# SURFACING AND DELIVERANCE

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IT IS DIFFICULT to read Margaret Atwood's recent novel *Surfacing* without thinking of its imaginative counterpart, James Dickey's *Deliverance*, since so much is similar in theme and structure. Dickey speaks for both novels when he says that the motivating force of *Deliverance* is the recognition that the wilderness is fast disappearing.[1] Each novelist feels that self-definition can only be achieved through a return to nature in a test for survival. In flight from the "world of systems", each feels a need for submergence in a concept of the natural that verges on violence or madness. Atwood's novel was published almost simultaneously with her book *Survival*, a thematic guide to Canadian literature. It is the imaginative expression of the theoretical preoccupations of that book, a writer's attempt to make self-conscious some of the key patterns which constitute the shape of Canadian literature. To explore in what way Atwood's book is an expression of the Canadian tradition is important, but the startling similarities between Atwood's and Dickey's novels invites a quite different problem. Would a comparison of the two lead to any tentative conjectures as to national differences in the imaginative preoccupations of two cultures? Of course such an exploration would be difficult. Can any single work be taken as representative of the preoccupations of its culture?

In his brilliant study, *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis indicates in what way this is possible. For the person interested in the history of ideas he explains that a representative imagery or anecdote can usually be discovered in the works of imaginative writers which crystalizes the concerns of a cultural period. Every culture as it advances toward maturity seems to produce its own determining debate over ideas that engross it: the order of nature, money, power, salvation,

the machine. Behind its terms of discussion is an image or motif that animates the ideas, for what is articulated is a comprehensive view of life. When these coherent images or narrative patterns are made self-conscious, the culture has finally yielded up its own special and identifying myth. As the image-making process is an evolutionary one, it is to be expected that cultural self-images will change. Rather than the nineteenth century American Adam that is Lewis' theme, much contemporary American literature seems to yield a nostalgic version of it, an attempt to flee from the mechanized world of human construction in pursuit of an aboriginal self recovered in a primitive nature that has become a forum of original sensation. While far from the only narrative pattern, it is yet an expressive and enduring one to which Dickey in particular gives powerful embodiment. Because so much has been written about the mythology of American literature, it is not difficult to see certain predominant themes of *Deliverance* as expressive of cultural preoccupations.

But Canadian literature is still in the process of finding its own mythology. What must be asked is whether, in *Survival*, Atwood has found an enduring image adequate to Canadian experience. The image she offers is that of a collective victim struggling for survival, of a culture obsessed with feelings of self-depreciation and insignificance and which often seeks to escape the responsibility of self-definition through its victim role. Whether this image actually identifies a native tradition can only be determined by the future imaginative works which will be created out of it, as Atwood herself insists, not simply as reflections but as explorations, attempts to make self-conscious the experience of being a victim in a colonial culture. To any Canadian however, the pattern seems to hold out the promise of truth. A theoretical conjecture in *Survival*, it is made into complex personal experience in *Surfacing* so that what was propositional becomes experiential, verifiable through its capacity to move with that intensity reserved for works which deal with more than the personal. In this essay I propose to explore the imaginative rendering of this tradition; its workability as a cultural pattern in *Surfacing*. A contrast to Dickey's *Deliverance*, so related yet so different, seems to me to be the best way to identify what is peculiarly Canadian about Atwood's novel.

Both *Surfacing* and *Deliverance* are explorations of man's relation to nature, a theme rarely so well expressed as by Charles Olson: "It comes to this: the use of a man by himself and by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence." Atwood and Dickey are fundamentally opposed in the discoveries their characters make about nature

and the resolutions to which these discoveries lead. Such discrepancies may define something more than the personal. They may be expressions of the enduring debates which preoccupy distinctive cultures over the most basic of problems: the problem of power; of the use of man by man; of the order of nature and man's relation to it.

