Questions of Survival in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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I'd like to begin with a sweeping generalization and argue that every country or culture has a unifying or informing symbol at its core... Possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier...it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society...The central symbol for Canada...is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance. (Survival: 31-2)

It may seem odd to begin this discussion of Atwood’s futuristic novel set in the United States with a reference back to her early thematic guide to Canadian literature, but my argument is that the topic of Survival engages with The Handmaid’s Tale at every level. Survival, like wildemess, is one of the distinctive marks of Atwood’s Canadian signature and it provides a major due to the continuities within Atwood’s writing over the past thirty years as well as a means of contextualising The Handmaid’s Tale within that web of interrelationships. Questions of individual and collective survival condition not only the thematics and plot structure of The Handmaid’s Tale but also provide a rationale for the choice of genre, an interesting hybridised version of dystopia inflected by gender, for this is a woman’s tale of resistance which manages to combine oral narrative with the written epistolary form (‘A story is like a letter. Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name’, THT: 50). Atwood’s contemporary fable of prophecy and warning to her late twentieth century readers stages a scenario of catastrophe in the near future, from which the human race is shown to be saved in a second futuristic scenario several hundred years later in the Historical Notes. Of course the Handmaid herself has not survived, and indeed we never know the length of her life span because her tale is left incomplete. However, her voice and her story relayed through the edited transcript of her cassette tapes remain as testimony to the survival of the human spirit, and although under threat from the voice of the male Cambridge historian, Offred’s message manages to reach us from another time which looks very like our own. History and futures are tangled together with the present time as readers are invited to join in the conference debate by the final words of the text: ‘Are there any questions?’ (THT: 324)
Bearing in mind Offred's comment that 'Context is all; or is it ripeness'? (THT: 202), our first question might be, how much of The Handmaid's Tale is already written, or at least prefigured in Atwood's earlier texts? To go back to Survival published thirteen years earlier, what connections might there be between that literary history (as product of Canadian cultural nationalism in the early 1970s) and her American dystopia addressed to an international readership? In Survival Atwood's emphasis was on the identity of Canada as separate from America, Britain and France, focussed through Canada's favourite cultural myth of wilderness. Within that scenario she defined Survival through a cluster of meanings related to 'bare' survival in a hostile environment, or 'grim' survival of a crisis or disaster, or 'cultural' survival (like Quebec 'retaining a religion and a language under an alien government'), or fourthly 'a' survival as the vestige of a vanished order that has managed to persist after its time is past. However, the primary meaning of Survival is 'staying alive', where 'the survivor has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life' (S:33). How to survive and not become a victim is the main thrust of Atwood's cultural nationalism as she urges her fellow Canadians to take control of their own space 'physical as well as cultural' and to avoid making choices which would be 'destructive towards the land' (S:244), an early warning against ecological disaster. Survival makes a strong plea for a rehabilitated sense of Canadian nationhood, ending with an optimistic vision of 'jail-break' and 're-creation', though the final questions signal radical insecurities about the future:

Have we survived?
What happens after Survival? (S:246)

With The Handmaid's Tale Atwood has written another survival manual, though this is no tale about a nineteenth century Canadian wilderness but instead a tale of individual and collective survival under threat in a late twentieth century technological wilderness. That American wilderness is similarly full of 'pitfalls', traps, disasters and 'an ever-present feeling of menace' (S:30). Atwood has transposed the Canadian struggle for cultural and economic survival within the North American power dynamic where the United States is Canada's 'globally determining neighbour' (Nicholson 1994: 33) into a futuristic North American nightmare set south of the border. Why America and not Canada? Atwood's reply ironically hints at the continuing dominance of the United States over the Canadian imagination: 'Everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now' (Conversations: 223). Canadian-American relations are still high on Atwood's agenda in the mid 1980s, as they have continued to be in her novels of the 1990s. Nor should we forget that comment in Survival on America's failed utopian aspirations; indeed there she discerns a discursive space for dystopia already laid out: 'Most twentieth century American literature is about the gap between the promise and the actuality, between the imagined ideal Golden West or City Upon a Hill, the model for all the world postulated by the Puritans, and the actual squalid materialism', p. 32).

