

**Strange Births in the Canadian Wilderness:
Atwood's *Surfacing* and Cronenberg's *The Brood***
(カナダの原野での奇妙な誕生：アトウッドの
『浮かびあがる』とクローネンバーグの
『ザ・ブルード』)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: マーガレット・アトウッドの小説『浮かびあがる』(1972)とデビッド・クローネンバーグの映画『ザ・ブルード』(1979)は、どちらも森の中で突然変異の生き物を産む狂女を主要な登場人物として描いている。本論においては、共通したこの奇妙なイメージを考察するために、この小説と映画の比較を試みる。本論は、身体とジェンダーに焦点を合わせつつ、個人が犠牲となることと植民地的な経験の関係を探る。その際、(やはり1972年に出版された)『サバイバル』に収録されている、カナダ文学の特徴についてアトウッドが語っている、偏ってはいるが主要な論に言及する。アトウッドとクローネンバーグはどちらも、同時並行で描かれている国家的かつ個人的トラウマを甘受する新しい道を模索するために誕生のイメージを用い、変容させている。そのトラウマとは、植民地化による自国の環境からの疎外、悪化する家族関係、そして心身の分裂である。アトウッドは、はじめカナダ人の植民地的精神構造と父権社会における女性の犠牲を比較するものの、彼女とクローネンバーグのどちらも、ロバート・フォザギルが1970年代のカナダ映画において支配的である「弟コンプレックス」に照らして見ることができ去勢された男性登場人物を生み出してもいる。この「弟コンプレックス」とは、植民地的親に対するエディプスコンプレックス的戦いに勝利した「兄」であるアメリカ合衆国に対する劣等感のことをいう。アトウッドとクローネンバーグはどちらも革命的な断絶(身体的な用語で言えば切断)に代わるものとして、突然変異的な誕生を描いており、

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それは過去とのつながりを維持しながらも変化する可能性を提示している。しかし、二人とも狂気でありグロテスクな人物を描くことによって、ある種のリアリズムを主張しており、それは一見した印象ほど不条理なものではない。突然変異の生物の誕生は、人間の進化が同時に退化でもあるということを説明している。我々は「独立」を達成するよりも、むしろ常に傷物であり、不完全である。自然と自己からの疎外を克服することは、(アトウッドが描くヒロインが望んでいるように) 獣の姿をした神を生むことと同じくらい不可能である。あるいはそれは、(クローネンバーグの描くヒロインがしているように) ある人間の憤怒を具体化するのと同じくらい損害の大きいことである。最終的には適応し、奇形の生物を産む罪から解放されることが幻想的な願いなのである。

“At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head” (105). So says the nameless main character of Margaret Atwood’s 1972 novel, *Surfacing*. Earlier she had observed that frogs are better off: “I’m not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. . . . If the head extended directly into the shoulders” like a frog’s, there would no longer be “that constriction, that lie” that enables humans to “look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets” (76). As the novel progresses, the main character attempts to become amphibian: she dives down under the lake to find the native rock drawings her father left sketches of. Clearly, diving down into the lake means plunging into the collective unconscious of both family and nation. The pictures are submerged, not because the lake is naturally that deep, but because “the power company” (113) flooded it. She has come to the woods to find her lost father, but surfacing from underwater, she dredges up a repressed memory of her own, of an unwilling and regretted abortion. After this turning point, the character attempts to escape “the death machine” and get back to nature, to live as a wild woman. She uses her current lover to get pregnant again, and imagines giving birth to the baby all by herself in the woods, “squatting” on a heap of “dry leaves”; “the baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I’ll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs.” The child she imagines is a mutant, a new stage in human evolution: “its eyes and teeth phosphorescent . . .

it buds, it sends out fronds”; “it will be covered with shining fur, a god” (162).

In his 1979 film *The Brood*, David Cronenberg also has an insane woman give birth to mutant babies in a cabin in the woods. She had been going through therapy to deal with her own suffering, and infliction, of child abuse. Nola’s offspring are, like the baby in Atwood but more literally, embodiments of their mother’s psyche: they are children of her rage, produced by a new psychiatry technique called “psychoplasmics” which seeks to manifest emotion in flesh. Apparently without her knowledge, these children murder anyone who provokes her anger (such as her parents). Cronenberg’s story, then, is also concerned with mending the rift between the body and the mind, with bringing submerged memories to the surface, and with the role of a “power company,” whether that is the power relationships imposed by the interrelated forces of gender roles and family relationships, or an actual corporation: Cronenberg’s early movies without fail have a dubious scientific corporation at the origin of their horrors, in this case an innovative psychology clinic, the Somafree Institute.