JAMES DICKEY begins *Deliverance* with a revealing quotation from Georges Bataille: "Il existe à la base de la vie humaine un principe d'insuffisance." We see through his characters Ed Gentry and Lewis Medlock that this "insufficiency" is a fundamental boredom, the cause of which is normality; the long declining routine of everyday existence embodied in the job, the wife, the suburban environment: "I was really frightened, this time. It had me for sure, and I knew that if I managed to get up, through the enormous weight of lassitude, I would still move . . . with a sense of being someone else, some poor fool who lives as unobserved and impotent as a ghost, going through the only motions it has." Ed Gentry describes himself as a get-through-the-day man who slides, living by anti-friction, finding the modest thing he can do and greasing that thing. His friend Lewis, though fundamentally different — "he was the only man I knew determined to get something out of life who had both the means and the will to do it" — is plagued by this same boredom. "He had everything that life could give, and he couldn't make it work." To understand this boredom is to recognize the fatalism which is at the core of all of Dickey's work. Life must fail, must prove inadequate to expectation because at its core is a paradox: the process of accustomization. Experience brings not knowledge but the death of intensity and a man "will risk *everything* for a bit of intensity that he thought he would never have again".[2] This quest for intensity is an archetypal ingredient of the romantic sensibility, but Dickey's solution is particularly American, a nostalgic return to primitive nature, seen so often in his poetry as the potent world of adolescence when the discrepancy between ideal and real was least marked. In *Self-Interviews* Dickey defines the ideal man as the intensified, totally responsive man with a capacity for complete participation, for commitment of the self to whatever is contemplated. As a consequence of modern mechanization which exercises only the pragmatic, functional capacities of the individual, this intensity is lost, to be replaced by a numbing of sensibility. The single way to break down this process is through a recovery of intimacy with nature, a re-integration with that half-dreaming, half-animal part in the human make-up that is funda-

mentally primitive, absolutely untouched by civilization and through which can be recovered a personally animistic relation to things.

Such is the basic pattern of *Deliverance*. Nature allures its two central characters Ed and Lewis as potential chaos — nothing in normal life can offer its edge. Hungering for a kind of life that isn't out of touch with other forms of life, they return to nature in a curious courting of disaster in order to prove their capacity for survival. The theme which develops is common to many American novels — the perilous testing of man against man, the bonding of male aggression in an assault on nature. What may prove disturbing to the reader however, is that the essential ingredient of intensity is violence. The capacity for survival is defined in the old terms: machismo, the virile code of risk, man pitted murderously against man in a trial of courage under pressure. When faced squarely, a nostalgia for the test of violence is seen to be the motivating force of the novel. Dickey never evades the importance of this theme to his work. In *Self-Interviews* he writes of war: "There's a God-like feeling about fighting on our planet. It's useless to deny it; there is . . . You can never do anything in your life that will give you such a feeling of consequence and of performing a dangerous and essential part in a great cause as fighting in a world war. . . . You feel a nostalgia for war because all the intensities of life, youth, danger and the heroic dimension, as nearly as you will ever know them in your own personal existence, were in those days." As Dickey adds, it is useless to say this is wrong; it is felt. This self-induced captivity to the "heroic dimension" is indelibly a part of the American psyche and is the product of a peculiarly American brand of romanticism, anti-social in its implications, which insists on the inevitable superiority of the primitive and instinctive over the civilized and cultivated. Under this code, women come to stand for social strictures. Ed's wife is responsible for his boredom "just as it's any woman's fault who represents normalcy." The flight into nature becomes a flight into a closed masculine world where a man can recover the heroic dimension normally lost to him.

Margaret Atwood's novel begins on a similar premise to Dickey's. Her unnamed narrator returns to the wilds of Northern Quebec ostensibly in search of her missing father, but her return is also a process of submergence in nature through which she discovers the artificiality of what Dickey calls the world of "men and their systems". The irony is that she is not even initially aware, as are Dickey's two main characters, of the boredom which is at the root of her experience. She lives anaesthetized, incapable of feeling yet ignorant of her incapacity to do so. The re-emergence in nature and in her past exposes this inadequacy to her. The

cause of it however is not the fundamental insufficiency at the basis of human existence which Dickey finds; instead, the numbing of sensibility, the entropy of feeling is the consequence of a process of self-deception. The novel begins with the narrator's having been divorced from her husband, in her mind a stereotype of the insensitive male who has tried to force her into the passive role of wife and mother. She has left him and their child in a bid for freedom. All this proves to be a lie. We learn gradually that the husband, child, and marriage are fictions. She was not married, but rather played at it in an affair with a married art teacher, and the child she has left "in another city" is dead, aborted in a dingy backroom clinic. She has fabricated an illusory past in which she plays the passive role of victim to escape moral responsibility for the death of her child. She explains: "I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version." She balances precariously on a thin edge of sanity carrying the dead child within her. The eventual demolition of her fictive life through her return to the wilds of her childhood brings her to the edge of madness; yet a madness which is the beginning of true vision. She discovers that victimization has been an excuse to escape responsibility for evil.

