"I HAD CERTAINLY FOUND MY TRADITION": MARGARET ATWOOD AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CANADIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood is a worldwide successful writer as well as a Canadian celebrity who promotes her national identity or helps her fellow artists. However, her ascension has not been an easy one. Growing up in the 1950s, she had to face a society full of prejudices regarding women interested in literature. Moreover, Canadians were still in a deep-frozen colonialism making barely visible efforts in constructing their self-consciousness and specific culture. Atwood had to discover the Canadian tradition on her own, process its elements and themes and apply them in her writings. She identified the idea of Survival as a unifying symbol similar to the American Frontier or the British Island. She praised the communion between people and nature due to her own experience in the Bush but also revealed the Canadian victim complex and the female experience living in a patriarchal society. Finally, Atwood used her voice not only to construct a Canadian literary identity but also sound a warning signal regarding important contemporary problems such as human rights and environmental degradation, failed scientific experiments, pandemics, totalitarianism, fanaticism and wars.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Canadian Identity, nature, survival, women.

For almost fifty years, Margaret Atwood has been an internationally acclaimed author who dared to approach various genres from poetry, prose, theatre, to non-fiction, critical essays and even comics. She has also been regarded as a Canadian celebrity who participates in various shows and promotes her national identity or helps her fellow artists by founding the Writer's Trust of Canada or the Griffin Poetry Prize. Nevertheless, Atwood remains a well-known socio-political satirist and human rights spokeswoman, an environmentalist who associates her name with organic food and recycled products and the brilliant inventor of the LongPen, a device which facilitates the remote writing of documents. Her extraordinary ability to combine "high seriousness" and "a witty image" has fascinated the public of all ages and become a "hallmark" of her entire activity (Howells 1). Time and space seem to be no obstacle for her as she continues to be prolific, to reinvent herself and spread her messages overpassing both physical and virtual boundaries via Tweeter, Facebook and other sites. However, in order to understand her ideas and evolution, we should see where the story of this "electrifying" woman with blue sparkling eyes and "wiry, unruly hair" (Sullivan 61) begins.

Margaret Eleonore Atwood was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottowa as the second child of a family with modest financial possibilities but with a deep love for knowledge. Her parents, Carl Edmund Atwood, a biologist, and Margaret Doroty (née Killam), a former dietician, had an older son Harold, born in 1937, and a second daughter, Ruth, in 1951. Six months after Margaret's birth, she was "backpacked" and moved to rural western Quebec, where her father pursued his entomological studies. Seven years later, Carl Atwood joined the University of Toronto, however the family continued to alternate the time spent in the city

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with that in the woods and as the writer recollects: "I didn't spend a full year in school until I was in grade eight. This was a definite advantage" (Ingersoll 38).

Canada, as a member of the Allies, had been ravaged by the losses and social transformations of the Second World War. However, in the middle of the woods, little Margaret lived isolated from all this and grew up with the images of "stacks of fresh-cut lumber", "the huge mountain of sawdust", "the tar smell of heavy canvas tents and the smoke from campfire or rancid smell of fish" (Sullivan 27-28). She saw her father chopping wood, building containers or patiently studying moths – a habit which will raise her interest in metamorphoses. She admired her mother's skills and courage especially when a bear attached their food supplies: "If mother had had a rifle handy, she probably would have shot the bear. She wasn't a bad shot" (Sullivan 28). She also grew very fond of her brother, Harold, whom she competed against but also protected finding him vulnerable. Yet, he passed her a range of skills from reading, Greek or Science to swimming, canoeing, scaling fish, shooting bows, arrows and rifles (Sullivan 29-30). Her younger sister, Ruth, came much later, but despite the age difference, offered Margret a sense of sisterhood which she would often talk about.

Asked about the years spent with her family in the Bush, Atwood would sarcastically reply that they corresponded to a well-known stereotype: "Americans usually find this account of my childhood- woody, isolated, nomadic – less surprising than do Canadians: after all, it's what the glossy magazine ads say Canada is supposed to be like" (Atwood 31).