However, such binary divisions between the two nations are simplistic, as The Handmaid's Tale shows with its multiple ironies which blur the borderline of the 49th parallel. The very costumes of the Handmaids and Gilead's traditional 'family values' programme represent a bizarre revival of seventeenth century New England Puritan history, which is also a history that many Canadians share: 'Those nagging Puritans really are my ancestors' (Conversations: 223), and her dedication to Mary Webster and Perry Miller underlines the significance of common heritage here (Howells 1996: 130-31 and Evans 1994: 177-88). Moreover, Atwood's warnings about pollution and its threat to human
survival, though staged in this specifically American dystopia, are not confined to the United States but may be taken to comprehend a globalised warning of ecological risk at the end of the twentieth century. It may be noted that Atwood’s ecological warnings have become increasingly urgent since the 1970s, and that after *The Handmaid’s Tale* both *Wilderness Tips* (1991) and *Good Bones* (1992) include diagnoses of human society at high risk of collapse and extinction. We might take heart from the second futuristic scenario at the end of the novel (set in Denay, Nunavut) that the human race has managed to survive (‘Gilead society was under a good deal of pressure...from which we are happily more free’, p. 314-5) and that Arctic Canada has remained unpolluted. However, even that glimpse of an uncontaminated northern wilderness is shadowed by early warnings of threat to the delicate ecological balance of the Arctic in *Survival* (p. 76), and since then Atwood has directly addressed Canadians themselves in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995): ‘The North is not endless...it is not vast and strong and capable of devouring and digesting all the human dirt thrown its way...erosion, pollution and ruthless exploitation are taking their toll’, (p. 115-6). So, Canadian and American distinctions begin to blur in the present and future as in the past, for as the narrator of *Surfacing* (1972) comments: ‘If you look like them [Americans] and talk like them and think like them then you are them’ (p. 28)².

That reference to *Surfacing*, Atwood’s novel published the same year as *Survival*, raises two significant factors for consideration: genre and gender. Like *Survival*, *Surfacing* is set in the Canadian wilderness, but like *The Handmaid’s Tale* it is a woman’s survival fiction whereas *Survival* as a literary and cultural history is told from a curiously neuter gendered perspective. I find this absence of a feminist critical perspective particularly odd, given Atwood’s previously published novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) and her poems in *Power Politics* (1971). Though later I shall discuss Offred’s survival tactics in her narrative, my priority question here is, what difference does gender make to the telling of a dystopian fiction that warns against ‘the rise of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth-rate in North America and northern Europe, the rise in infertility and birth-defect rates, due, some say, to increased chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually-transmitted diseases’ (Atwood, ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale* - Before and After’, quoted in Howells 1996: 128-9). Atwood challenges the masculinist discourse of the dystopia (or for that matter the utopia too) by focussing on what has traditionally been left out, which is a feminine perspective on events: ‘It’s the story of one woman under this regime, told in a very Personal way, and part of the challenge for me was the creation of her voice and viewpoint’ (Howells 1996: 127). Marginalised and disempowered by Gilead’s repressive social policies and its fundamentalist patriarchal representations of womanhood, Offred tells her tale of gendered struggle for survival as a speaking subject. She vigorously resists the state’s view of women as commodities where the Handmaids are sexual slaves, ‘possessed’ by their temporary Commanders as their renaming signifies: ‘Of-fred’ or ‘Of-warren’. It is no wonder that Offred ironically likens the sitting room in her new Commander’s house to a slave ship:

To have and to hold, till death do us part.
The hold of a ship. Hollow. (THT: 91)

In what might be seen as an answer to Julia Kristeva’s challenging questions about the relation between feminism and the symbolic, ‘What can be our place in the symbolic contract?... How can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?’ (Kristeva 1971: 199), Offred silently adapts Gilead’s
patriarchal script as she tells a revisionary narrative of her own which is by turns sceptical, defiant, and determinedly hopeful. Like the flowers in the Commander's Wife's garden, Offred's discourse of freedom is dynamic, lyrical and as difficult to stop as a natural process:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say, ‘Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently’. (THT: 161-2)