The culture of Northern Quebec, and by implication, of Canada as a whole is an important backdrop to the novel because the narrator's predicament is indicative of the culture which produced her. The northern landscape is a "mélange of demands and languages" where the only conspicuous signs of culture are the billboards: "THÉ SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE, QUÉBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVEZ COCA COLA GLACÉ, JESUS SAVES . . . an X-ray of it would be the district's entire history." It is described as a pastiche culture which escapes responsibility for self-definition by passivity. It claims itself as victim to American cultural domination thereby sharing a complicity in its victimization by a failure to fight back. Atwood's remarkable insight is to have seen that emotional entropy is simultaneously a cultural and personal predicament.

*Deliverance* and *Surfacing* begin on a similar premise. Their characters discover a fundamental inadequacy, an emotional entropy in their ordinary life. For Dickey this is to be identified romantically, impersonally as a fatal flaw, the paradox of accustomization in human experience. For Atwood the problem is moral and therefore personal — a self-deception caused by moral and emotional timidity. Both analyses can be seen as products of cultural predisposition. The diagnosis which both novelists offer is the same. At the core of the dilemma of emotional ennui is a failure of feeling, of total response, identified through the characters' attitudes toward nature which are fundamentally flawed. For Ed Gentry nature

is a dead past which she has exorcised. Inevitably, a rejection of nature is a rejection of a fundamental part of the self. Atwood speaks for both novelists when she defines the problem as a separation of body and head, logic and feeling, the insistence of the mind to abstract itself from the process of being: "We refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks". For both authors the only means by which an integrity or wholeness of self can be recovered is through a literal and metaphoric return to nature and thus to the unconscious element of the self in search of new vision. Both offer a kind of psychic bending backward in a gesture of repossession to an earlier primitive integrity of self. Yet in search of authenticity, Dickey turns to a cult of sensation; Atwood turns inward to moral self-castigation.

For both novelists the experience of returning to the wilderness is an experience of penetration to a previously unknown or repressed self, the unconscious. Dickey's character Ed Gentry compares entering nature to his entrance into the unknown, into the unconscious in sleep. It was "something unknown that I could not avoid, but from which I would return". Initially nature appears to him as a massive indifferent force that is not morally explicable, but in confrontation with it a man discovers his capacity for survival which rests on a standard of physical courage, sheer nerve; survival "came down to the man, and what he could do." In the crisis for survival, the cult of sensation is recovered: "I had never lived sheerly on nerves before, and a gigantic steadiness took me over, a constant trembling of awareness". Under the pressure of death, things never witnessed, never beheld so closely before are absorbed by an almost mystically supersensitive awareness. Suffering itself is desirable as sensation: "It had been so many years since I had been really hurt that the feeling was almost luxurious"; fear is exhilarating: "I felt wonderful, and fear was at the centre of the feeling: fear and anticipation — there was no telling where it would end."

We are in that part of the American imagination that seeks out war, the wilderness, the calculated risk, violent death as the only means of recovering the sense of consequence and meaning lost to the emasculated world of contemporary experience. However Dickey does not leave us in the cult of sensation. He offers a profound and disturbing insight. When a man enters into nature's violent cycle he finds himself in a moral vacuum, the terrible freedom of which is exhilarating and enjoyable. The threat of nature is unconsciousness, mindlessness. In its predatory cycle, man partakes of its vast indifference. When Ed Gentry is about to kill the hillbilly who has assaulted his friend, Dickey writes: "I still believe I