The author grew up surrounded not only by nature but also by plenty of exciting stories. Many of them were about Nova Scotia, "an exotic place" her mother came from, and which in the girl's eyes "abounded in eccentrics whose eccentricity took a practical form" (Sullivan 22). Her genealogical tree was also a source of great interest as it included martyrized French Pilgrims, a monk's son but also a brave woman named Mary Reeve Webster, who lived in Hadley, Massachusetts, and who was accused of witchcraft a decade before the infamous Salem trials of 1692-93. Moreover, Atwood became a voracious reader beginning with Grimm's Fairy Tales, Dell pocketbook mysteries, Canadian animal stories, comics and big survival guides such as Ellsworth Jaeger's *Wildwood Wisdom*. She was particularly fascinated by Josef Scharl's Gothic illustrations of skulls, monsters and witches and this passion would lead her also to Edgar Allan Poe's terrifying poems and short stories and Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Yet, reading was not enough for little Margret who started writing her own poems, plays and stories and whose mother remembered her saying: "Hurry, Mummy. I'm telling myself a story and I can't wait to find out how it turns out" (Sullivan 34).

Later on, in Toronto, she had to replace the freedoms of forest with the constraints of school and face real life, "in the form of other little girls - their prudery and snobbery, their Byzantine social life based on whispering and vicious gossip, and an inability to pick up earthworms without wriggling all over and making mewing noises like a kitten" (Atwood, *Negotiating* 10). Moreover, she was able to go through the entire year's curriculum in a month and enrol sooner to Leaside High School - a situation which made her feel awkward: "They shouldn't have done that. I was 12 in the first year of high school and there were people in my class who were 15-and-a-half" (qted in Potts 1).

Growing up in the 1950s was not an easy thing for the talented Margaret Atwood, as the society around her "was very bent on having girls collect china, become cheerleaders, and get married". Becoming a poet was merely a dream and "the attempt to write well – to

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investigate, to explore, to acknowledge an external discipline, to take risks among them the risk of failure" – was especially discouraged in young women (qted. in Sullivan 4). Atwood's parents, did not encourage her to write, but expected her to become as educated as possible and use her intelligence and abilities. Up until age sixteen, Margret herself thought that professional writing was an impossible thing for a young person in Canada in the twentieth century and expected to work as a Home Economist or fill in the obituaries and the ladies' page as a journalist. Canadians were still in a deep-frozen colonialism and their efforts to build a self-consciousness and culture were barely visible, as Atwood remembers:

> *we had no Canadian poetry in high school and not much of anything else Canadian. In the first four years we studied the Greeks and Romans and Ancient Egyptians and the Kings of England, and in the fifth we got Canada in a dull blue book that was mostly about wheat. Once a year a frail old man [Wilson MacDonald] would turn up and read a poem about a crow; afterward he would sell his own books . . . autographing them in his thin spidery handwriting. That was Canadian poetry*. (qted in Staines 13)

However, by 1957, Atwood knew that her life goal was to "write the Great Canadian Novel" and began her bachelor studies in English Literature at Victoria College, University of Toronto (qted in Potts 4). There she encountered a dynamic cultural life, read the evergreen editions of Sartre and Ionesco and had mentors, such as Jay Macpherson and famous Northrop Frye. Furthermore, she discovered for the first time, the works written by Canadians such as Margaret Avison, P. K. Page, Leonard Cohen, James Reaney and A. M. Klein. This experience made her realize "that people in the country were writing and not only that, they were publishing books" and that she could "do the same thing". As she recollects: "by the time I was about 21, I had certainly found my tradition" (Gibson, 11–12).