Such lyricism both critiques and eludes Gilead's master narrative of phallic power underpinned by the Old Testament and the ‘deadly hardware’ of late twentieth century military technology. Incidentally, I would like to note that in The Handmaid’s Tale national politics seem to have been transposed into sexual politics, while ironically still keeping an earlier diagnosis of differential national diseases from The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970): ‘If the national mental illness in the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia’ (Moodie: 62). In this context, we may be inclined to see Offred's insistent doubleness of vision as a peculiarly sane form of the characteristic ‘Canadian disease’.

If, as Adrienne Rich suggests, women’s revisioning of patriarchal narratives about power and male myths about femininity is ‘more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival’ (Rich 1971: 35), it is worth looking more closely at the range of survival tactics that Offred employs through her revisionary narrative within the confined spaces of Gilead. Her story includes all the meanings of ‘Survival’ set out by Atwood in 1972, even the ‘jail-break’ and the ‘re-creation’. As a lady ‘in reduced circumstances’ physical survival (‘bare survival’) is Offred's basic priority. She is a Virtual prisoner, traumatised and robbed of her individual identity, renamed and re-educated to be a Handmaid, always aware of danger, threats of violence, and even the sentence of death if she fails to produce a baby for the State (‘Give me children, else I die’ may, as she reflects with some irony, be interpreted in more than one way.) Offred 'intends to last', and she retains her vivid awareness of her living body: 'I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight' (THT: 18). It is characteristic of Offred's honesty to recognise that such determination has both positive and negative valences, as she balances sensual delight in her body against the selfishness of her basic survival instinct. When she and Ofglen see the man on the Street being beaten up (in a passage strongly reminiscent of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four) she thinks: 'What I feel is relief. It wasn't me' (THT: 179), and after the horrible Salvaging, she is shocked to find that she feels hungry: ‘Maybe it’s the body’s way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: I am, I am, I am, still’ (p.293). Only at the end does she lose this vitality and succumb to fatigue and indifference, and significantly this is the point when she is invaded by the voice of her dark double, the previous Handmaid who hanged herself in the same room. Offred's State of utter despair is uncannily close to Kristeva's description of abjection: ‘If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject’ (Kristeva 1982: 5). From that condition of helplessness so close to the extinction of all desire Offred is rescued by the plot mechanism, with the arrival of Nick in the black van, and her story ends with an unexpected revival of hope.
Offred says in her anguished version of the Lord's Prayer: 'I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that...Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living?' (p. 205) Her problem within the catastrophe of Gilead is how to survive psychologically. Never openly rebellious (a useless strategy if one intends to last) Offred survives by devising her private revisionary script which continually challenges Gilead's master discourse. Her tactics are based on a policy of refusal (refusal to believe in Gilead's theology or its sexual ideology, refusal to forget her past, refusal to give up hope of escape) and on her counter claims to rights which the System denies to her ('my name', 'my time', 'my body'. See Howells 1996:132). Here I would like to develop some of those tactics which have been described by Kathleen Kirby in her recent study as 'subjective realignments' in relation to space and discourse:

The tactitian 'borrows' the environment for momentary pleasure or practical needs, wresting her constitution from the efficient partitioning that makes her a producer of profit and a reproducer of power structures.... The tactic's decomposition of inside and outside, its 'in-difference' provides the basis for its political potential. (Kirby 1996: 105)

A striking instance of Offred's subjective reappropriation of environment may be seen in her declaration of freedom, when she sits alone at night in her closed room transforming that prison cell into an escape route out into the spaces of memory:

Step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.

Step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.

