

MARGARET ATWOOD AND LEONARD COHEN : THE FEMININE VOICE

par Kathleen HULLEY

Clearly Leonard Cohen in *Beautiful Losers* has invented a «*langage mineur*», while Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* does not venture far beyond convention. Nevertheless, *Surfacing* raises a specific issue about language which asks us to re-examine the disruptive power of both books: That issue is : can the feminine voice speak a «*langage mineur*» ? In comparing the two novels we see that Cohen's voice refuses to be placed, while Atwood speaks specifically for two minorities —the Canadians (vs. the «Americans»), and the feminine minority. Thus she speaks in two voices; and in both the language she speaks is her enemy. As a Canadian who speaks American she is trapped in the language of what she sees as Canada's political and moral oppressor; as a woman writer she is trapped in the *Father Tongue*. Whether she accepts convention or fights it, she is outflanked by «*enemy*» language.

In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliett Mitchell points out that Freud is not prescribing feminine behavior when he equates «*normality*» with being a wife and a mother, he is *describing* the inevitable place allotted to women not merely by 19th century European society but by the structures of human culture as we know it. Levi-Strauss, providing a wider sampling, affirms the essential object value of women : there is no society (e.e., the smallest unit of kinship) without a system for the exchange of women either by the father (patriarchy) or by the maternal uncle (matriarchy). (1) Jacques Lacan brings together both Freud's and Levi-Strauss' insights by his own discovery that the birth of language as well as that of any functioning social unit depends on the oedipal triangle : the word and social consciousness spring from the same root and depend on «*the law of the father*». (2) Each arises from the oedipal triangle in which woman is essentially a being who *lacks* and acquires a fundamental dependence in her impulse to speak.

Atwood's narrator feels this contradiction viscerally; the language which cripples her is embodied in her flesh. When she tries to scrape off civilization and to re-cover herself in primal fur, she must evade both traditional and dissenting «*territories*» already mapped by «*the enemy*», in order to «*reterritorialize*» a new space which grows outward from an organic feminine

center. Her struggle is important to feminine writing, for in the past women writers have either submitted to the father tongue or chosen paralysis : women write «feminine» stories in forms already handed down to them, or they are entrapped by their rage. Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf are two notable exceptions (3) If there is a «weakness» in Atwood's dissent it arises from her refusal of submission to or paralysis by the language which is her «crippled» self. Instead, she desires a re-embodiment of words, for language, self, skin are one. Thus to «reterritorialize» language requires a physical inversion; she must turn herself inside out, divest herself of all recognizable modes of being, move through the space of silence and back into wholeness.

Her strategy is a visionary movement toward the sloughing off of language. But she can do this neither by spewing forth words till they create a universe and form of their own; nor can she do it by paring language away to a bare minimum of signs. Both strategies have been fully mapped out —from Henry Miller to Beckett. Her strategy is rather subterfuge; her novel wears a conventional mask of quest-for-self, but it ends with a disturbing failure to resolve, rebalance, complete that quest. The regressive structure of the book towards a uroboric state does not satisfy the longing for a return. When we last see the narrator, she is nude, living on roots and berries, grunting, half «mad», pregnant, and silent.

Thus *Surfacing* remains irreparably off-center; it raises an issue it does not solve. If Cohen's strategy is to push the patriarchal tradition beyond its limits, Atwood's strategy is to push the maternal pattern of inwardness beyond limit. She offers a feminine form or resistance to the frenzy of self-destruction the American tradition of literature demands of sexual woman; and she thus uncovers the terrible destructive potency of the re-embodiment of the word : Her form of resistance denies first the social tradition which accompanies traditional masochism and then the archetypal structures of human civilization as we know it. Because her narrator's search for the father concludes with the woman inside her body, that search annihilates the symbolic father and the boundaries his presence reconstructs.

This annihilation begins with a simple refusal to play the role of victim, but it quickly evolves to a digging away and down from civilization. Her refusal to be what others expect or to submit to the abortionist's knives is part of the recovery of her body and self, but the closer she comes to total recovery, the more she must refuse. To re-embodiment herself, the narrator comes to realize, requires first

a refusal to be what civilization defines as «human». Hence she must divest herself of language and its inherent mythic limits.

She retreats from social space (in becoming «Indian»); then from human context («animal»); then towards limitless linguistic and phylogenetic possibility in becoming Mother to a «fatherless» god/child whom *no one will teach to speak* the language of «fathers». This final vision brings together each recoil and recovery in a series of coalescing rejections which leaves her at the primal beginning — free from the oedipal triangle, free from the God/father/superego archetype, free of the Word, but centered in her primeval, physical self. Only from this center can gesture, body, self, woman be restored to language so that language regains its potentiality to open up community, not to circumscribe it.

The novel is, thus, structured on a series of regressive transformations, from one negativity to yet another. As the heroine becomes rooted in her feminine reality, she becomes uprooted from all that has made her human. Her retreat achieves first a collective importance for women, but finally calls into question all cultural development. The «America» she hates is not merely a symbol of political and moral oppression but a symbol of self-alienation inherent in the myths which have come to structure human culture. Since it is the «Americans» who have emptied language of gesture, it is inevitable that to be «not an American» comes to mean silence.

By insisting that she re-embodiment language, Atwood has expressed her problem in such terms that any language she currently speaks depends on structures which symbolically cripple women. This is, perhaps, a false problem, a failure to distinguish between the boundaries of *language* and the freedom of *parole*; but if the Word itself is, indeed, «patriarchal» in structure there are but two modes of feminine recovery —silence or vision. Atwood's linguistic conventionality occurs because to choose a strategy in terms of this dialectic is to launch the attack without weapons because those weapons have been forged by the enemy. Such an attack is limited to the thematic and structural levels, and does not transform the roots of language.

Nevertheless, in *Surfacing*, Atwood identifies an important feminine problem, not unique to feminine writers; «minorities» are crippled not by men, nor by social milieu, nor by economic systems, nor by «American» attitudes, but by the inescapable language which makes them human. If for this reason Atwood cannot imagine a «langage mineur», she does restore «voice» to feminine writing, which like a physical grunt or howl demands to be heard in a re-

ciprocal, concrete, embodied gesture. Furthermore, it is her strategy which leads us to reconsider the success of Cohen's disruption of traditional American forms.

Precisely because Cohen speaks the father tongue, he need never confront a similar paralysis, but instead he risks incorporating the traditional neuroses of the conventions he seeks to break; as a consequence he reveals the limitations of attempting to re-create a language whose structures are already given, and he illuminates the difference between the male and female modes of protest.

To begin with, if we examine the difference between his narrator's emotional relations to his wife Edith, and his relation to his homosexual lover, F., it becomes clear that Cohen's hallucinating and hallucinatory Saint is not fundamentally polymorphous perverse, but simply homosexual. The women in the novel —whether they be the suicidal wife, obediently waiting in the basement to be squashed flat by the elevator, or whether they be Catherine Tekawitha, the narrator's hallucination from the American past, once again enduring, through his recreation, every moment of her excruciating self-torture; the whippings, flayings, tearing of her denied sexuality —the women in Cohen's books are allowed to live only so long as they remain a collection of orifices into which multitudes of men insert their penises, their fingers, sticks, manic dildoes, their fantasies. She is raped, urinated on, tortured, shared, glorified, humiliated, penetrated largely as a means for the narrator to create an emotionally and historically rich connection with his homosexual lover. At any cost to herself —isolation, suicide, self-torture— the woman must not expect or demand relationship between herself and the man, nor must she intrude on the true relationship between the men. She is an idea; her body is mere vehicle. To be sure, homosexuality has its own disruptive significance, but in the tradition of American literature, homosexuality has always been an acceptable mode to transform the threat of community into abstraction.

From Ishmael and Queequeg to the narrator of *Beautiful Losers* and F., we are in the same territory and still speaking the father tongue —a language whose literate conventions reveal a horror of being «territorialized», civilized, communalized, sexualized; a convention in which woman has always stood for the threat of body and of cultural cohesion; a convention which excludes woman from her own body and from relationship.

Thus we note that despite his inventive power, Cohen's book

ends in an affirmation of the father tongue and of a polymorphous perversity whose power remains simply the recovery of the lost homosexual lover :

Poor men, poor men, such as we, they've gone and fled. I will plead from electrical tower. I will plead from turret of plane. He will uncover His face. He will not leave me alone. I will spread His name in Parliament. I will welcome His silence in pain. I have come through the fire of family and love. I smoke with my darling, I sleep with my friend. We talk of the poor men, broken and fled. Alone with my radio I lift up my hands. Welcome to you who read me today. Welcome to you darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end.

His conclusion is both phallic in imagery, and fully at ease in the linguistic structures. It is a search for the impossible father/lover, He who gives the Word, the law, the structure. This is no rejection of traditional territory, but a reiteration of the loss and perpetual search; only the object has been transformed.

No matter how far he pushes form and language then, Cohen finally affirms the patriarchal roots of the language he speaks. In Atwood's book, on the other hand, the narrator is paradoxically deracinated from language as she succeeds in growing roots in femininity. Thus *Surfacing* concludes with an irresolvable conflict : for a woman to tell a story is to use a language outside herself, alienated. Atwood's heroine wants to get inside, rooted in a space from which she might generate new growth. Her silence does not symbolize paralysis, but a movement into a space which avoids territorialization and abstraction by the symbolic father only by remaining unnamed.

Yet for the feminine writer, as for any «colonized» writer, there is no way out of the dilemma of speaking the oppressor's tongue if she is to write. No matter what language she speaks, be it the language of convention or the language of revolution, she is always trapped, she returns to being edible, self-devoured as she makes her denial heard. We are what we speak, Atwood tells us; our language eats us up. Hence she cannot attempt linguistic upheaval but merely a vision of a «god» child free from both the «father» and language (since they are the same thing); a vision of a child who may become its own god by perhaps creating its own language; a vision of unimaginable beginning, an apocalyptic re-

turn to the Garden in whose center sleeps the seed of a word, limitless, free, a language not yet spoken; her book circles into silence :

The lake is quiet, the trees surround me,
asking and giving nothing.

NOTES

- (1) *Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Anchor Books, New York, 1967.*
- (2) *Jacques Lacan, The Language of the Self, translated by Tom Wilden, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1971.*
- (3) *Both Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein are important in the context of this particular problem because neither was paralysed or submissive. Instead each offers a conception of the feminine voice which includes it as simply another voice of dissent, disruption, experimentation. As do all writers of a «langage mineur», they allow that voice to emerge from a private space which seeks and creates its own form and which cannot be territorialized till after it has spoken. It is because Atwood's book is about dissent and because her inescapable enemy turns out to be language that we have been led to look at the issue of the feminine voice from this uniquely defensive position. At any rate, if Freud, Mitchell and Lacan are right about the origins of culture and language, Atwood's novel raises a genuine dilemma which neither future writers nor future critics can ignore.*