felt, in the moonlight, our minds fuse. It was not that I felt myself turning evil, but that an enormous physical indifference, as vast as the whole abyss of light at my feet, came to me: an indifference not only to the other man's body scrambling and kicking on the ground with an arrow through it, but also to mine." With his victim framed in the sight of his weapon the death appears to him to have an abstract beauty: "I had never seen a more beautiful or convincing element of a design. I wanted to kill him just like that." A powerful drunken exhilaration comes from the awareness that "there's not any right thing." This is an extraordinarily powerful conception. To conclude that mortality is a graft, civilization a veneer over instinct, is conventional enough. It is even common to speak of this instinct as positive, life-energizing. But to explore the mindless violence of the unconscious freed by the enormous physical indifference of nature and discover in it the pure exhilaration of evil reminds us of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. What is astounding is that this leads to no moral insight. Dickey has made self-conscious the lure of violence which is endemic to American romanticism, but he is honest with himself when he draws no moral revulsion from this. It is too easy to judge the novel's theme as tamer than it actually is. The return to the wilderness is a metaphoric return to the hidden reaches of the self where, in an atmosphere of terror, the release of the murderous capacities of the self is experienced as an exhilarating freedom. Dickey would probably insist that there are areas on the edge of civilization — the Southern outback being one — where social morality is ambiguous and even dangerous, and a man must create his own moral code to survive. Drew Pearson is naive in assuming that normal standards of justice can support him in such circumstances. This is of course true. But Dickey's theme is not the aberrations of social justice. The real core of energy in the novel comes from the exhilaration which man discovers when he escapes social normalcy to re-enter the predatory-aggressive cycle of nature from which he has withdrawn at the cost of emotional wholeness.

In *Surfacing* the return to nature is also the motivating theme, but with very different results than in Dickey's *Deliverance*. Nature becomes a forum, not for emotional intensity but of moral self-scrutiny. The novel deals with the problem of power. The narrator has neatly divided the moral world into killer and victim, the intrinsically innocent who are misused and the evil predators, the "Americans", who can relate to the rest only through the megalomaniac assertion of power. The putrid body of the heron is their symbol in the novel; they kill it

since "the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it". Atwood seeks to propel her character beyond this simplification to the recognition, similar to Dickey's, that violence is intrinsic to the human personality: "To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate." But the question remains, what moral conclusion does she draw from this discovery? She does not find the primitive exhilaration which Dickey's character feels, but rather insists on the need to move beyond the predator-pursued, killer-victim mentality. Perhaps the difference between Atwood's and Dickey's viewpoints can be clarified through the relation each author adopts toward the animal world. Throughout Dickey's work the animal world is seen as mystery, challenge, otherness, and the only relationship man can have to it is the life-death one of the hunter-hunted — the hunter matching himself against his victim and conquering, assimilating the primitive animal energy and wildness to himself. Dickey is motivated by a nostalgic desire to re-enter the cycle of the man who hunts for his food, a compulsion perhaps created by that need which he expresses so often in his work to know the universe emotionally. Atwood rejects the nostalgia of this position. In the relation he conceives to nature, as Olson says, is defined the use of a man by himself and by others. It is too easy to be caught in the trap of predator (even when powerfully motivated by the desire for a primitive animistic intensity) where the only relation one can conceive to external nature and therefore to other men is that of power. In fact, in the terms of *Surfacing*, Dickey reveals himself in this attitude as Atwood's archetypal American. His test of courage and manhood lies not only in a man's capacity for self-control but in his ability to bring others under the control of his will, to manipulate their fate in the god-like role of the hunter. For Dickey in all human encounters, including love, there are two roles, and given such a range it is obvious which side one chooses to be on. Atwood sees beneath the predatory cycle of nature another, sacrificial cycle: "The animals die that we may live . . . but we refuse to worship . . . the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks." The inchoate mumblings of the narrator in her madness conceal real insight. We must move beyond the victor-victim relationships, which are simplistic categories, to a new vision which recognizes that if nature is a sacrificial cycle of life dying to sustain life, then man's position in it is not hunter but suppliant and the energy he absorbs from nature is not that of power but of awe, the capacity to worship. Atwood works through to this insight in a very powerful fashion, dispelling the narrator's simplistic notions of good and evil in one of the most dramatic moments in the novel.

The narrator has been diving in search of the mystic Indian symbols which her father had been studying before his death. In one of her plunges she discovers her father's corpse which, bloated and distorted, appears in its watery element like the foetus she had aborted. The death symbols of the novel conflate: heron, foetus, corpse, as, for the first time, she recognizes her own culpability. She too has within her the "American" capacity for death but in wilful self-deception has rejected her own murderousness. The scene is powerfully handled, the submergence in water being simultaneously a plunge into the past and into the unconscious regions of the self where the ghosts of the past are confronted. Her discovery is of course an insight into the perilous nature of innocence. To define oneself as innocent (i.e. victim) is per se dishonest since being human inevitably means being guilty.[3] The narrator's subsequent madness is a process of expiation and rebirth.

