the 'something' is a sexual liaison or affair. The description of the two people suggests that they are talking at odds, and that what is elided is as important as what might have been said. In relation to the notion of a multi-temporality, however, the central image of the passage is that of the 'round historical plaque' which commemorates a site and an 'event of little importance'. The image of the plaque has been segued to that of the 'slice of cucumber pickle'; in other words, it is not entirely clear if the plaque's commemoration is 'this' event (the illicit meeting). A plaque is an object overloaded with significance and imperatives: it commands that we are mindful of something, usually a person or an historical event; we are being commanded to remember that person or event, to 'intrude' the present with the past, for a range of reasons, from the banal to the extremely important. The narrator remembers that her peaceful childhood was adjacent to the invisible (from her perspective) catastrophe of the war and the Holocaust; she retrospectively commemorates those who



suffered alongside her peaceful existence. But in the passage under scrutiny, the commemoration is unwanted, it is a nuisance, and an event that she feels is no longer of any significance anyway: why keep harking back to the past? In this passage, the past is itself problematically conveyed; experiences are selectively shared or fantasized or simply distorted for a while beyond all recognition. The commemoration thus becomes a reminder that the past has constantly to be revisited if we are to make sense of the present, because versions or interpretations of the past will compete or vie with one another for pre-eminence. The narrator performs triage on her memories: 'He puts his hand on mine, he tries that a lot but he's easy to get rid of, easier and easier. I don't have time for him, I switch problems' (24). But the switching, to the narrative present, is not a simple abandonment of the past for the present; the switching of 'problems' means that the childhood memories are now being reinvestigated: 'There used to be a barometer on the porch wall . . .', or, 'When it was first explained to me . . .' (24).

Another way of thinking through this multi-temporality is in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'differentia of time', which Andrew Benjamin suggests 'could be temporal montage, the copresence of different times'.<sup>23</sup> This phrase relates in the case of *Surfacing* to the way in which different times 'intrude' upon the narrative present (or, put differently, construct the narrative present): 'It will awaken a possibility in which the present as temporal montage will reorient itself in relation to the given and thus to that which is given to it.'<sup>24</sup> Gérard Genette, no doubt, would think of *Surfacing's* differentia of time as sabotage,<sup>25</sup> although at a general level the novel conforms to an historically embedded pattern: 'We know that this beginning *in medias res*, followed by an expository return to an earlier period of time, will become one of the formal topoi of epic, and we also know how faithfully the style of novelistic narration follows in this respect the style of its remote ancestor.'<sup>26</sup> Atwood is pushing at the boundaries of the novel's form with *Surfacing* and her writing in the novel is primarily imagistic. The problem with traditional narrative theory is that it reveals *anachronisms* (jumps in time) where Atwood constructs *temporal montages*; in other words, narrative theory reveals two dimensions while Atwood works with three dimensions at the very least.

Atwood's widening of the concept of a narrator's acceptably explored experiences, undermining the theories of narrative that label the narrator unreliable in the first place, is interpreted in general by critics as a form of *manifesto writing*. That is to say, *Surfacing* becomes not a novel but an implicit or explicit manifesto for eco-warriors, feminists, nationalists, psychoanalytic critics, and so on. Such ideological readings are themselves temporally located, giving the novel an air of being both out-of-date (e.g., outmoded 'seventies' feminism) and of the utmost relevance (e.g., still relevant to contemporary debates about feminism, nationalism, and so on). Such a paradoxical and contradictory formulation is related to the mode of the manifesto itself, and the question becomes: is *Surfacing* a manifesto, or does

*Surfacing* explore the manifesto mode as being indicative of transformed, previously unreflective, experience? In other words, by defining the narrator's existence as being self-reflexive, rather than unreliable, power is embedded and embodied by her analyses and choices. Manifestoes themselves make up a discursive formation, to use Foucault's terminology (from his *Archaeology of Knowledge*),<sup>27</sup> made up of particular statements; Mary Ann Caws describes some typical statements:

At its most endearing, a manifesto has a madness about it. It is peculiar and angry, quirky, or downright crazed. Always opposed to something, particular or general. . . .

The manifesto proclamation itself marks a moment, whose trace it leaves as a post-event commemoration. Often the event is exactly its own announcement and nothing more, in this Modernist/Postmodernist genre.

Generally posing some 'we,' explicit or implicit, against some other 'they,' with the terms constructed in a deliberate dichotomy, the manifesto can be set up like a battlefield. It can start out as a credo, but then it wants to make a persuasive move from the 'I believe' of the speaker toward the 'you' of the listener or reader, who should be sufficiently convinced to join in.<sup>28</sup>

There are many instances of the oppositional 'they' in *Surfacing*, from the remembered family, the hunters in the countryside, to the group of friends the narrator is travelling with; various other people become constituted by the 'they': '. . . they must have missed something, I feel it will be different if I look myself' (24). The first-person singular of the novel constantly reasserts itself even through the manifesto moments where some oppositional grouping (say, 'Americans') creates a unified counter-grouping (such as 'Canada') to which the narrator presumably can feel a momentary sense of belonging. The 'battlefield' within the novel is an open-ended chiasmus or crossing between the 'I' and the 'they/we' which replicates to some degree the typical battles within ideological groups who produce manifestoes; in other words, between the charismatic leader and the other members of the group. Continuing with the above extract from Caws, the manifesto mode is considered insane in relation to the normative discourses of society; in *Surfacing*, the narrator is not just dealing with the psychological impact of her abortion, she is dealing with the ongoing taboo of the act of abortion in the first place.<sup>29</sup> Even given a progressive society and debates over women's power to control their own bodies, abortion is an act where discursive norms have not been produced, however, and this complicates the manifesto mode. The event-like status of the manifesto moment is one of complex temporality, relating to the above discussion of the differentia. The manifesto must separate itself spatially and temporally from normative notions of aesthetics, discourse, history, society and so on; it creates its own spatial and temporal zone that is shocking to those who feel that the world they inhabit is the natural one. Suddenly to produce a radically different way of conceiving not only ideas, but events and time, is disturbing and

powerful, even if such an alternative perspective ultimately remains isolated. Caws thinks of the 'nowness' of the manifesto as essentially modernist: 'The manifesto moment positions itself between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in a radical and energizing division.'<sup>30</sup> This positioning is one of utmost seriousness, whereas a purely postmodern discourse would undermine itself through irony and parody. Atwood's *Surfacing* is thus situated dialogically between modernism and postmodernism.

### THE IMPACT OF SURFACING

In an insightful survey and analysis of Atwood's impact on teaching (in the United States, Canada and Europe), Caroline Rosenthal concludes that Atwood's work 'raises and intersects many different issues: Canadian, feminist, anthropological, and cultural studies concerns as well as postcolonialist criticism'.<sup>31</sup> In part, these concerns with her work as an act of ongoing creativity and productivity can also be seen to emerge from *Surfacing* itself. As Alice M. Palumbo puts it: 'The manners in which this novel has been analyzed by critics (as ghost story, family story, anatomy of a breakdown [etc.]) all highlight the layering of histories and cultures in the novel.'<sup>32</sup> As a layered text, or a *palimpsest*, the novel has had a strangely doubled existence: continually reread for its key themes (especially that of a feminist manifesto); the novel has also undergone a more sophisticated 'archaeological dig' as critics have uncovered its less obvious layers. Simultaneously, the novel is often doubled, twinned or paired with Atwood's *Survival*, leading some critics to assert not so much that the novel is a blueprint of revolt, as suggested above, but that it is actually a blueprint 'for escaping the nightmare' of the 'Basic Victim Positions' described in *Survival*.<sup>33</sup> One constant during the years since the publication of *Surfacing* has been the way in which the novel generates a sociological and cultural response: that is to say, critics have used the novel to trigger further exploration of Canadian society and culture, especially with its tensions and relationships with its immediate neighbour America. In other words, critics constantly utilize *Surfacing* to gain a better understanding of Canada's recent past and the present. For example, in mapping the similarities between the characters called 'Joe' – in *The Edible Woman* and in *Surfacing* – Henry C. Phelps concludes that the 'explicit link' between these two novels created by 'Joe' originates in the ways in which both novels 'develop a remarkably insightful portrait of that legendary decade, the Sixties'.<sup>34</sup> The symbolic transformation of 'Joe' appears to Phelps 'a deliberately devastating indictment of the decade', which is given a more general signification in *Surfacing*:

The pervasive sense in the . . . novel of wasted opportunities, deepening bitterness, isolation, and empty – even aborted – lives casts a consciously dark shadow over the era of so-called freedom and liberation. Atwood's skillful embodiment in a

single character of the perniciousness of these changes both displays an unexpected facility for implied social commentary and offers a new perspective for examining her already intriguing narratives.<sup>35</sup>

Early responses to Atwood's novel often shared another notion: that it would *endure*. Only five years after its publication, Bruce King argued that *Surfacing* was 'likely to last beyond the topicality of its themes'.<sup>36</sup> Responding thematically, but also exploring briefly some interesting comparisons with Atwood's poetry, King also maps the novel schematically, but with focus on Canadian literary criticism: 'Margaret Atwood has made her narrator's sensibility express many of the well known topics of Canadian literary criticism: a land of solitude, the lost garden, the sacrificial figure and even what Atwood once described as a tendency towards "paranoid schizophrenia"'. The novel is a representation of such themes and an attempt to go further.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, this recognition of Atwood's fulfilling of the literary-critical role mapped out in *Survival* – and, even more importantly, going beyond that role – reveals the 'internationalizing' of Canadian literature and criticism, for which Atwood was partly responsible. It is worth returning to Rosenthal's survey to explore the full extent and the implications of this impact:

In a 1997 *Globe & Mail* SURVEY [*sic*] titled 'The Takeout Window of Canadian Nationalism,' Atwood is listed among the ten most famous and internationally known Canadians. . . . Although Wayne Gretzky leads the inventory and Atwood ranks only after Céline Dion and Anne Murray, she is significantly the only English-Canadian author who is listed at all. Even though her prominence in the countries under consideration [in Rosenthal's article] varies – Atwood is listed second last in Canada while in the US she ranks sixth, the UK seventh, and in Germany she is the fourth best known Canadian – these statistics confirm what I had guessed at before I started research for this article, namely that internationally Margaret Atwood is better known than any other English-Canadian author.<sup>38</sup>

The 'cultlike status'<sup>39</sup> of Atwood explored briefly by Rosenthal in her conclusion, especially in the form of official and unofficial websites, is reflected even more thoroughly in the book collection in which Rosenthal's essay is published, where many pages of essays, photographs, cartoons and bibliographical materials compete to delineate Atwood as icon.<sup>40</sup> This iconic status is given definition in the Atwood entry in the monumental *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, where she is described as: 'Poet, novelist, children's writer, cartoonist, and cultural commentator.'<sup>41</sup> Additionally, in terms of Atwood as icon, Sharon Hengen and William H. New note that 'Atwood's name became synonymous with the cultural flowering that took place in Canada during the last 25 years of the 20th century.'<sup>42</sup> The comments in the *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature* reveal the most sustained contributions and interventions that Atwood has made within feminism; after calling Atwood 'Canada's most important contemporary writer, without peer in range and international stature', the entry goes on to note that the 'influence of Atwood's work on contemporary writing by



women is indisputable. She articulates the various experiences of women and of girls in powerfully moving ways that function also as acerbic and telling social criticism.<sup>43</sup> A key aspect of such experiences is women's mediation via systems of oppressive and commodifying representation, for example the various *visual technologies* of subjection-through-representation. As such, Atwood is renowned for her 'resistance to representation',<sup>44</sup> and her exploration of power relations reveals the ways in which such technologies are both the tools and the very medium of the inscription and reproduction of patriarchal systems of being and thought. The presencing of women via visual technologies is also a mode of exclusion, and this is embodied most powerfully in *Surfacing* in the character of Anna. According to Özdemir, '... her soul is trapped in the mirror where she rehearses ready-made images of female beauty, none of which is herself: "a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere."<sup>45</sup> This labyrinthine mirroring of subjectivity is not something separate from the medium; rather, it is via the medium that subjectivity is produced. The stress in *Surfacing* on the need for a new language is also a desire for a new medium of representation, a process that has fascinated feminist literary and cultural critics who are working primarily with the new French and North American feminist theorists. Thus the early reception to the novel in terms of the 'grail motifs' (i.e., the quest schema) is recoded from a feminist perspective by a critic such as Sue Thomas: "These motifs, reconceived in substantially feminist terms, provide a most illuminating mythological context for the central mother/daughter relationship and the narrator's senses of maternal inadequacy and guilt."<sup>46</sup> As *Surfacing* continues to be reread by a new wave of feminist and other critics, the novel continues to offer a schema that leads to further exploration of the relations between subjects and society, language and power, and the technologies of exploitation and representation.

## 7 The Rushdie Affair

### Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

The furore that erupted in the wake of the *fatwa* (death sentence) following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) brought the postcolonial novel into the public consciousness in a way that no other literary text had ever previously achieved. The issues that generated this furore are immensely complex (although they can be broken down into their constituent parts), and led at a number of levels to a sustained re-examination of reading practices, and the relationships between multiple secular and religious responses to literary texts (or, perhaps more accurately, the *gulf* between multiple secular and sacred responses). Any survey, however, of the 'Rushdie Affair', as it was soon known, risks reducing or stereotyping the participants. While it would be naïve to expect a critic *not* to take a particular angle, this chapter will attempt to present multiple perspectives on the debates and the novel, regarding overall the publication of the novel as an historical event, whereby a literary text became the focal point for expressing cultural and ideological differences. To reduce the multiple perspectives to two sides – for example, a homogeneous secularism versus a homogenous Islam, or a singular 'aesthetic' versus a singular 'religious' reading – is already far too simplistic. Instead of reproducing binary stereotypes, this chapter will attempt to survey the Rushdie Affair using the concept of the critical constellation: that is, a number of competing and even contradictory perspectives on the novel may be taken by one individual, creating diverse patterns or interpretive frameworks of reader-response. For example, taking an experiential approach, Pnina Werbner notes:

When Muslims I know read *The Satanic Verses* they are deeply offended not by the rational questioning of the Qur'an's divine source – they are used to such sceptical critiques – but by the juxtaposed contiguity of profane language and profane acts or persons with the image of the Prophet and his companions and wives. The book is perceived as a single and undivided physical space.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the offensiveness is not simply caused by a religious or moral response, it is also an 'aesthetic' one:

The offence is a gut feeling of shock. All the Muslims with whom I have discussed the book feel certain that Rushdie as a Muslim, albeit a lapsed one, intended this