In both *Surfacing* and *The Brood*, diving into the depths of the unconscious mind is associated with venturing out into the wilderness. Atwood’s main character, to find her father, returns to an isolated island in the northern Quebec bush. Cronenberg has his psychiatrist Dr. Raglan set up his Somafree Institute at enough distance from Toronto to be surrounded by trees. The cabin where Nola gives birth is even more removed: Cronenberg includes more than one scene of Raglan or the husband Frank approaching it through the trees via a long set of stairs built out of rough-hewn logs. In *Surfacing*, the heroine dives down into the lake to discover what was hidden in her psyche, but in *The Brood* the metaphor is architectural instead: the children of Nola’s rage live in the attic of the cabin, while she does not move from the lower level. The building is analogous to herself, the upper part being the furthest reaches of her mind, inaccessible to her. The main building of the clinic also shows that though these characters are apparently plunged into the wilderness of nature and of the mind, they are at the same time securely closed off from it.¹ Raglan’s office has a wall of windows looking out on the snowy trees, but is trimmed in warm-coloured though angular wood. He enters in a bathrobe, drying his hair: he’s wet and warm, protected from the environment. The womblike nature of the clinic becomes clear in comparison with a recurring image from *Surfacing*: “an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother’s stomach, like a frog in a jar” (32). The frog image here, which, as we have seen, Atwood also uses an example of a creature with no head/body

separation, figures this womb-enclosed baby as primarily psychosomatically unified. It is suitable that the Somafree Institute be like a womb, since it is a psychological birthing clinic. Raglan coaches his patients to “go all the way through, don’t stop in the middle, go right to the end” to make their neuroses visible, to embody them in the flesh, to push them out. But the difficulty with this approach is already suggested in the glassed-in safety of his office. When the children of Nola’s psyche are pushed out beyond the clinic into the world, they commit murder. Although Raglan’s principle is to go all the way through, he is horrified when Nola’s physicalized rage escapes the contained womb of the clinic. *Surfacing* also shows that isolation in the wilderness is untenable. First, the setting, though less insulated from nature than the Somafree Institute, is still only a “pseudo-wilderness” (Murray 75). It’s cottage country, a place to go fishing. She doesn’t go alone but with friends, disguising her search for her father as a holiday, and they meet up with other tourists. Not only is it not really wild or isolated; it is also very familiar to the narrator. The fact that the backwoods are her childhood home goes toward showing the narrator’s alienation and explaining her difficulty with emotions and human relationships. She says:

I could list every plant here that could be used or eaten. I memorized survival manuals, *How to Stay Alive in the Bush* . . . at the age when the ones in the city were reading True Romance magazines: it wasn’t till then I realized it was in fact possible to lose your way. . . . Worthless knowledge; the pulp magazines . . . would have been more practical. (48)

But when the narrator tries to throw herself completely into this environment she seems more suited for, she doesn’t succeed. When the others leave, she hides, and attempts to live alone, at one with nature. But, trying to live like an animal (and hearing voices which forbid her to eat food from tins or even enter the cottage), she suffers from hunger, she cuts her bare feet running through the woods, and she does not grow fur as she had hoped. She lives out that characteristically Canadian dilemma, the inescapable bind of those who are both colonizers and colonized in a harsh, cold country. It is painful to live in alienation from the land, where one is not indigenous. And it is also painful, if not impossible, to become one with the land. Cronenberg, for his part, insists that nature can represent alienation as much as the cold architecture he predominantly features: “I’m very ambivalent about the ecology movement. . . . It’s not at all clear to me that the natural environment

for man is the woods—for all we know, it could be downtown Chicago” (qtd. in Harkness 90-91). What Atwood and Cronenberg do is to take this “natural environment” paradox and map it not only on to Canada but also on to the human **psyche and its relationship to the body.**²

The coincidence between the body/mind and inhabitant/landscape dualities is typified in a malady arising from these paradoxes: the madness which comes from being isolated in the wilderness too long, a complex problem in that it stems at once from being penetrated by the wilderness, and trying too hard to block it out. Atwood, in *Strange Things*, represents this concept through the native Canadian figure of the Wendigo: “or is it a figure? Perhaps it is also a verb, a process . . . one can ‘go Wendigo’” (62), which is to lose humanity, lose the power of communication, turn to ice (the heart, or even the whole body), and hunger for human flesh, usually of one’s former family (66, 68). Atwood explains, “The Wendigo has been seen as the personification of winter, or hunger, or spiritual selfishness, and indeed the three are connected: winter is a time of scarcity, which gives rise to hunger, which gives rise to selfishness” (67). Defending against the dangers of winter too intently turns you into winter itself. Becoming one with nature, and being totally detached from it; being fully in touch with your feelings and being repressed: both are disastrous. And cutting yourself off from your family only results in being closer to them than you ever imagined: ingesting them. As well as its personification in the Wendigo, this wilderness-insanity has the particular name of bush madness. “Bushed, the trappers call it when you stay in the forest by yourself too long” (*Surfacing* 60); a person is bushed, or goes bush. One of the male characters in *Surfacing* gleefully points out that the Canadian national animal, the beaver, is actually a euphemism for the female genitals. (He suggests it should be on the flag) (118-19). The same is true, of course, for the bush. It could be, then, that by having their insane female characters give birth in the wilderness, both Atwood and Cronenberg are suggesting that there might be a particular kind of bush-madness, one that derives from diving down too deep into femininity, so that a woman becomes enwombed in the self and produces mutant psychological offspring with minimized male involvement.

