CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

From 1972 Margaret Atwood began to reveal the full potentialities of her creativity. She was already known as one of the best of the younger Canadian poets, with six volumes to her credit. If Atwood prepared but did not publish a book of verse in 1972, she did bring out in that year the two books which broadened her public image from that of a rapidly developing young poet into that of an accomplished and influential woman-of-letters. The first of these was *Survival*, important in the context of Canadian writing (present and past). It is the presentation of Canadian literary history in terms of traditions of fiction and verse that give expression to strong collective fears regarding their survival as a distinct Canadian culture. *Survival* is important as a tract against cultural colonialism. For Atwood it was a first declaration of Canadian nationalism. *Survival* describes itself as "A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature", and here it reveals what at first sight may seem a fundamental discrepancy in Atwood's attitudes towards the various literary genres. For, while in her verse she tends to be formally austere and philosophically tortuous, in her fiction she is inclined to be didactic — unashamed to be teaching a lesson and — satiric in the classic sense of commanding reformation by laughter.
For Atwood art is a re-exploration of life with a view to bringing men and women closer to an understanding of the evil — and occasionally the good — that characterized their true relation with each other and with the natural world. She is an intensely moral writer, and even if she has written nothing so openly propagandist as Hugh MacLennan's early nationalist novels, *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, an argument is always being worked out in her novels, usually obliquely and always in terms of human experience.

It was with the publication of *Surfacing* that Margaret Atwood became regarded, perhaps more than she had bargained for, as a woman novelist speaking especially for and to women. Christina Newman praised the book, which "moves from the plain perceptions, of the opening chapters onto the knife edge of madness and fantasy that are characteristic of Atwood's vision," for its excellence in "Conveying what goes on in the mind of a woman trying to deal with the little brutalities inflicted on her body and spirit by the harsh politics of sex". But she sees the real triumph of the book as, in its own way, a nationalist one: the evocation in her portrayal of the Northern wilderness of Canada as it is, as we actually experience it.

Atwood's fiction as a whole is remarkable due to its anti-social realism. Social realism assumes the presence and necessity of a given social order within which the characters interact. Even novelists with a politically revolutionary intent tend to proceed from the assumption that what is wrong
with any modern society can be righted by progress achieved through a more rational and scientific ordering of society which leads it further away from the apparent disorder of natural (or primitive) living. Atwood proceeds from the assumption that the society which has emerged from a reliance on logic, and which defies the natural instinctual urges, will be a sick one. It will produce emotionally sick people who will only be able to cure themselves by challenging and defeating its manifestations within themselves. The social novel was based on observing the interaction of human beings within a given and accepted social situation. In *Surfacing* - and before it in *The Edible Woman* - the social situation is not accepted; it is liberation through self-understanding and self-realization that the individual is led towards, and this of course produces a new attitude towards the character, who is seen from within rather than in a constantly changing dramatic relationship with others. In this pioneering rejection perhaps lies Mararet Atwood's importance as an innovatory influence in Canadian fiction.

The apparent pattern of Atwood's fiction is that of comedy which begins in social disruption and leads the characters into a healing green world and returns them to society capable of restoring its wholeness. Atwood's characters face a slightly different task of healing from that of traditional society. Their task is more to heal themselves than to heal society. In this healing they deliver themselves from the damage done to them by the male concepts of order and
language. They also attempt in some ways to deliver themselves from the inherited patriarchal narrative pattern in which Atwood has located them - that is, from the comic pattern itself. The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, and Bodily Harm present us with a young woman of some sensitivity who has found herself isolated among form-asserting and technologically inclined people. All four protagonists attempt to escape. Those of The Edible Woman and Surfacing see an escape through an unconscious rebellion. The protagonists of Lady Oracle and Bodily Harm escape by flight to another country. Each woman appears to have an unconscious perception of the threat which her present situation constitutes to her integrity. In the first two novels, the protagonists' attempt to flee. A kind of madness seizes the women in which their body dominated perspectives make everyday events seem surrealistic. Their images of the world become prelogical, discontinuous. Yet they deliver convincing symbolic truths. In The Edible Woman the protagonist's fiance attempts to photograph her and he is characterized by the same camera and weapons imagery of male rationalism that is found in Atwood's poetry:

That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands (246).
In *Surfacing* a group of friends and acquaintances attempt to 'rescue' the protagonist from apparent insanity and return her to 'normal' city life:

They're hulking out of the boat now, four or five of them, I can't see them clearly, their faces, the stems and leaves are in the way, but I can smell them and the scent brings nausea, it's stale air, but stations, and nicotine smoke, mouths lined with soiled plush, acid taste of copper wiring or money. Their skins are red, green in squares, blue in lines, and it's a minute before I remember that these are fake skins, flags (183-184).