But the night is my time out. Where should I go? (p. 47)

Her elision of space-time categories might be seen as a kind of Creative paranoia, if we think about the etymology of that word as Kirby advises us to do: 'Paranoia, etymologically, is caught up in spatial indeterminacy: its Greek roots mean 'beside' and 'mind' (p. 105). Offred realigns herself by going 'somewhere good' in her memory narratives about her college friend Moira, her mother, and her little daughter, the three most important female figures in her life. That ability to summon up absent presences is one of Offred's major survival strategies, testimony to the power of discourse as an act of personal survival. In curious ways the plot endorses her imaginative efforts, by facilitating the 'reappearance' of these figures in Offred's present life. Moira is there in the flesh when Offred goes to Jezebel's on her night out with the Commander, still offering her devastating feminist critiques of male fantasies and her tales of heroic escape attempts; Offred's mother is resurrected not once but twice, when her image leaps into life in the Unwoman documentaries shown at the Red Centre; and Serena allows Offred to see a borrowed photograph of her lost daughter. Yet such returns are shot through with ambivalence; they may be a 'blessing' as Offred remarks of her daughter's photo and her fate, but they are also acute reminders of loss and powerlessness. Moira's story is not one of triumph, Offred's mother has been sent to the Colonies, and the 'glib shiny surface' of the photograph spells a double erasure for both Offred and her daughter.

Yet Offred's telling allows something of these lost figures to survive, especially their voices and characteristic turns of phrase, for as she says of Moira's story: 'I've tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive' (p. 256). Offred's stories of the past grant a new resonance to the early 1970s Women's Liberation slogan, 'The Personal is Political' for they represent important documentary evidence of late twentieth century North American cultural history, which includes the rise of second wave feminism and the anti-feminist backlash of New Right Christian fundamentalism. I have elsewhere discussed the cultural survivals on which Gilead's power structure and
rhetoric was based, for after all ‘There was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis’ (THT: 319). Of course as a refugee from the past (like every other adult in Gilead) Offred is blessed — or afflicted — by that quality of double vision which is the repressed underside of social history and which continues to unsettle Gilead’s claims to absolute authority.

13 For Offred, physical and psychological survival centres on her body, whose femaleness has been reinscribed by Gilead’s utilitarian biological discourse and its oppressive sexual practices. Though she has no power to avoid her Handmaid’s role and must undergo the monthly Ceremony of copulation with her Commander, she can defy these prescriptions by aligning herself differently through her own narrative about her body. Not only does she detach herself emotionally from the Ceremony, but she mischievously reverses the power dynamic in this arrangement, where it is her body’s biological rhythms which dictate the time frame for action (‘Even the Commander is subject to its whims’, p. 91). In Offred’s private narrative she claims her body as her own territory, an unknown wilderness tract which baffles male invasion: ‘I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing’ (THT: 83-4). Ironically it is through that same female body that Offred finds her way to emotional survival, for in the unpropitious circumstances of Gilead she falls in love — not with the Commander but with Nick his chauffeur. She turns a situation of coercion into a love story during her secret meetings with Nick which are arranged by the Commander’s Wife for the purpose of making her pregnant. In a curious way, Offred’s revisioning of Gilead’s dystopic plot looks like a cultural survival of ‘the time before’ when ‘falling in love’ was the fashion, for this forbidden love story looks very like a traditional romance plot, with its strong undercurrent of sexual magnetism which leads the heroine into dangerous territory with a dark stranger who turns out to be her rescuing hero in the end. That Offred is aware of such conventionality is evident in the triple versions through which she tells the story (THT: 273), but there is no doubt that falling in love is for her an act of survival. This reawakening of sexual desire releases her into what Cixous has called ‘the marvellous text of herself’ as she allows Nick to read her body:

He seems indifferent to most of what I have to say, alive only to the possibilities of my body, though he watches me while I’m speaking. He watches my face. (THT: 282)

14 By a double irony, that love relationship achieves precisely the goals which Gilead intended and which Offred has resisted for so long. She becomes pregnant, and she is reconciled to staying there: ‘The fact is, I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him’ (p. 283).