In the same year that she published *Surfacing*, Atwood also published *Survival*, setting out to map Canadian literature in order to document and perhaps alleviate this very problem of alienation from the natural, mental and literary landscape. *Surfacing* can be considered as a performance of the principles set down in *Survival*. Key phrases transfer from one to the other, most notably

“home ground” being “foreign territory” (*Surfacing* 11, cf. *Survival* 26), and the resolution to “refuse to be a victim” (*Surfacing* 191, cf. *Survival* 48-49).³ Despite its confessed limitations as a work of thematic criticism attempting to pin, necessarily reductively, what definitively preoccupies Canadian literature (see 11-13), *Survival* was a seminal work produced at a time when efforts were being made to consciously construct a Canadian identity. Further, it can be seen as an early manifestation of postcolonial theory. Introducing one of the major frameworks she proposes for Canadian literature, a series of possible “victim positions,” she writes, “Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an ‘oppressed minority,’ or ‘exploited.’ Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony” (45). A more complex picture emerges when this is combined with an interview, with Graeme Gibson, in which Atwood discusses *Surfacing*:

If you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault—it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. . . . And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one. Look what a mess I am and it’s all their fault. And Canadians do that too. Look at poor innocent us, we are morally better than they. We do not burn people in Vietnam, and those bastards are coming in and taking away our country. Well the real truth of the matter is that Canadians are selling it. (22-23)

If to be Canadian is to be not American, Atwood complicates the picture with complicity. In *Surfacing*, Americans are apparently the villains; from the novel’s first page, a symbolic disease is spreading from the south. But the narrator who tells us this later mistakes Canadians for Americans, and also becomes increasingly insane as the novel unfolds: having suppressed the memories of an affair with a married man and an abortion, remembering them instead as a disastrous marriage and unwilling motherhood, she’s an example of the feminine victim position, “look at what a mess I am and it’s all their fault.” By the end of the novel, denying complicity with Americans and with men both turn out to be untenable positions.

Though it is not as explicit in his work as in Atwood’s, Cronenberg also creates allegories of colonization which question the victim stance. He extends such power relations to mind and body, and considers the flesh and its apparent ills to have been unduly denigrated. Famously, he strives to see “from the

disease's point of view": "most diseases would be very shocked to be considered diseases at all . . . for them, it's very positive when they take over your body" (qtd. in Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* 82, hereafter referred to as *CC*). He considers the flesh in his movies not to be "necessarily treacherous, evil, bad. It is cantankerous, and it is independent. . . . It really is like colonialism. The colonies suddenly decide that they can and should exist with their own personality and should detach from the control of the mother country. At first the colony is perceived as being treacherous. It's a betrayal. Ultimately, it can be seen as the separation of a partner that could be very valuable as an equal rather than as something you dominate." He refers to a line from *The Brood* about psychoplasms: a former patient, who has developed a lymphatic cancer, complains, "Raglan encouraged my body to revolt against me. And it did. I have a small revolution on my hands and I'm not putting it down very successfully." And Cronenberg reflects, "I think to myself: 'That's what it is: the independence of the body, relative to the mind, and the difficulty of the mind accepting what that revolution might entail'" (*CC* 80).

Cronenberg explores parallels between colonization and gender through his male characters, who have been remarked by several critics to embody the kind of masculinity stereotypically found in Canadian literature;⁴ William Beard particularly, in his book on Cronenberg, *The Artist as Monster*, stresses how ineffectual the men in *The Brood* are ("Male Failures" 78-81). Robert Fothergill's classic analysis of Canadian movie masculinity, in his essay "Coward, Bully or Clown: The Dream-Life of a Younger Brother" (from the decade in question here: published 1973, revised 1976) finds in film particularly "the radical inadequacy of the male protagonist—his moral failure, especially, and most visibly in his relationships with women" (235). He picks out "a capsule summary" which manages to "capture the essential theme of literally scores of movies made in English Canada": "it's about a guy who realizes he's pretty much of a schmuck, and that there really isn't anything he can do about it" (236). Fothergill blames this on a nation-wide little brother complex:

. . . the younger brother has grown up with a painfully confined sense of his own capacity for self-realization. An abiding sense of himself as inescapably diminished, secondary, immature, has become second nature, has indeed shaped his nature and bred into it a self-thwarting knowledge of personal inadequacy. Back in their family history, in 1776, while his brother

was successfully waging the Oedipal struggle with the father, and asserting his autonomy, he refused the combat and stayed dutifully at his father's side . . . he had declined the Oedipal battle and had forfeited its psychic spoils. (243-44)

Both *Surfacing* and *The Brood* include characters who fit this image of the emasculated Canadian male so well that they seem to parody it. In *Surfacing*, the main character's boyfriend, Joe, is at first compared to a buffalo, the buffalo on the U. S. nickel. Comparison to something American could be part of the heroine's paranoid habit of classifying anyone who annoys her as American, whether they are or not. But she describes Joe's buffalo-like appearance as "shaggy and blunt-snouted, with . . . the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened" (8). There are a few symbolic possibilities here. The narrator reverses the idea of the threatened species to apply to humans rather than animals: specifically, this could be Americans (decline of empire), or men (rise of feminism), but applied to Joe, it seems to pinpoint the Canadian male as defeated and defensive. In this sense the buffalo is not so much something American as something hunted to near extinction by Americans. Later, the narrator confides, "his back is hairier than most men's, a warm texture, it's like teddy-bear fur, though when I told him that he seemed to take it as an insult to his dignity" (41-42). Like the threatened buffalo, the teddy bear is a strong, hairy beast reduced to harmlessness. Joe is not successful; he works in ceramics and creates pots that "have a disagreeable mutant quality" (57). In *The Brood*, the therapy session which begins the film shows the character Mike being verbally abused by Dr. Raglan in the role of his father, accusing him of being weak, and telling him he should have been a girl. Later in the film when Raglan has closed down the clinic, ejecting all patients except Nola, Mike pathetically begs Frank, "Can you be my daddy? . . . My real daddy won't do it, and that bastard Dr. Raglan won't do it any more. My real daddy rejected me. And my surrogate daddy rejected me. That's just fucking wonderful, isn't it?"