In 1959, Atwood made her literary debut with the poem *Fruition*, published in a major literary journal, "The Canadian Forum". Soon after that she would come to the public's attention with two important collections *Double Persephone* (1961), winner of the E.J. Pratt Medal, and *The Circle Game* (1964), winner of a Governor General's award. These works illustrated as Sherrill Grace explained in *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, the poet's "pull towards art on one hand and towards life on the other" as well as her constant opposites "self/other, subject/ object, male/female, nature/man—and of the need to accept and work within them" (130).

After receiving the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, in 1961, Margaret Atwood began a master program in English Literature at Radcliffe College, Harvard University. She had the chance to access Widener Library and its extensive and endowed holdings in Canadian literature, and to attend the courses on Victorian literature hold by Jerome Hamilton Buckley or those on American Puritans taught by Perry Miller. The time spent there allowed her a certain distance from her own country and a more serious perspective over it:

> *it [Harvard University] was the place where I started thinking seriously about Canada as having a shape and a culture of its own. Partly because I was studying the literature of the American Puritans, which was not notable for its purely literary values – if one can study this in a university, I thought, why not Canadian literature? (you must understand that at the time Canadian literature was simply not taught in high schools*

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> *and universities in Canada) – and partly because Boston was, in certain ways, so similar, in climate and landscape, to part of Canada. One began to look for differences.* (qted. in Oates 9)

One year later, Atwood got her Master's degree and began her doctoral studies at Harvard University with a thesis on "The English Metaphysical Romance". However she later abandoned it in order to write poetry and support herself financially while performing different jobs.

Her teaching career started in 1964 when Atwood accepted a lectureship in creative writing at the University of British Columbia (1964–65, 1992–93) and continued at Sir George Williams Universities in Montreal (1967-68), University of Alberta (1968–70), New York University in Toronto (1971–72), University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (1985), where she was a visiting M.F.A. and New York University (1971–72), where she was Berg Professor of English. Meanwhile, she married Jim Polk an American colleague from Harvard within a "faintly shambolic and surreal" wedding ceremony in January 1967 (Potts 1). Afterwards she became the editor and a member of the board of directors at the prestigious Canadian publishing "House of Anansi Press", which her husband was also involved in and travelled to Europe. The couple got divorced five years later and Atwood started a long-lasting happy relationship with novelist Graeme Gibson, whom she also has a daughter with, Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson, born in 1980.

Margaret Atwood's literary acknowledgement began with her first full-length volume of poetry *The Circle Game* (1966) which won Canada's highest award, the Governor-General's Award for Poetry, and secured her collaboration with William Toye, the editorial director of Oxford University Press, and Jack McClelland, president of the "McClelland and Stewart" publishing house. Soon, she would publish two other collections *The Animals in that Country* (1967) and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1968), which focused on Canadian history but also invoked for the first time the image of an artist of the past.

Her preoccupations regarding "the frail Canadian Identity" were encapsulated in a controversial study titled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* and published in 1972. Atwood claimed that there was a Canadian literature, different from its American or British counterparts, and which was mainly concerned with victims and their ability to survive in critical conditions. It used survival as a unifying symbol similar to the American Frontier or the British Island (Staines 18). Yet, Canadians also seemed victimize themselves the relations with others and especially with the Unite States, as Atwood stated: "Look at poor innocent us, we are morally better than they. We do not burn people in Vietnam and those bastards are coming in and taking away our country. Well the real truth of the matter is that Canadians are selling it" (Gibson 22–23). She returned to this theme in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) when she also claimed that "Canadians are fond of a good disaster, especially if it has ice, water, or snow in it. You thought the national flag was about a leaf, didn't you? Look harder. It's where someone got axed in the snow" (2).

The author has further associated the Canadian victim complex with the female stance towards men and society and urged people to take responsibly for their actions stating that: *It you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault – it is always somebody else*

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doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. (qted. in Gibson, 22–23).

Her first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) reveals a young woman's rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. Having no professional opportunities and an unhappy engagement the protagonist, Marian McAlpin, feels separated from her body which she regards as food and finds herself unable to eat, repelled by metaphorical cannibalism (Levens, 61). Although critics have usually qualified this novel as a feminist or a "proto feminist" one, Atwood claimed that:

> *there was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors. It's noteworthy that my heroine's choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it. But these were the options for a young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the early sixties. It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed . . .*(*The Edible Woman* 8)

Surfacing (1972), is a novel especially written for the Canadian public, at a time when nationalism and Quebecois cultural differences were raising in force. It is usually read as a postcolonial novel, though not in the traditional sense as it regards not only the gradual Canadian independence from British dominance but also that from American subtle cultural infiltration. It also questions the gender roles and the psychological mechanisms that men use to control women. Atwood's following books such as *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Life before Man* (1979), would also point out the physical and psychological boundaries women have to face although they are represented by an obese girl or a worker at the Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. Her fifth novels, *Bodily Harm* (1981) removes the heroine, Rennie, from Canada and places her on the fictional Caribbean island St. Antoine, on the brink of a revolution. By doing so, Atwood criticizes Canada's passivity to social issues that plague the world. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) positions Offred, the protagonist-narrator, within the Republic of Gilead, a dystopian version of the United States. This patriarchal society was combined the events taking place in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979) which Puritan precepts and Nazi ideology. All its citizens suffered especially women. Deprived of their political and social rights, they were regimented and forced to perform well established tasks otherwise tortured and killed. In addition, they are also part of a hierarchical system, where the Commanders' wives, dressed in blue, are at the top of the pyramid while the Jezebels or the prostitutes and the Unwomen or the rebels are so low that their existence is officially conceived. Being a fertile women, Offered has to wear a red robe and become a handmaid or a "two-legged womb", a child breeder for the governing elite (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 136). She is tortured by the Aunts, a par-military female cadre, and blackmailed by Serena Joy, the infertile wife who wants a baby. The protagonist acts as "an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than heroine)", yet she breaks free and flees to Canada, where she tells her story (qted in Bloom 16). Atwood would focus again on the power relations between women and the ways they could hurt each other in *Cat's Eye* (1988). The novel focuses on a successful painter, Elaine Risley, who returns to Toronto, the city where she grew up, and

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remembers the ways in which she was bulled by three other girls up to a point when she felt suicidal impulses.

In her later books, *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *Alias Grace* (1996), Atwood continues to question women's moral nature by constructing female characters defined by their intelligence and complexity. The first one brings forward the self-empowered modern Zenia, who backstabs her college friends and seduces their husbands. The second one is a historic novel which focuses on Grace, a servant convicted for murder in a time when women had to act as "angels in the house". Atwood takes the difference between what women really are and what they are expected to be, even further in *The Penelopiad* a novella published in 2005. She borrows the voice of Penelope and gives the myth a contemporary twist. Odysseus's wife is expected to remain faithful and to him for twelve years, avoid scandalous rumours, take care of Ithaca, bring up their son and reject a hundred suitors. Meanwhile her husband is away fighting in the Trojan War in the name of the beautiful Helen, overcomes the hardships of the journey back home, fights monsters and sleeps with goddesses. Upon his arrival he kills her suitors and her twelve maids and makes sure to remain her where her place is. This story may also remind us of the Canadian wives who joined the workforce and emancipated themselves while waiting for their husbands who were finding in the Second World War. When the men returned, women had to go back to their homes and kitchens and the feminist leaders, just like the maids, were firmly criticized.

Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy brings the reader back to the speculative terrain mapped out in *The Handmaid's Tale.* Consisting of three novels, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), it depicts a distorted society of the near future, a big scientific experiment which got out of control. The plot takes place again on the territory of the former United States, because as Atwood claims, "Americans are more extreme in everything" and everyone keeps an eye on them to see what they might do in a year or two (qted in Bloom 14). This way, the author is free to explore a series of contemporary problems such as human rights and environmental degradation, failed scientific experiments, pandemics, totalitarianism, fanaticism and wars both at local and a global level.

Atwood's short fiction continues to perpetuate almost the same themes and to reflect the idea that a writer should write about what he/she knows best. Her collections of short stories such as *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Wilderness Tips* (1991), *Good Bones* (1992) *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994), *The Labrador Fiasco* (1996), are set just like her novels in the places she knew well, grew up or was educated. They explore brutal forms of love, the suffering and the relation victor-victim, the metamorphosis of the personality, the connection between nature and humans and the instinct for survival. Moreover, in *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), Atwood recreates in a modern manner Charles Perrault's folkloric story "Bluebeard" and talks about infidelity, abuse of trust, and the failure of men and women to communicate on a personal level. Her recent books, *The Tent* (2006) and *Moral Disorder* (2006), talk about the confusions of childhood, the burdens of fame, about city people adjusting to a life surrounded by nature, dysfunctional family members, Alzheimer as well as the fear of terrorism. Atwood's latest collection *Stone Mattress* (2014) reveals her obsession with aging and dying and the misfortunes of a character which says:

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> *You believed you could transcend the body as you aged, she tells herself. You believed you could rise above it, to a serene, nonphysical realm. But it's only through ecstasy you can do that, and ecstasy is achieved through the body itself. Without the bone and sinew of wings, no flight. Without that ecstasy you can only be dragged further down by the body, into its machinery. Its rusting, creaking, vengeful, brute machinery.* (270)

Since her debut in 1959, Margaret Atwood has constantly written poetry which more or less reflected the themes found in her prose. The volume titled *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) expresses her grief after losing her father and understanding of her own transience. Her recent collections *Eating Fire: Selected Poems 1965-1995* (1998) and *The Door* (2007) have been admired for their elegance and symbolism. Moreover, the critic Jay Parini stated that Atwood maintained her "northern" poetic climate "full of wintry scenes, harsh autumnal rain, splintered lives, and awkward relationships. Against this landscape, she draws figures of herself" (1).

Her children's books are also subscribed the general themes Atwood approaches in her prose. They are illustrated and abound in witty word games in order to delight but also to teach little children different important lessons. For instance, *Up in the Tree* (1978), *Anna's Pet* (1980), *For the Birds* (1990) (with Shelly Tanaka), *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* (2003) depict the connection between humans and nature, animals and their place, as well as food. *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (1995), *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda* (2006) *Wandering Wenda and Widow Wallop's Wunderground Washery* (2011) show the differences between the rich and poor and the ways boys and girls interact.

The author also shares her opinions about writing in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* published in 2002 and in several essay collections, such as *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent*, 1982-2004 (2004), *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing*, 1970-2005 (2005) and *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008). She insists that a good writer should write within his tradition, discover and reinvent it. Her like time activity remain a vivid example for the Canadian as well as for writers from all over the world.

Overtime, Margaret Atwood received numerous awards which consecrated her name among the best writers of both the twentieth and the twentieth first centuries - the Arthur C. Clarke Award, Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, the Booker Prize, the Governor General's Award 2001. She has been inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame, her books, *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride* have inspired movies, a show performed by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and real trends among the young adult readers. She has been labelled as a Canadian nationalist, feminist, deconstructivist and even as a Northern Gothic writer but as Harold Bloom argues, "given the range and volume of her work, Atwood both incorporates and transcends all of these categories" and seems "vastly superior […] to the ideologues she attracts" (7). Yet, she draws her draws her creative energy from the landscape, the history and the people of Canada, she fallows the tradition formed by her fellow writers and she processes the contemporary problems sending a message to the whole world. In short, the prolific Margaret Atwood is not only a Canadian writer who has successfully created a path for others to fallow but who did not limit herself to the physical and cultural boundaries of her country and continued to approach new subjects which have an import impact all over the world.

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