15 Offred may try to refashion the social rules of Gilead into a private utopia (she also knows that ‘this is a delusion of course’, p.281) but generic conventions of dystopia dominate the plot, and the love story is cut short through a series of violent events and discoveries which reaffirm Gilead’s control over life and death. It is only by the intervention of Nick that Offred manages to escape from Gilead, and we never know what happens to her. We might interpret the end of Offred’s story as a struggle for survival between two different sets of narrative conventions — that of the masculine dystopia and the feminine romance plot, an instance of Atwood’s optimism which endorses Offred’s survival tactics throughout. Atwood commented on the importance of storytelling in her Amnesty International address back in 1981 (which must have been around the time when she started to think about The Handmaid’s Tale):
The writer... retains three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: a human imagination, in the many forms it may take; the power to communicate; and hope. (Second Words: 397)

Certainly for Offred storytelling is her most significant survival gesture, where discourse functions as the means of her subjective realignment in the present: 'Which is not where I want to be', (p. 153) and as message to the outside world from her prison (to be compared with Bodily Harm (1981): 'Tell someone I’m here’, says Lora. 'Tell someone what happened', BH: 282). It is also Offred's inscription, by telling rather than writing as we discover at the end, of faith and hope in the future. Against the stasis of the cushion embroidered with the word FAITH, Offred measures what is missing in Gilead: 'I wonder what has become of the other two cushions. There must have been three, once. HOPE and CHARITY, where have they been stowed? (THT: 119-20) The word 'hope' exists in Gilead, but only on gravestones: 'In Hope. Why did they put that above a dead person? Was it the corpse hoping, or those still alive'? (p. 116). 'Charity' (or 'love' as it is translated in modern versions of the Bible) is markedly absent either as word or concept. In this spiritual desert Offred paradoxically proves the survival power of these three traditional Christian graces. Only in her crisis at the end is she drained of belief and of the will to live: 'Faith is only a word embroidered' (p. 304). Yet Nick's sudden appearance and his exhortation to 'trust' him restores Offred to her former position of hoping, helpless subject: 'But I snatch at it. It's all I'm left with' and her final words as she climbs into the black van describe the secular equivalent of a leap of faith: 'And so I step up into the darkness within; or else the light' (p. 307).

Does Offred survive? And for how long? How long did Gilead survive? We do not know any of the answers, though Offred's reconstructed message delivered nearly two hundred later ensures the survival of her voice and her version of Gileadean history. Professor Pieixoto from his male historian’s perspective may dispute the authoritativeness of her cultural history (though not, we note, its authenticity), but as readers we are left with Offred's narrative which challenges us to make connections between her vanished world and our own, and to reckon up our own chances of survival in a world which in the late 1990s more closely resembles Gilead than it did in the mid 1980s.

I would like to end with a Historical Note of my own, with a look towards the future in Atwood's own writing since The Handmaid's Tale. What survivals do we find? In 1996 I remarked on the documentary historicising impulse that was so strongly signalled in Offred's narrative, and which was again evident in The Robber Bride with its meticulous chronicle of Toronto’s post war history and its figure of Antonia Fremont, the female military historian. Atwood's latest novel Alias Grace is her first explicitly historical novel, the story of a double murder set in nineteenth century Toronto, and like The Handmaid's Tale it is a prison narrative told as a woman's autobiographical fiction. Grace Marks, too, is a storyteller who manages to chronicle the social history of her own colonial times, while like Offred eluding patriarchal constructions of her true identity. She too survives and disappears from the annals of official history. Offred the Handmaid, Zenia the Robber Bride, Grace Marks the suspected murderess, all of them survive within the parameters of Atwood's fiction, so that we might see Atwood the novelist at work like Grace Marks as she pieces together her patchwork quilt:

I will embroider around each one of them with red featherstitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (Alias Grace: 534)
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NOTES

2. Of course this proposition could be reversed: given Offred's values, is the Handmaid really a 'Canadian'? To entertain such a possibility would be typical of Atwood's ironic playfulness.
3. I have written elsewhere about similarities between Offred's language for writing the female body and Helene Cixous' 'Laugh of the Medusa' (Howells 1996, 136-41); see also Meira Cook 1997,
186-201, for a discussion of the same topic through the lens of Cixous' 'Castration or Decapitation?' essay.

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