Such male victimization can be partly understood through Atwood's victim theory in *Survival*. Taking an archetypal approach to roles-of-women criticism, Atwood notices that in Canadian literature, among the three mythological feminine possibilities of beautiful virgin, sexy fertility goddess and old witch, "Diana-Maidens often die young. There is a notable absence of Venuses. And there is a bumper crop of sinister Hecate-crones" (237). She blames this on the association

of the female with nature: if “Nature is a woman” in Canada she is a “cold, forbidding and possibly vicious one” (238).⁵ And she goes on to suggest that even those female characters in Canadian literature who wish to be Dianas or Venuses find themselves trapped inside the figure of Hecate (251). In both *Surfacing* and *The Brood*, the fertile women freeze out the men, figuratively and literally, in their particularly feminine form of bush madness. In *Surfacing*, the narrator and Joe have a predominantly physical relationship. When he asks her to marry him, she refuses. She considers that he asks her exactly because she wouldn’t want to; she thinks of it as a power game, and, in her condition of emotional anaesthesia, she does not love him. He responds by sulking angrily (86-87, 89). After this, camping in the woods, he has gone to bed in their tent, and she follows later: “I undressed by touch; he was obscure beside me, inert, comforting as a log. Perhaps that was the only time there could be anything like love, when he was asleep, demanding nothing. I passed my hand lightly over his shoulder as I would touch a tree or stone. But he wasn’t sleeping; he moved, reached over for me” and he says, “I give up, you win. We’ll forget everything I said” and go “back to the way it was before.” But she says “No.” “His hand tightened in anger on my arm; then he let go. . . . His outline lifted in the darkness, I crouched down, he was going to hit me; but he turned over away from me, muffling himself in the sleeping bag” (124). Joe takes her rejection without violent retaliation. As on the previous occasions of her refusal, he muffles himself physically and emotionally. When the narrator uses him to conceive a child, she begins caressing him in bed but insists he follow her outside. “He kneels, he is shivering, the leaves under and around us are damp from the dew” (161). Afterwards, “He rolls off me, lies beside me, nuzzling against my shoulder for warmth; he’s shivering again. ‘Shit,’ he says, ‘it’s bloody freezing.’ Then, cautiously, ‘Now do you?’ It’s love, the ritual word, he wants to know again; but I can’t give redemption, even as a lie. We both wait for my answer” (162). The climax of *The Brood* is comparable to these episodes. Frank and Raglan encounter each other outside the cabin. Raglan explains what the brood children are, and wants to cooperate with Frank to save his daughter Candy from her monstrous siblings. Raglan says to Frank, “I want you to go back into that hut, and persuade Nola that you want her back, that you want your family back. I want you to play the role of apologetic lover and husband.” Frank asks, angrily, “Why?” and Raglan insists that if Nola is “calm and happy” then the brood will not attack. Significantly, this scene is punctuated with reminders of the Canadian wilderness: the cry of an owl, and their visible

breath in the cold. Both men are forced into submissive roles, but unlike Joe, Frank does not suppress his violent response. He is disgusted by the sight of Nola giving birth to one of her brood babies, and his disgust awakens her anger. She suspects he has come to take their daughter away, and she threatens, "I'd kill Candice before I'd let you take her away from me." In cross-cut scenes we can see the brood children trying to act out this desire of hers, and because Nola either can't or won't make them stop, Frank threatens to kill her. He chokes her to death.

Now, this could be considered from a different perspective as a male response to the threat, not of a cold and vicious female nature, but a powerful and fertile femininity—a point of view articulated fully by Barbara Creed. The turning point in *The Brood* scene is Nola giving birth to a child—not in any ordinary manner, but from an external womb that rests in her lap. In an extreme of abjection, what should be interior is externalized; hidden female reproductive power exposed is the height of horror in this gross-out movie. She produces these children with a minimum of male participation, which would seem to express male anxiety about lack of control over fertility. And in *Surfacing*, on one occasion when Joe in his frustration attempts to force himself on the narrator, she recounts, "'I'll get pregnant,' I said, 'it's the right time.' It was the truth, it stopped him: flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them" (147). *The Brood* dramatizes this kind of paternal fear. Raglan dies by being swarmed by brood children. As the psychiatrist who coached Nola to produce these babies, he is at least the delivering doctor, and at most a father. Indeed, Raglan's other patients drop innuendoes to Frank that the doctor is sexually involved with Nola. As a sort of psychological obstetrician, he is in a suspect position, an idea Cronenberg would later play on in *Dead Ringers* where the twin gynecologists find, and share, sexual conquests from among their patients. (They try to fend off the threat of female fertility through the limits of their practice: they say, "we don't do babies").⁶ Raglan ends as a picture of a hapless father overwhelmed by his offspring: they crawl all over him, wearing matching hooded sleepers, an undifferentiated mob. And although *The Brood* is unusual among Cronenberg's films for its lack of sick sex scenes, Nola's murder is filmed like one (Beard, *Artist as Monster* 72-73, 85). Frank climbs on top of her on a mattress; his reddening, furious face hangs over her, and over the audience. His frustration in trying to "be nice to her," as Raglan had warned him, bursts out in fury against the woman he can't control, and her reproductive powers he can't control, which cause his

desire as well as hers to spawn unstoppable horrors. It is as though he is demonstrating that sex equals death; that by impregnating her he kills her; that he might be as guilty and insane as she is. It recalls another horror story about birth, *Frankenstein*, or at least its author. Mary Shelley, in the letter to her close friend Maria Gisbourne which tells the long sad tale of Percy Shelley's death, narrates that as a premonition of his own demise—and not long after Mary Shelley had nearly died of a miscarriage—he had a nightmare in which he was strangling her (244-45).

The autobiographical element of *The Brood* would seem to confirm that the film gives vicarious outlet to violent impulses in response both to lack of paternal control, and female demands considered beyond the bounds of the reasonable. Cronenberg had gone through a divorce and was embroiled in a custody battle which informed the writing of *The Brood*. "I got a call from my ex-wife saying she had decided for religious reasons to go and live with these nice people in California and was going to take Cass [their daughter] with her. . . . I said, 'OK, that's nice, great, good luck.' I put the phone down . . . and went to the school and kidnapped my daughter" (CC 76). And he confesses about *The Brood*, "I can't tell you how satisfying the climax is. I wanted to strangle my ex-wife" (CC 84). Such a stark statement would seem to flatly contradict Cronenberg's professed sympathy with parts of a united body which decide to split off: he does see this separation as a betrayal and a threat. And yet, he argues that "the kind of rage Nola had was an all-purpose one—genderless . . . just pure anger," and furthermore, "The creatures are, in fact, embodiments of my own rage, my anger, guilt and disappointment" (CC 84). There is more to it than paternal anxiety and fear of feminine power if Cronenberg identifies with the female character (as well as wanting to strangle her!). There are further parallels. He recalls, "I had bought a house. . . . I remember writing *The Brood* with gloves on, because it was unheated upstairs. It was winter, and freezing. I cut the fingers off the gloves so I could type. I couldn't write the script I was supposed to [he had promised his producers a movie about telepaths] because *The Brood* kept coming . . . it insisted on getting written. It pushed its way right up through the typewriter" (CC 75). That is quite a birth image. In more recent interviews, Cronenberg consistently reiterates the same kind of evocative description: "I had told them I was going to write something else . . . but this idea just pushed that right out of the way"; "I was writing in a room where . . . the lath and plaster was there like a skeleton. Freezing! I was actually writing in sheepskin gloves that I had cut the fingers off.

I was so cold writing it, and was very driven to go up to that room and write every day; write that script that was just forcing its way to be written. So even physically, the writing was a kind of unique experience” (qtd. in Grünberg 52, 58). *The Brood* itself is a frigid birth in the harsh Canadian winter, which I suppose makes Cronenberg a crone!

As unexplained as they remain, the workings of psychoplasms also suggest that the film is not simply a projection of body horror on to the female and the female reproductive system, as Barbara Creed argues. These monstrous births are not necessarily exclusively feminine. When Raglan dismisses everyone but Nola from the clinic, Mike complains, “She’s the star. She’s the one he’s interested in and the rest of us don’t count anymore. She doesn’t even have to pay for it. That’s because she’s the one who was born to prove that ‘psychoplasms is the ultimate therapeutic device.’” He calls her the “queen bee.” But why is Nola so receptive to psychoplasms? It could be because Mike’s comparison to insect reproduction is perceptive here and Nola is very much like a queen bee. Queen bees are cared for and fed and all they have to do is produce numerous offspring; they never leave the hive except to mate. They tend to kill their rivals. And the male bees, drones, are like Mike, the emasculated Canadian male: they have no stingers, and if they don’t mate and reproduce, they are kicked out of the colony. Or it could be merely because Nola is a woman that she can actually give birth to brood children. But she does not give birth to them in any ordinary way. Robin Wood in “Cronenberg: A Dissenting View,” which sees *The Brood* as demonizing feminine power, considers that the external womb, the “huge excrescence on Nola’s body, has the appearance of an enormous penis, a vivid literal enactment of Freud’s perception that, under patriarchy, the child is the woman’s substitute phallus” (131). I’m not convinced by this: it is the wrong shape to be phallic, and as the brood children are sexless they can’t qualify as the son who would satisfy a woman’s penis envy. But Wood has a point in that gender divisions are definitely broken down here. Nola’s reproductive organs are at least masculinized insofar as they are made external. And although we only see the process of brood-birthing at its culmination, the film suggests that the “excrescence” grows from other pustules on her skin, which can be seen around it. Apparently this is the ultimate stage of the skin rashes which are revealed at the beginning and the end of the movie, as a visual sign of the uncontrollable horrors of psychoplasms.

At the end of the film it is Candy who has the rash, suggesting that, as Creed

puts it, “The disease which is passed from mother to daughter is the disease of being female” (47). In an earlier scene, Candy and her grandmother look at family pictures; Candy says her favourite is one of her mother in the hospital—the picture is shown, and it looks just like Candy. The grandmother explains that Nola as a child was often in the hospital for the “big ugly bumps” which would appear on her skin. The suspicion is that the mother abused Nola, which underscores the suggestion that Nola (or the brood under her influence) abused Candy on her visit to the clinic. However, it is not clear whether what the grandmother says is merely a cover-up for physical abuse; whether the rash was a psychosomatic response to that abuse, or merely a psychosomatic condition. When we see Candy’s rash at the end of the film, Nola’s abuse of her is called into question: was it only the hereditary rash? Instead of Nola’s femininity, it could be her propensity to physical manifestations of her mental state that make her the “queen bee” of psychoplasmics. As Cronenberg says, “The basic idea for Psychoplasmics was that people do get rashes when they’re stressed out; muscles do tighten up” (CC 80). When the rash is introduced at the start of the film, it is through Mike, but notably in a situation where his gender identity is being called into question. At Raglan’s goading, he tears off his shirt to show “Daddy . . . this is how you make me feel inside.” The outbreak fits the later description of “big ugly bumps”—the marks are like hives or insect bites and turn into sores as the scene goes on—but initially, they look remarkably like nipples. In the final scene with Candy they even exude liquid (although it is not milky but clear). Again, this would seem to connect psychoplasmics with femininity: Mike is feminized in the role play, and feminized physically by growing these nipples.⁷ But, for one thing, they are only *like* nipples, similar but not the same. The fact that they turn into sores suggests hurt arising from parent-child connection: nipples turning to sores symbolizing nurturing gone wrong.⁸ This does seem to be the root of the psychological disturbances that psychoplasmics brings to the bodily surface—Mike and Nola both struggle with the hate and love they feel simultaneously for their parents. For another thing, nipples need not be considered feminine; men, of course, have them too, but they can’t be used for lactation, they are vestigial.

The idea of body parts which once had a function but remain after that function has been lost ties back to the ideas of evolution and mutation which are so predominant in both *Surfacing* and *The Brood*. At one point, Atwood’s narrator compares herself to Joe and the other couple accompanying them, David and Anna (David has just humiliated Anna by making her pose nude against her

will). “David is like me, I thought, we are the ones that don’t know how to love, there is something essential missing in us, we were born that way. . . . Or perhaps we are normal and the ones who can love are freaks, they have an extra organ, like the vestigial eye in the foreheads of amphibians they’ve never found the use for” (137). She thinks Joe must have such a vestigial organ which allows him to feel—comparable to Mike’s ability to bring his feelings out on his skin in extra nipples. It seems that the qualities which make these two men so pathetic are the very qualities which make them the best suited to the physical mutations which both the novel and the film propose as a way to overcome the separation between mind and body. The narrator in *Surfacing* had chosen frogs as the neckless beings whose heads and bodies are completely connected. A devolution to amphibian being is necessary to mend the mind-body split. With his nipples that could grow into exterior wombs like Nola’s, Mike is also a potential parent to children embodying his emotions. And as the heroine in *Surfacing* wants to give birth to a mutant baby, who she describes as sending out fronds and imagines will be a fur-god, uniting human to animal and vegetable, Joe is also a mother of mutant creation: the “monstrous humanoid pots,” as the narrator calls them, which he throws so skilfully then deforms. At the close of the novel the narrator considers whether she should return to the human world after her attempt to live in the woods as an animal. Joe has come to look for her: “I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility . . . he isn’t anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him” (192). The half-formed Joe is open to process, rather than clear-cut definition of identity. If the emasculated Canadian male results from loyalist history as against the revolutionary big brother the United States, perhaps the point here is that rather than cutting oneself off from one’s past, evolving (or devolving as the case may be) might be a preferable solution, as it allows preservation of the past as part of the new being. If physical devolution, the actual birth of a fur-god, seems unlikely if not undesirable, at the end of the novel the heroine’s madness has abated at least enough for the mutation to become figurative: a third eye or a possibility.

Surfacing also examines the significance of cutting off in literal, bodily terms. When she was considering herself as someone born lacking the organ which enables love, she recalled a childhood memory of a local shopkeeper who had an amputated arm: “Madame at the store with one hand, atrophy of the heart” (137). In her previous description of this character, the narrator associates amputation with a sense of mystical power: “This arm devoid of a hand was for me a great

mystery, almost as puzzling as Jesus. I wanted to know how the hand had come off (perhaps she had taken it off herself) and where it was now, and especially whether my own hand could ever come off like that . . . the arm, miraculous in an unspecified way like the toes of saints or the cut-off pieces of early martyrs” (27). Cutting off a part of herself in order to achieve holiness is exactly what the narrator has done, and tries to do, in *Surfacing*. She had tried to cut off the memory of her abortion—that is, sever the memory of something being severed from her body. It had seemed she was able to excise it and replace it with other memories, prosthetic memories, so to speak, to substitute for the ones that were diseased and had to be amputated: a living child left with her ex-husband replaces an aborted child; a failed marriage replaces an affair with a married man; an imagined wedding replaces the occasion of the disavowed abortion. She dives into the lake and retrieves the original memories—but up until this point the reader has had the other story, and is still relying on the point of view of a madwoman, so how certain is it that the new memory is the true one? The effect is that what was amputated does not stay severed: the abortion is still a wedding, like a ghost limb and a prosthetic limb in the same space. When the narrator attempts to cut herself off from human civilization and become an animal, it is a similar process. She considers human beings to be murderers, and so as not to be complicitous, she takes the side of the ones she perceives to be the victims, the animals. This applies directly to her abortion: “He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal . . . it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it . . . that made me one of them too, a killer” (145). She tries to avail herself of saintly powers—Sue Thomas points out that the narrator has legendary predecessors in Mary Magdalen and Mary of Egypt, two saints credited with expiating their sexual sins by living as solitary hermits in the wilderness on very little food, and growing their hair to cover their nakedness (85). The saintly desire to achieve holiness by cutting off a part of oneself, or cutting oneself off from society, maps well on to Atwood’s victim theory as she applies it to the main character in *Surfacing*: the desire to be “intrinsically innocent,” she says, causes “a lot of problems . . . the thing with her is she wishes not to be human . . . because being human inevitably involves being guilty” (qtd. in Gibson 22).

Nola’s insanity produces a similar delusion of pristine isolation. Her brood children separate from her and, without her conscious knowledge, murder anyone who angers or threatens her. It’s a very effective cure for her psychic difficulties: when the schoolteacher, whom she thought was a rival for Frank’s affection, is

murdered, Nola wakes up the next day feeling much better, but not sure why! Clearly, her saintliness, and her healthiness, are only sustained by disavowal of her guilt. When Frank appears, she says to him, “Isolation is part of my therapy . . . what’s been happening to me has been just too strange, too strange for me to share with anyone from my old life.” Cutting herself off and feeling morally superior as a result, she insists, “I seem to be a very special person, I’m in the middle of a strange adventure.” Cronenberg translates the exceptionality of saints into an infuriating self-absorption encouraged by new-age self-help. Kauffman specifically identifies *The Brood* as satirizing “the human potential movement, one of the most popular of pop-psychology movements in the 1970s,”⁹ and similarly, Robert Lecker in “Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood’s First Three Novels” argues that in *Surfacing*’s spiritual journey “there is a parody of all of the conventions associated with ‘search for identity’ literature” (192). Cronenberg also creates an interesting visual commentary through costume: the white fabric which drapes Nola in such a way that she can part it to reveal her externalized womb is something of a cross between a hospital gown and church vestments, and when spread open gives the effect of angel’s wings. Being a saint, being angelically pure, is like being an invalid. As with the narrator in *Surfacing*, the result is not beatification above ordinary human existence, but a descent into the animalistic. Cronenberg discusses the importance of “a long and loving close-up of [Nola] licking the foetus” that was meant to heighten the effect of the climactic birth scene, but was cut by the censors. It was not for gross-out value that Cronenberg wanted the close up (though it certainly had that)—he says the image is “not sexual, not violent, just gooey—gooey and disturbing. It’s a bitch licking her pups. Why cut it out? Here’s a woman who’s nurturing her rage as personified by these creatures, and the fact that they should be grotesque children is even better” (CC 85). Instead of a desirable mutation which brings human beings closer to their emotions and closer to nature, Cronenberg presents a deforming failure to be human, a propagation and nursing of pain and victimization. When, earlier in the film, one of the brood children is caught and given an autopsy, the animalistic devolution is confirmed: they are equipped with a kind of yolk-sac for nourishment and die when it is depleted, and they have no genital organs, and no navel. They are not born and fed like humans, then; like rage, they live a short, violent while then die out. Most importantly, they have no physical signs of connection. The quasi-nipples produced by psychoplasms indicate that Nola and Mike embody their problems with parental connection and nurturing; the

children born out of these “ugly bumps” apparently solve the problem by being children entirely disconnected from their parents (and also angry murderers of parents). Cutting yourself off from those who have hurt or oppressed you would seem to be a way out of the victim cycle, but both Atwood and Cronenberg demonstrate that, instead, it is a perverse isolation, a circular embrace of victimization. There is no way to cut oneself off, because the amputations always come back.

On escaping this double bind of reproduction of victimization, the endings of both *Surfacing* and *The Brood* are inconclusive. In *Surfacing*, there is a note of hope in that the expected child, meant to replace and redeem the aborted child, “might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed.” But this is a tenuous hope; the baby is “perhaps not real, even that is uncertain; I can’t know yet, it’s too early” (191). The narrator had previously blamed language for causing the fragmentation, the amputation which alienates humans from their environment and cuts off their bodies from their minds (as she says in her time as a wild woman, “The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word” [181]). She imagines her possible child has “word furrows potential already in its proto-brain” (191). That is, it is already marked physically with a hereditary, inescapable human debility—parallel to the “ugly bumps” revealed on Candy’s skin at the end of *The Brood*. There is hardly a glimmer of hope at the end of the Cronenberg film. Frank has been apparently the most sane character throughout. As Raglan says to Nola in a roleplay session, Frank has been “trying to be a protective father, doing what a good father should do, [he] doesn’t want to see his daughter hurt.” But he fails horribly. He has murdered the mother of his child, which is in itself a fairly desperate way to solve family problems, but worse, the problem hasn’t gone away. As Cronenberg puts it, “*The Brood* is the most classic horror film I’ve done: the circular structure, generation unto generation; the idea that you think it’s over and then suddenly you realize that it’s just starting again” (CC 78). Furthermore, if Frank’s calm sanity is called into question by his final violent outburst, then many previous assumptions are undermined. Not only is Frank’s righteousness now questionable—a good father? and is it even possible to be a good father?—but also his point of view: how do we know that his opinion of Nola as an insane abusive mother is correct, and not an overreaction coloured by *his* rage, or even a projection of his own paternal anxieties or his suppressed violence? Cronenberg ends the film with Frank and Candy in the car, driving away from the Somafree Institute, in the darkness. As Cronenberg

points out, Frank is saying that everything will be all right, “but he does not believe it, and it’s not true, as well. He’s staggering and, of course, he’s a murderer. Given what a bland and straight guy he is, there is no way a person like that is going to suddenly be able to come to terms with himself as the murderer of the mother of his child, no matter how grotesque she might have been” (qtd. in Beard and Handling 183). *Surfacing* ends with the expectation, “we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That’s normal . . .” (192).

