

HORIZON OF SURVIVAL

BECAUSE THE LIFE OF MOST WRITERS is a struggle — for money, for acceptance, even for the very time to write — they are inclined to see their careers largely in terms of survival, and in a deeper, more biological sense, the theme of survival enters into a great deal of classic literature from the *Odyssey*, surely the prototype of the survival epic, down to Zola and Hardy, down — in our own time — to works like Camus's *The Plague* and even to 1984, where the survival power of the proles is one of the novel's leading themes.

Is there, then, a special way in which Canadians are committed to the idea of survival? That such a commitment has shaped our literature is one of the basic themes of Margaret Atwood's first critical work, *Survival* (Anansi, \$3.25), in which, following the example of Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* and D. G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock*, she outlines yet another schematic view of the nature of writing in Canada.

There can be no doubt of Margaret Atwood's qualifications for this kind of task. In less than a decade since her first book of verse appeared (other than a brief pamphlet in 1961) she has established herself as one of the leading poets of this country, and her two novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, have extended into wider frames that extraordinary intellectual clairvoyance which has enabled her to see so many human predicaments with a lucidity that many people find distressing because it endangers their images of a safe life.

Survival is a fine example of what happens when a highly analytical intelligence of this type becomes involved in the kind of task that is usually performed by semi-writers on the principle that "in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king." It was originally planned "as a teacher's guide for the many new courses in Canadian literature", but what has emerged from that plan is a highly

intelligent series of critical insights and controversial arguments that will leave most students bewildered. It is as if Third-Eye were trying to instruct One-Eye on how to guide No-Eye on a tortuous quest after the Canadian psyche as revealed in our literature. Yet, juxtaposed with the ten brilliant essay chapters on various aspects of the literary persona (a particularly fascinating one is on the key role of animal literature), there remain the fragments of apparatus that belong to the originally conceived easy guidebook — the lists of recommended texts, the “fifteen useful books”, the appendices devoted to research resources — and this has resulted in a strangely hybrid book with clumsy outlines. It is best to forget the apparatus (those who have read enough to appreciate Margaret Atwood’s arguments will not need it in any case) and to concentrate on the substance of the essays.

Margaret Atwood presents, and supports with many shrewdly chosen examples, the theory that our literature is still scarred and mis-shapen by the state of mind that comes from a colonial situation; she even has charts which tell us how to define the degree of acceptance or rejection which a writer’s work displays. This situation, she suggests, has made ours a literature of failure. Our greatest triumphs as a nation have been achieved by blind collective urges; the “heroes” we name in connection with them turn out to be at best outward successes (rotten with the consciousness of ultimate failure by any standards that count) and often not even that. Thus our literature reflects an attitude to life that aims no higher than survival.

It is certainly a thesis that isolates a habit of thought to which Canadian intellectuals are liable. We pride ourselves on our ironic modesty. When this journal — whose basic subject is the same as Margaret Atwood’s — celebrated ten years of publication, the editorial was entitled not “A Decade of Achievement”, but “Getting away with Survival”. Indeed, Margaret Atwood’s special merit is to have condensed into a sharp focus the scattered insights which many other critics have already formulated or half-formulated about the Canadian condition. In developing her thesis, which certainly fits many of the facts about our life and literature, she presents a salutary picture (and salutary in this case, as in most cases, means depressing) of a people who express their nature only in struggle against the forces of economic and cultural frustration which turn almost every Canadian work of writing into a depressive reflection on our slavery.

Yet I cannot accept Margaret Atwood’s vision in its detailed entirety, and I suspect she does not anticipate such literal and complete conversion from any reader; rather she has been occupied in creating a logical horizon within which

we can seek our bearings. It is possible to find many important Canadian writers who fit only square-peggedly into the pattern of failure and survival she presents. Robertson Davies, I feel, does not belong, nor does Irving Layton or Robert Kroetsch, and Hugh MacLennan and Al Purdy fit the pattern only partially. Margaret Atwood has in fact drawn quite heavily on a restricted group of young novelists and poets to make her most telling points. She could have made the points even more telling if she had not been too modest to draw on her own verse and fiction, and one suspects a temperamental inclination has led her a long part of the way towards her conclusions.

Yet the poets and novelists of failure and survival still surround us in a haunting circle, too numerous not to give a special tone to Canadian writing. And can we be sure that these are not the writers who give faithful expression to our inmost urges? Are we not, as a people, inclined to be content with pulling through rather than triumphantly succeeding? Yet even this does not mean one has to accept literally Margaret Atwood's thesis that it is colonial economic domination that has made Canadians so obsessed with failure. The theme of survival is, after all, not unique; as one of Margaret Atwood's fellow poets remarked in a letter that reached me today, "survival is the spine of worldlit!" Canadians may display an extreme case of this concern with survival, but so did the Eskimos to an even more advanced degree, and it was geographical, not colonial economic, factors that produced the original survival arts of the north. Yet, considered as a critical tool, a frame of reference, a usable hypothesis, it is hard not to accept Atwood's horizon of survival as the circle that best defines the bounds of Canadian writing.

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COMMENCING with this issue, *Canadian Literature* will grow in size to between 120 and 128 pages an issue. This enlargement of content represents an expansion of scope. In the past our pages have been in principle devoted to the criticism of Canadian writing in both French and English, but up to now we have in practice done little more than signal from Vancouver our cordial feelings towards writers in Quebec; on an average less than 10% of our material has been in French. With the increased size of our journal, which has been made possible in part by a special grant from the Canada Council, we shall be able within 1973 to increase to at least 25% the proportion of our

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content devoted — in French or in English — to the discussion of writing in Quebec, and in later years we hope further to expand that proportion. Thus we shall be able at last to fulfil the second of the aims with which *Canadian Literature* started publication more than thirteen years ago. The first of these aims was to establish a high and consistent standard of reviewing and criticism in Canada, and if we have not been wholly successful in this task (as the book pages of so many newspapers still suggest by their abysmal inadequacy) at least we can point to the vast growth of serious studies of Canadian writers — many of them published in our pages — since *Canadian Literature* first appeared. Our second original aim was to produce a journal that on the level of literary achievement rather than political fantasy would bring the two leading cultures of Canada together. Politics did intervene, particularly during the middle 1960s, to frustrate this intention, but at last we hope that we have earned enough credit and trust in all parts of Canada for our project of a truly comprehensive organ of Canadian criticism to gain what all of us — led by Margaret Atwood — suspect to be the prime Canadian achievement: survival, with any other success an astonishing bonus.

G.W.

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