For the narrator, the revelation of the foetus-corpse appears as a vision occasioned by gods unacknowledged or forgotten. Through it she achieves a contact with the springs of feeling long dried within her, a contact which is sacred because awakened by a power outside the self. On the edge of madness she searches out the sources of this power. Through a ritual of purification she sears away the human form encasing her, trying to become animal and in her frenzy has a succession of visionary experiences. The pattern for this *sacred initiation* into nature is derived from primitive initiation rituals. A probable source is Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*.[4] Shamanism, as described by Eliade, is a technique of ecstacy, a process of induction into the sacred. Whoever aspires to be shaman must go through a period of psychic isolation in which the mind swings between extremes of ecstasy and madness, and the aim of which is transformation from the human state. The prescribed rituals are outlined by Eliade and Atwood adapts these to her own end. They follow a precise psychological order: retreat to the bush — symbol of the beyond — to a kind of larval existence (the physical and psychic regression of Atwood's character); prohibitions as to foods, with certain objects and actions taboo (in her madness, the narrator intuits rules which dictate appropriate foods, permissible areas; the fasting induces hallucinatory states); hypnotic sleeping (the narrator builds a lair and sleeps in a position simulating a larval state); secret language (the narrator regresses to non-verbal communication); dismemberment or cleansing of the body in symbolic death (the narrator purges her "false body" in the lake water); spirit guides assist the aspirant in his quest for resurrection (the images of the miraculous double woman and the god with horns). Atwood is able to offer this initiation ritual which

symbolically simulates the death and resurrection of the regenerate self in remarkably dramatic personal terms. The quest she ascribes to the narrator is clearly visionary: "The gods, their likenesses: to see them in their true shape is fatal. While you are human; but after the transformation they could be reached". After an arduous period of preparatory waiting transformation does occur, radically altering the narrator's perceptions of nature. The first such visionary experience she undergoes is one of mystical translation to otherness. She feels that disintegration of the empirical self and reintegration into nature that is characteristic of mystical experience: "I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh. . . . I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place." Nature thus seen from the inside is a living continuum of pure being, no longer the indifferent or hostile force from which she had felt alienated. Her mother later appears to her in human, then animal form as if the boundaries of the animal and human are co-terminous after death. Finally nature appears as a kind of Manitou, a forbidding and awesome presence in the landscape; it's the "thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone. I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it; it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes. . . . It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself." That nature should appear as Manitou is interesting. Atwood implies a vision of the divine not as the benevolent oversoul of the nature pantheist but as a forbidding indigenous presence with which one seeks a truce.[5] As are all manifestations of the divine, it is also one of the ghosts of the self; exploited, destroyed, tamed or encroached upon only at grave cost to the self. But if awesome and terrifying it has other aspects since it is immediately transmuted to the form of a fish, a sacred icon, or protecting spirit: "It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take?" The vision implies that nature is neither hostile nor benevolent; it exists in itself, a living process which includes opposites — a process of life as energy. Sanity returns with the capacity to be awed by nature, to respect its fearful and sacred rituals, its unknown gods. But the rational mind abstracts itself from this process of being. One of the most profound insights of the book comes from the narrator's father: "He wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation." Like Robertson Davies in *The Manticore* Atwood offers a vision of the sacredness of the natural world, into which man can enter by abandoning his will to power: "The ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer or

a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship".

IN BOTH *Surfacing* and *Deliverance* we are led to ask in what way the energies of nature have proved convertible. When the characters emerge from the outback, what knowledge do they bring with them? Dickey's characters certainly emerge chastened. *Deliverance* is prefaced with a second quotation which makes this point: "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rocks, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground" (Obadiah, verse 3). In retrospect we see that the characters come to recognize that the desire to impose one's own idea or order on nature ends in failure. As the narrator says of Lewis Medlock, he "wanted the thing [in life] . . . that must be subject to the will". He confuses his power to control the map-image of nature with power over the reality. Through the chastening power of the river he discovers his hubris; he learns he cannot take on the whole nature, and recognizing his mortality, he becomes more human. Yet we are left with a marked feeling of deflation at the end of the novel because little has changed externally. After the violence of nature, the business world becomes precious for its normalcy — boring but not so much as before. The wife is seen as tender, professional, tough, qualities which had been undervalued. Though the two main characters had hoped for the promise of "other things, another life, deliverance," they end as middle-aged "tenderfeet" gathering around a calm civilized lake drinking beer and water-skiing. Have the energies of nature then proved inconvertible? We turn to Ed Gentry for the answer since he alone carries within him the surviving image of the river, symbol of mindless primitive energy. Dickey summarizes his character's insights in an interview for *The Southern Review*:

> In this country a man can live his whole life without knowing whether he's a coward or not. And I think it's important to know. And what you're supposed to believe, gradually, and to see about Ed Gentry, is that he, as he plots out this ambush of the hillbilly, what you are supposed to be aware of is that this decent guy, this art director, this minor pillar of the community, decent family man, suburbanite, is really a born killer. He figures it out exactly right as to how to kill this guy, and he does it. He carries it out, and gets away with it. I mean he doesn't have to keep on doing it, and do these things again later on in life — he's done it once and that's all he needs to do it. That's all he needs to know, that

> he's capable of it. And as you see in the last few pages, it's a quietly transfiguring influence on him. He knows. He knows what he did. He knows what he'll do, if he has to, because he's done it.[7]

We are left with the test for survival as measuring-up, the ability to assume an aggression-attack mentality, the myth of self-reliance translated into machismo, and thus tottering from true insight into parody. Can there be no more profound test of heroism that this test of violence as a man goes it alone in the untamed wilderness, a test so rarely possible today that it drives a writer of Dickey's brilliance nostalgically to create a hillbilly outback with triple murder and sodomy as the subject of his first novel? Yet there is something evasive about this wilderness at the core of the American imagination. Wright Morris poses the problem in *The Territory Ahead*: "Nature — even nature red in tooth and claw — is child's play when confronted with human nature". As always D. H. Lawrence gets it perfectly: "Absolutely the safest thing to get your emotional reactions over is nature."[8] In this wilderness a man works out but his own salvation alone, making up his moral code as he goes along. If there are others with him they are either his victims (both real and the savage phantoms of his unconscious mind) or his dependants who increase his heroic stature as victims he must save. It is essentially a solo performance in a test of manhood. What is disturbing is the inherent simplification of this vision. The problems of human motive, of nature versus human nature, of social responsibility are evaded, perhaps with the recognition that morality means the death of intensity since its essential ingredient is measure.

This mythification of violence is not evident in Canadian literature. Even when the theme of a literary work is violence, and indulgence is psychic violence in particular, as in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, the attitude assumed is usually different. The stance taken is often ironic. (It has been too little noted how persistent in Canadian literature is this technique of ironic deflation which often becomes a self-depreciating humour, bordering on self-parody). An essential distinction in the responses of the two literatures toward violence is implicit in Atwood's *Survival*; a distinction which is not meant to be self-congratulatory. One aspect of American romanticism is the cult of sensation, with its potential exoneration of violence as a psychic test. The counterpart to this in Canadian literature is the myth of violence internalized, masochism or victimization. Northrop Frye draws the distinction precisely when he says that the violence and destructiveness which are turned outward in the American psyche, are repressed and turned inward in the Canadian. The myth of self-reliance, of the heroic

dimension, which can degenerate into machismo or measuring-up, is inverted in the Canadian tradition. Life-destroying forces are usually seen as personal: paralysis through guilt, inability to act, lack of feeling. And this leads to a dangerous simplification which is Atwood's major point in *Survival.* The myth of victimization leads to an evasion of responsibility. Responsibility is located elsewhere.

Atwood's purpose in *Surfacing* is to alert to the dangerous self-indulgence of masochism. As she writes in *Survival,* the danger of being a victim is that it creates a need: the obsession with victimization can become the will to be a victim, inferiority developing into a fatalism, a will to lose. One must move beyond these simplifications of power. It is essential to moral maturity to recognize the capacity to kill as innately human, but moral and social sanity does not impose it as a test of strength and survival. Courage is of another order altogether. For Atwood the experience of nature offers at best survival, with one's moral and civilized self intact; there is no deliverance to another state since, after the moment of vision the gods once more prove theoretical: "No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull. . . . No total salvation, resurrection." Yet, however ambiguous the momentary experience of the sacred otherness of nature has been, it does lead to a predication about man's relationship to himself and to others. At the end of the novel the narrator has achieved the simple conviction of the need "to prefer life, I owe them that." The problem then remains to become human: "Does anyone ever achieve it; being human. If you define human beings as necessarily flawed, then anyone can be one. But if you define them as something which is potentially better, then it is always something just out of reach."[9]

In retrospect, what finally strikes the reader about Dickey's vision in *Deliverance* is the romantic nostalgia for a spontaneous response to nature that is its impelling force. It is the reverse side of an earlier American myth: from the myth of inexhaustible resources to the myth of resources exhausted, all or nothing. No better work of criticism has been written on this theme than Wright Morris' *The Territory Ahead,* nor any better novel than *The Great Gatsby* with Fitzgerald's brilliant ending: "He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year after year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our aims farther. . . . And one fine morning — So we beat on, boats against the current, born back ceaselessly into the past." Huck Finn's wilderness, the territory ahead, is always in the

past so that the present is always a diminution. The essential human problem for Dickey still remains the need to create other wildernesses of the imagination in which can be discovered something commensurate to man's capacity for wonder. Perhaps this is why the moon-shot seems, for him and for others, the potential basis of a new compelling myth. In his poems, if not in *Deliverance*, this theme is convincing. Yet it is the basis of something tragic in the American imagination which moves between poles: on the one hand the search for intensity (a source of the pageantry and idealism so powerfully a part of American life, but also of the cult of violence from which Dickey is never entirely free and which has as its corollary a rejection of social normalcy, a desire to escape from culture) and the nostalgia and despair which come from a rejection of present life, so that the novelist from either pole is on the outside, and the novel while it may have a Faustian intensity, is rarely able to offer the profound social panorama which we associate with the genre. There are of course many exceptions but the American novel has too long drawn its deepest energies from the romantic for these to break a general rule.

The Canadian psyche is essentially different, perhaps more European, because the romantic, exploratory and idealistic have always been tempered by the reflective and observant. Canadians have tended to focus on a consequent lack of energy and intensity in Canadian fiction, conscious only of a standard of American romanticism. But instead of that intensity, another kind of depth can and is being achieved. The conflict which is external in American literature — the artist against his society as romantic, anti-hero, or existentialist white negro on the outside — which often leads to brilliant rhetoric as with Norman Mailer or nostalgia, can be internalized as the author within his society absorbs its conflicts into himself, as Atwood's character begins to do in *Surfacing*. This may lead to a novelistic tradition of mature moral vision on a broad social canvas; with a new version of imaginative survival not in flight from the society of man's construction but within society, because individual liberation is synonymous with collective social liberation. The Canadian novel may take as its theme the need to put down roots, to participate joyfully, as Atwood says, in one's own place, recognizing that self-knowledge "Who am I" can only be answered in terms of "Where is here".

NOTES

[1] William Heyen, "A Conversation with James Dickey," *The Southern Review*, 9, No. 1 (January 1973), 150.

[2] James Dickey, *Self-Interviews*, ed. Barbara and James Reiss (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 167.

[3] See Graeme Gibson, interviewer, "Margaret Atwood," *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 22.

[4] Mercea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, tr. Willard Trask (Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 64, 288.

[5] See Atwood's description of indigenous gods in *Survival*, p. 54.

[6] Gibson, p. 27.

[7] Heyen, p. 155.

[8] Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead: Critical Interpretations in American Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1963).

[9] Gibson, p. 26.

# MY FATHER, DYING

*Christopher Levenson*

The world contracted to a single room,
a single view over suburban trees.
Everything is outside, beyond, remote.

Over a glass of water, flowerpots, paper towels
he has complete dominion:
fastidious with age, he re-arranges
incessantly all that's within his grasp
as if playing chess with some unseen opponent
and pondering each move.

Our words have atrophied,
my rude health a rebuke.
I tell him friendly lies and watch him
diminishing into childhood, helplessly
lifted and washed.
Will alone is not enough.

Everything is within, inaccessible,
a safe whose combination I have lost.
The last right of age is silence.
His eyes drained of perception have long since
put aside all false shame. His one good hand
toys endlessly with the threads of the coverlet.
I try to read the parchment of his face.
Outside the world decays.