Cronenberg insists on the realism of *The Brood*, comparing it to Hollywood treatment of divorce and custody battles. “*The Brood* was my version of *Kramer vs. Kramer*. I was really trying to get to the reality, with a capital R, which is why I have disdain for *Kramer*. I think it’s false, fake, candy. There are unbelievable, ridiculous moments in it that to me are emotionally completely false, if you’ve ever gone through anything like that . . . I’m not being facetious when I say I think it’s more realistic, even more naturalistic, than *Kramer*. I felt that bad. It was that horrible, that damaging” (CC 76). Atwood’s *Surfacing* has, to a lesser extent, autobiographical elements as well: like the narrator, she spent much of her childhood in the bush of northern Ontario and Quebec. And Atwood has also expressed a struggle to portray her experience authentically, without the interference of sugared conceptions of family, childhood or the wilderness: “How to write about this childhood devoid of electricity, running water, movies, telephones and most other people—without making it sound like a verbal Christmas card?” (qtd. in Hammill). The way I’d argue they achieve such authenticity is by demonstrating that there is no authenticity. On the personal and on the colonial level, these stories suggest that overcoming alienation is not possible. Revolution doesn’t work because the past cannot be amputated; evolution is more like devolution; it may be a hope but to expect it to happen quickly or to literally transform the physical body is madness; becoming one with the land doesn’t work because there is no real wilderness, no escape from civilization, no way to stop being a human; and uniting the mind and body doesn’t work because the consequences of dismantling those borders are horrific. In the Canadian psychological landscape, at least, a certain degree of bush madness is an inevitable state of being.

Notes

- 1 Testa considers Cronenberg's settings in terms of Northrop Frye's concept of the "garrison mentality" (Testa 49), a crucial precursor to Atwood's concept of "survival" as definitive of Canadian literature and culture. Testa's take on Cronenberg's Canadianness is that he exemplifies the Canadian attempt to master the threatening environment (and the body itself) via technology.
- 2 McGregor makes a brief connection between Cronenberg and Atwood, appealing to patterns in Canadian literature. "The only difference between Cronenberg and a mainstream artist like, say, Margaret Atwood, is that where the latter devises aesthetic means for containing or controlling or transforming the threat [of 'breaking down . . . normal category boundaries'] . . . the former demonstrates what would happen if this greatest of all fears were to come true" (54-55). I would argue that this difference does not hold. Atwood's heroine in *Surfacing* demonstrates the unsettling effects of breaking borders between mental and physical conception, between human and animal, and between safe cabin and threatening wilderness; conversely, Cronenberg's mad mother in *The Brood* "hug[s] boundaries" (55) in that she does not move throughout the whole film, but remains still in her insulating cabin. McGregor likens "the ubiquitous house symbol" of "isolation and confinement" in Canadian literature to Cronenberg's "images of bodies turned literally deadly [which] only makes more explicit what it is that *always* subtends the ritual reiteration of enclosure" (54).
- 3 Handling observes, "everyone is a victim of one sort or another in the Cronenberg world. Vicious circles of victimization occur." And quoting from *Survival* on obstacles to survival initially being external, then becoming internal, he considers "Atwood's thinking . . . particularly applicable, for the external fear of the first films has been replaced by an internal fear in all the films subsequent to *The Brood*" (110). I would contest the separation of internal versus external fear in *The Brood*, and in all the early Cronenberg films for that matter: the emphasis on sexuality, violence and contagion in all of them prevents external threats from remaining external, and emphasizes their arousal of internal dangers.
- 4 For instance, Handling: "Cronenberg's male protagonists fall into a time-honoured tradition of Canadian men. Most are uninteresting, particularly when contrasted with the scientists, have a certain flatness as characters and find themselves consigned to the periphery of much of the action" ("Canadian Cronenberg" 106).
- 5 Beard's examination of "The Canadianness of David Cronenberg" picks up on Atwood's observation in *Survival* that "It doesn't take much thought to deduce what 'Nature is dead' and 'Nature is hostile' are going to do to a man's attitude towards his own body and towards women," but he concludes that "In this respect, Cronenberg is true to the Canadian model: nature is the enemy of consciousness; it is unknowable, unconquerable. Nature is death" (124, 127).
- 6 On this uneasy containment of the fertile female body, and for a different view of pregnancy in Cronenberg focused on *Dead Ringers*, see Maher, who takes this pithy quote as her point of departure.
- 7 Beard in *The Artist as Monster* uses Mike to separate the movie's horror from gender: "it must be emphasized how careful the film is to anchor the monstrous bodily powers of Psychoplasmic subjects in suffering. . . . Females may be the principal ground for this destructive bodily mutation, but

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they are so by virtue of their oppression. . . . Mike's open wounds render him 'female,' as does his father's castrating attack: suffering genders the subject 'female,' no matter what sex he is" (83). He footnotes Creed on the sores as Kristevan "disruptions of the 'clean and proper body' that recall the maternal 'wound'" (*The Monstrous Feminine* 47-48) (Beard 428). Both read the sores as vaginal rather than mammary.

- 8 Kauffman sees the parent-child relationship in *The Brood* in terms of a different sucking of life-giving bodily fluids: "Emotional vampirism is a sentient force in Cronenberg's universe; transformed into physical vampirism, it preys on parents and children alike" (125).
- 9 Particularly "one of its most successful leaders . . . Werner Erhard . . . who repudiated his own history as a Jew, abandoned his family, and trained legions of followers to get in touch not with the animal within, but with the 'inner child'" (124).

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