When the protagonist achieves some conscious insight into the male danger she has escaped from, her body can surrender its control of her to a somewhat reintegrated person. In *Lady Orcale* and *Bodily Harm* the woman protagonists are sufficiently detached and alienated to experience their friends and relatives as utter strangers. The protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, overwhelmed by plots and dangers she imagines around her, escapes not into madness but into a mad act of pretended suicide and improvised exile. The protagonist of *Bodily Harm* less dramatically escapes superficial friendship, superficial sex, ominously perceived lover and partial mastectomy on a remote Caribbean island. In a condition of exile both women achieve a new vision of their own lives and of the violence latent in the various men they have known. Atwood's structuring of her novels in a sense resembles Shakespearean comic sequence of social order, exile into a green world, reintegration into society, and return to natural order. But along side this parallelism there is a significant difference. Atwood's concern is with process much more than with order. Order for her is
a male word used by "packagers" like Rennie's lover Jake in *Bodily Harm*. Her immediate goal is not to change society but to change the individual woman so that she may survive with some integrity in society. **The Handmaid's Tale** is a critique of female brutalization, a theme articulated in *Bodily Harm*. It is a dystopian novel by Atwood which imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference. It is recorded, not written. The protagonist's "own story" recalled from memory is transcribed by Prof. Pieixto, an activist. The narrative may be controlled and ordered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation and reconstruction of the protagonist's version. Offred, the protagonist, uses language as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings. Her tale involves an exposure of how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies. **The Handmaid's Tale** is a piece of 'speculative literature' built up out of the experiences of the past and present and extending to the future. The novel concludes with an Epilogue which gives us hints about the main story and yet it exposes the critical interpretations of the story by posterity. There is yet another ambivalence in the novel. That is feminism itself appears to have been viewed in certain contexts with certain ambivalence. An overtly political fable, **The Handmaid's Tale** shows how in Atwood's fiction formalist concerns and political ones are never separate and this is a paradoxical postmodern phenomenon. If **Cat's Eye** is a woman painter's cynical retrospective principally on her relationships with other women and feminism, **The
Handmaid's Tale is most often labelled feminist dystopia. The novel is offered as a prediction of the future only if its warnings against oppressive central powers to mute protest are ignored. The world of Gilead is not quite an inevitable destiny. The Handmaid's Tale resists labels that place it within a particular generic stream. The maintenance of a multiple identity is shown in the novel to be part of a policy of subversion of the dominant. The perspective given by the final chapter, that what we grasp as a single text is in fact a reassembled account from a surviving jumble of cassette recordings, shows how the novel reiterates its uncertain, problematic relations with the concept of a single reality, one identity, a truthful history as propagated by the political orthodoxy of Gilead. There are four levels of narrative time in The Handmaid's Tale. One of them is the pre-revolution past characterized by the narrator's memories of her childhood with her mother, her student days with Moira, her memories of her daughter, and her relationship with Luke. The second level of narrative time refers to the period of revolution itself and the time immediately subsequent to it. At yet another level we have the Gileadean time. It is this narratorial period that is interrupted by the dream sequences. The Gileadean present is what the narrator is telling her tale about, although the events at this present are still retold as past occurrences narrated retrospectively. At the fourth level we have the time of the present, the period of the Symposium of Gileadean studies. The novel suggests that the privileging of history, in the form of authentic first person account of the past,
as something more truthful and accurate than fiction, is fallacious. The narrator insists that the tale she is telling is a reconstruction which is going to be at some level inaccurate, partial, incomplete, because it is retrospective. But she suggests that this status, neither wholly fact nor complete fiction, is something that her story has in common with other historiographic metanarratives. The Handmaid's Tale is dystopian fiction, but also historiographic metafiction with a confessional journal-style first person narrator.

Many novels of Atwood deal with woman's experience in a male-dominated culture. They present the woman caught in oppressive stereotypes and they show how some women struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought through self definition and reconstruction of the self, through bonding among women, and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation.