THE UNICORN AND THE BOOBY HATCH : AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET ATWOOD

by GILLIAN PORTER LADOUSSE
Université de Bordeaux I

Gillian Ladousse : Your novel *Surfacing* is shortly to be published in translation in France, another is to follow and I believe you are also discussing the translation of some of your poetry ?

Margaret Atwood: Yes, it's being talked about. I can't say anything about it yet because no arrangements have been made. According to my agent there are some publishers who are now interested in dealing in poetry in translation.

Gillian Ladousse : This is a fairly unusual occurrence, for yours is only about the third book by an English-speaking Canadian writer to be published in this country. Does this mean that Canada is no longer considered, as you once said, as "the sticks" ?

Margaret Atwood: I think it's changing, For instance, in Italy now there is a Canadian vogue. Don't ask me why, I don't understand it. It may be that the Italians view Canada as a place that they might some time go to. A number of people have relatives there now. But it has also acquired the same kind of romantic aura for the Italians, that the United States used to have but they've had the States, as it were. They know quite a lot about it. So Canada is now the unknown, romantic place, and I think for a European there is something very romantic about the notion of a country with few people in it, and also a place where there are wild animals. I was amazed when I was in Italy in September to note that one of the best-selling books in an Italian bookstore was a trapper's manual : how to survive in the wilderness, how to live off the land, mountain-climbing, living in the snow and things like this. This was selling like hot cakes, obviously not because anybody needs to read it but because it's an escape fantasy.

Gillian Ladousse : And do you think possibly the same is happening elsewhere ?

Margaret Atwood : Yes ; for instance, Australia is now developing closer literary ties with Canada. I'm on my way to the Adelaide Poetry Festival, and though I'm not the first Canadian to have gone there, I'm almost the first.

Gillian Ladousse : The situation has changed a great deal, then ?

Margaret Atwood : A great deal.

Gillian Ladousse : A great many non-Canadians are puzzled about the need for the constant assertion of a sense of Canadian identity, and this is a subject you have talked about a fair amount yourself. Why do you need so badly to identify with a nation rather than assuming your own individuality as a writer in a world situation ?

Margaret Atwood : I think possibly because one has always been identified in that way. For many years it was actually held against one that one was Canadian.

Gillian Ladousse : It was actually held against you ?

Margaret Atwood : Oh yes, very much so. In the States for instance, just a couple of years ago, when *Surfacing* was published, one of my publishers in New York said he didn't want to identify it as a Canadian book because the word "Canada" was death. In the States it gives a book a bad aura. People think it's going to be negligible. A lot of Canadian writers themselves did the same thing, having grown up there and having been given none of their own history, none of their own culture. I grew up assuming that one didn't want to be known as a "Canadian writer" ; one wanted to be known as a writer. In other words one wanted to get rid of that derogatory prefix. We have people like Mordechai Richler who went through that. His first book sold three copies in Canada and he makes jokes like "world-famous in Canada".

Gillian Ladousse : You want to write as a Canadian, yet on the other hand it appears that your books can sell in the States as simply "North

American". How do you distinguish yourself from American writers ?

Margaret Atwood : I don't have to worry about that. I let the critics do that. But it is amazing : one reviewer said that the book was set in Northern Ontario, which in fact it wasn't ; it was set in Northern Quebec. There is this degree of non-cognizance - I won't call it ignorance- or lack of awareness of just exactly what goes on over the border. They become aware when somebody blows something up. The Quebec situation has caused quite a stir in the U.S. because they don't want a Cuba right over their border. But in general the average American, and this often includes American literary critics, doesn't know that much about Canada. Why should they ? We have twenty-two million people and they've got two hundred and twenty two million. There are more blacks in the States than there are people in the whole of Canada.

Gillian Ladousse : But as far as writing is concerned, wouldn't you like to say whether you think there is a difference between American and Canadian trends and whether this difference lies mainly in the area of social mythology, or whether there are formal aspects as well ?

Margaret Atwood: We haven't got around to formal differences yet because we've been so busy with the other thing. I think, for instance, there are probably more formal similarities between Canadian English and American writing than there are between Canadian English and English writing. In that way there is quite a lot of spillover and we have a lot of things in common : the relationship to a land which is very large for instance - though I think Canadians are somewhat more conscious of space these days because they have a lot more of it per person than the Americans do. We've also had the historical experience of coming to this country, even though attitudes to the native Indian and Eskimo population were different. The American attitude was to exterminate them, whereas the Canadian attitude was to neglect them. There has been a resurgence in the native population in both countries. The ones in Canada have a better chance of winning, because there's a lot more of them *per capita.* So there are a lot of simi-

larities. But when you ask me what the difference is, I can put it very briefly by saying that south of us we have the United States and south of the United States they have Mexico, and that's quite a big difference. They do not feel dominated by their southern neighbour in the way that we feel dominated by ours.

Gillian Ladousse : About that feeling of domination and oppression, I have heard a Canadian critic equate the problems of literature in Canada with those of black writers in English-speaking African countries. Do you think it is a minority literature in that sense ?

Margaret Atwood: There are definite similarities there. The similarity is that we are both either neo-colonial or ex-colonial or pseudo-colonial or some kind of colonial culture. Many people have said that what we ought to be comparing ourselves to is not American literature or English literature but, say, West Indian literature, Nigerian literature, Australian literature, New Zealand literature, literature of people who have been identified as and who feel themselves to be colonies now.

Gillian Ladousse : Does this have repercussions on language, as, for example, in Black Africa where one is writing in the oppressor's language ?

Margaret Atwood: I wouldn't say that, because English is not even the native language of the United States. I mean it's as much of an import to the States as it is to Canada. French is an import to Canada as well. Those colonisations have been there for may be three hundred years. It's not really very long when you count time. I think the problem is to assert that there are different meanings for words. I obviously, when we say *colonial*, it has a different aura than when an American says *colonial.*

Gillian Ladousse : It was an epoch in the States, whereas it's still a reality for you ?

Margaret Atwood: It's past in America ; or else if the speaker happens to be on the Left, he's thinking about the United Fruit Company or something like that. He's not usually thinking about Canada. The thing about Americans is that individually they are often terribly friendly. The man in political life that is doing the most reading

in Canadian literature that I know happens to be the American ambassador to Canada. He's very interested in it, much more interested than most members of our own government. This is the problem. And when you go to the States, they are always very friendly and enthusiastic. It's a nice experience. But that is individually, and on the literary scene. When you get to the international companies you find other things happening - although it's the same companies whose activities are rapidly reducing the United States itself to a second-rate power !

Gillian Ladousse : The other "cause" that you have been associated with in various ways is, of course, feminism. Do you identify with feminist writers in particular, or just with women writers generally ?

Margaret Atwood: Let me say that I have been writing since 1956. There was no feminist movement in Canada at all until about 1969. That's thirteen years of writing without a feminist movement. Now in order to do that, I would obviously have had to have taken some attitudes that were different from these of my generation. These attitudes were focussed on writing. I wanted to be a writer and that seemed to me to rule out certain other choices. When I went to High School, it was assumed that one got married and that one did nothing else. That was the assumption of that generation. So I suppose that I was a feminist despite myself, or a feminist unknown to myself simply because I chose to do something else. A lot of my work as it now stands was written before the feminists. Women writers of my generation, and earlier, often take the view that it is all very nice that this is happening, but why didn't it happen before, and "where were you when we needed you". It was all those people who said, "Why aren't you buying china and having babies" who became rabid feminists when they found out what a sell out that was (Laughter). Then they come saying that they've made this new discovery. What am I supposed to do ? I've been doing my own work for years. Obviously anything that I write is going to come out of the situation of what I am in this society, namely female.

Gillian Ladousse : That means you reflect their views without taking a militant stand ?

Margaret Atwood: I did not take an ideology and apply it to my writing. Other people have extracted an ideology from my writing or made comparisons with the feminist movement. It is perfectly valid to do this as long as one doesn't confuse cause and effect. The thing about parallel lines is that they never meet. I give support to feminist things, naturally, but I was not a founder of the movement. I was a kind of embryo of it, I suppose.

Gillian Ladousse : You often seem to be keeping a certain distance when questioned on your views about this issue . . .

Margaret Atwood: Well, I don't wish to be given credit for something I didn't do. If you're a writer, that is a full time occupation. Naturally your writing will reflect certain concerns but you don't really have too much time to throw yourself into organisational activities of one kind or another.

Gillian Ladousse : Your would say, then, your interest is sympathetic but not militant ?

Margaret Atwood: Sympathetic, yes, definitely sympathetic, but please don't ask me to give up any of my writing time. If their projects cannot survive without me, then they probably shouldn't survive. Surely the goal of the feminist movement is to make it possible for people like me to exist. So I exist.

Gillian Ladousse : You're proof that it can be done ?

Margaret Atwood : I'm proof that it can be done, though they did not produce me.

Gillian Ladousse : Do you think it's easier for the younger generation today ? I mean for young women writers beginning to write now ? Have they benefited from the feminist movement ?

Margaret Atwood: I think it's easier for female people. I'm not so sure that it's any easier for women writers. It wasn't specifically hard for a woman writer, in Canada you must understand. It wasn't any harder than it was for a male writer. Possibly it was easier, because Canada was a culture that regarded writing as sissy, so male writers were

put in a position of having to defend their genitalia, whereas women weren't. In fact writing was regarded as such a crazy and eccentric thing to be doing that it was somewhat easier for a woman to do it than for a man. Also, the Canadian literary tradition has a high proportion of female writers that cannot be overlooked, unlike the American tradition. You can write something on American literature up to 1900 and only mention Emily Dickinson and nobody is going to complain much. But you cannot neglect Canadian women writers because, for many years they were the only writers.

Gillian Ladousse : The men were out . . .

Margaret Atwood: The men were out chopping trees and passing laws and throwing themselves around. Early Canadian writing consists of journals and diaries and things like Susanna Moodie's books. The first novel written in Canada was written by a woman, so you can't neglect it. Therefore we get more support from our ancestors than the American women writers do.

Gillian Ladousse : The victims, the people who are dominated in your books are women, but do you yourself feel more oppressed from being Canadian than from being a woman ?

Margaret Atwood: No, all I said was that the position of the writer is not typical of anything. Writers are a very small percentage of the population. Let me answer the question another way : why did George Eliot never write a book in which a woman became a successful writer and led a happy life ? Why does Maggie drown ? Why does Dorothea fade away ? Well, the answer to that for me is that George Eliot was not writing about an a-typical situation. She was attempting to write about the situation of most women, and to that her books are faithful. If you think for an instant that most women have been liberated now from unequal pay, from discrimination, from all those things, you're quite wrong ! I would rather attempt to write about a situation that is more typical of the society. You'll notice that none of my heroines are successful writers of my type. I'm an exception, and anyone like me is an exception. We're privileged. We do not lead the kind of life that most people are forced to lead.

Gillian Ladousse : That leads us on to another problem that you seem to have had in Canada of keeping yourself out of your books.

Margaret Atwood: People are always putting me into them ?

Gillian Ladousse : Yes.

Margaret Atwood: Well, I solved that for myself by making brief cameo appearances in my books. I appear in *The Edible Woman* in the party scene as an undergraduate student in long black stockings. There are other things like that, but nobody knows about them and they are private jokes. I think in Canada, unlike in England, the phenomenon of writers who are publicly visible is very recent. You're so used to having writers in England - in fact almost everybody you meet is a writer - that it doesn't raise anybody's eyebrows. People don't particularly want or need literary stars they can identify with. In Canada in the last ten to fifteen years writers have suddenly become visible. People are very curious about them. It's a combination of pride and fear, and the desire to keep poking at the person to see if they are real, and cutting them down to size because they don't want them to get too big. It's a very odd sort of situation. People very much want to believe, if they've liked a book and identified with it, that it's true.

Gillian Ladousse : That it must be true about you ?

Margaret Atwood: Yes, I think it happens more to women writers again, because they are considered to be more subjective and less inventive. They think you're not capable of making things up, that all you can do is babble on about your private life . . . which is not my view of writing.

Gillian Ladousse : People do seem to have been expecting you to put your head in a gas-oven any minute, and you have also been labeled a "confessional" poet. I gather you reject this label ?

Margaret Atwood: Yes, I absolutely reject it. Of course, one uses things that one has encountered. Sometimes they are things that have happened to oneself and sometimes they aren't. Only I know the difference.

But it's a tribute in a way, because it means that people have taken the voice as authentic. But on the other hand it's not a tribute because they think you're so stupid and lacking in skill that you can't make anything. It's as if a potter could make nothing but messes, as it were.

Gillian Ladousse : What you have been saying about the way people consider women writers is interesting because it does seem to have influenced the way your writing has been considered by the critics.

Margaret Atwood: Not only mine - it's general !

Gillian Ladousse : What I was thinking of in particular is this theme of oppression we were talking about. There seem to be two different ways in which you react, one which loosely speaking one could call a poetic inspiration, a kind of refuge in the imagination, and the other way tends to be derisive and leads to the comic and satirical elements - the comic vision in your work seems to be tremendously important - and this whole self-debunking process seems to have been totally neglected . . .

Margaret Atwood: Not totally. People are beginning to realise, ever since I came out into the open as a cartoonist, that maybe some of the things in my book are funny. It was pretty hard not to see it in *Lady Oracle*. But then it turns round the other way and people think that everything you write has to be roaringly funny.

Gillian Ladousse : What about *Surfacing* - a book which has been treated very seriously - seriously in that sense, I mean.

Margaret Atwood: Let me ask you this : is *Gullivers Travels* comic or serious ? I don't think that comedy is necessarily non-serious.

Gillian Ladousse : Serious is perhaps the wrong word . . .

Margaret Atwood: You mean it has been treated with a great deal of gloom and a good deal of the worship of the kind that tends to overlook the parts that are satirical ?

Gillian Ladousse : Yes, I was thinking of the "mythopoeic" aspects. People seem to be ready to slip you into that slot.

Margaret Atwood: If I weren't Canadian, nobody would ever say "mythopoeic". American critics never say mythopoeic. It's only the Canadian ones who say : oh, she went to Victoria College and studied with Northrop Frye. Therefore it must be mythopoeic.

Gillian Ladousse : But it does seem to me that this satirical and derisive aspect is found fairly seldom in women writers . . .

Margaret Atwood: Jane Austen ? *Northanger Abbey ?*

Gillian Ladousse : Yes, of course, but I was thinking of more modern women writers.

Margaret Atwood: Virginia Woolf ? Gertrude Stein ? and what about Iris Murdoch? There has been some very pointed female writing, and a number of people who don't necessarily write novels, such as Nancy Mitford, are noted for this. And what about Mary McCarthy ?

Gillian Ladousse : Yes, Mary McCarthy was one of the poeple who had come to mind. But it does seem to me in many ways that your humour and satire has more in common with, say, Jewish American writing, Malamud and people like that.

Margaret Atwood: I'm not too sure exactly what to say about that, except that I don't think that it is particularly lacking in the female tradition. In fact, we've got some good examples, although they didn't write novels. Primarily, Nellie Maclung was notedfor her extremely caustic wit. I think that women do back away from it sometimes because they don't want to be identified as nasty or harsh or sarcastic or any of those adjectives that women shy away from.

Gillian Ladousse : Yes, I wondered if it was anything to do with societies' attitudes towards women, what they're supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave.

Margaret Atwood: Well, you're told to be nice -you know, this functions in my own life. I don't cause scenes.

Gillian Ladousse : To go back to your own work, you said the comic aspects had not been totally neglected . . .

Margaret Atwood: Yes, they've started writing about it in Canada now. When *Lady Oracle* came out there were a couple of pieces on comic this and comic that instead of water symbols (Laughter). But it's very interesting, you get the same book with these totally different readings of it. For instance, *Dancing Girls,* my book of short stories. Somebody treats it as a work of comedy throughout, and someone else says this book doesn't have a bit of humour in it and it's terribly gloomy and pessimistic. It seems to depend partly on what kind of sense of humour the reader has.

Gillian Ladousse : A lot of people have talked about the polarity in your work, and it seems to me that this might have some bearing here. The sense of alienation in your work seems to lead on one hand to negative, satirical writing and on the other to a sort of refuge in images of harmony.

Margaret Atwood: It seems to me that they go together. It doesn't seem to me that you can be a satirist without having a vision of how things ought to be. Surely Swift wasn't writing simply out of pessimistic gloom and bowel troubles or whatever it was he had. It seems to me that he had an ideal about human beings.

Gillian Ladousse : What about somebody like Thurber, though ?

Margaret Atwood: Well, Thurber to me is not a satirist, he is something else. I don't know too much about this. I find him charming but I don't find him particularly a satirist. But I would point to the story about the unicorn, where the man says there's a unicorn in the garden. The wife says : you're crazy and you're a booby, and I'm going to have you put in the booby hatch. And there is a unicorn in the garden and he can see it. When the people from the booby hatch arrive, she says : my husband thinks there's a

unicorn in the garden. And he denies that he said that. And they take her away and put her in the booby hatch, and he and the unicorn live happily ever after. He does have a vision of harmony though it does involve getting the wife put in the booby hatch, but there is the unicorn.

Gillian Ladousse : So what you're saying is that they do go together, your vision of how things are and how they should be ?

Margaret Atwood: Well, if you didn't have a vision of how things ought to be, it seems to me that you would be simply a pessimistic realist. But surely even Zola in something like *Germinal* does have a social vision. It doesn't seem to me that you can write about something that you see as a misery or an injustice with anything but fatalism unless you have an idea of something that could be otherwise. The literary model that is at the back of all our minds is, of course, the Bible. All utopianism goes back to that vision. If you switch to an Eastern view it doesn't involve transforming society it involves transforming yourself so that you are in harmony with what is. If you did that, you would presumably be able to see all kinds of people being slaughtered and dying as simply attributes of reality. You wouldn't think it should be changed. I don't know.

Gillian Ladousse : That's very interesting and leads me on to something I wanted to ask you about your imagery. One of the things that strikes one is the extreme violence. Is there any specific reason for this?

Margaret Atwood: Well, I see the writer or the novelist as a kind of lens or focus and if you ask whether there is any reason for this, I might point out to you that I'm a member of Amnesty International and what really goes on in the world is much worse than anything in my writing. I'm quite mild compared to the reality of the world. Don't ask me why my work is violent.

Gillian Ladousse : Yes, ask the world . . . but while we're talking about your imagery, the other imagery I wanted to ask you about, which may have something to do with your sense of detachment and is part of the comic vision is this imagery of dismemberment of the

body, of detachment, of doubling of the self, like the image in *Lady Oracle* of the fat lady she takes along with her or in much of your poetry where things are, as it were, out up, dismembered. I wonder if you can trace this to anything in particular, to any source . . .

Margaret Atwood: Well, I could say a couple of things about it. One is that our society is such in Canada that it necessarily involves a double vision if you want to understand it in any kind of wholistic way. In fact, my next book of poems is called *Two-headed Poems.*

Gillian Ladousse : Of which part has already been published . . .

Margaret Atwood: Yes, in *This Magazine*, and the book is named after the group.

Gillian Ladousse : Could you expand on that rapidly ?

Margaret Atwood: Well . . . a country with two languages and two cultures essentially. I do not mean just Quebec but Ontario too where there is a very large French population as well. That's the part of the country that I live in. I suppose if I lived in British Columbia I might not think that way.

Gillian Ladousse : So for you it's a real double culture problem in fact ?

Margaret Atwood: If you're attempting to understand it, and not just take one side or the other, then you have to see it as having a hydra-kind of existence, with many heads. It may simply fall apart into its components, as we all know, but that won't change the experience of people who have grown up in it so far. You have to be able to think in two different ways in order to "understand" what is going on. It's actually more difficult for people in Quebec to understand what's going on in Ontario than it is the other way round because they have less access to the information. As far as I am concerned, culturally I'm not even from Ontario ; my parents are from Nova Scotia, so I don't have what Alice Munro has, which is a very intimate sense of one small town. We moved around a lot and if you want to get psychological about it you might say that images of fragmentation come

from an early nomadic existence or something like that. I think it's a lot of poop myself. If I were going to rationalize about it, I would say that western industrial society is one that demands a kind of cut-off valve between your neck and the rest of your body so that your brain can function as a computer and your body can be neglected for long periods of time, and then when it comes to recreation time you're supposed to turn off your brain and be sybaritic with the rest of you. I have not invented this. You can see it every time you open a magazine, when you start comparing the ads with the contents of the magazine. Advertising promises pure pleasure devoid of any intellectual content. Then you turn to the financial page . . .

Gillian Ladousse : ... for intellectual activity without the pleasure !

Margaret Atwood: Without any emotional content.

Gillian Ladousse : One of your major themes is strangled articulateness and the non-communicative value of the word - we're back to language again. A very common theme in 20th century literature, but lots of writers are more interested, it seems to me, in language *per se* total fragmentation of language rather than image, if you like, and I was wondering . . .

Margaret Atwood: You mean concrete poetry ?

Gillian Ladousse : Yes.

Margaret Atwood: One can do cross-words and thereby show an interest in language. But I do not think language no longer has any impact or potential. I believe that language is constantly being bled. Little faucets are constantly being turned on and meaning is dribbling out of various words which means that you have to renew the language, and the only way you can do that is through poetry. To me taking language and dismembering it and dislocating it and playing games with it is part of the renewing process but not the only way to do it. If you did only that, you would end up with the reduction of language to a meaningless assemblage of sounds. When I said that language was being bled I meant that if

you listen to political speeches and government bulletins and so on and get "anti-personnel" when what they really mean is that it kills a lot of people, all the blood is being taken out of things to make them easier for people to deal with, less upsetting. Language ought to be upsetting if the things that it's talking about are intrinsically upsetting.

Paris, February 4th 1978.