POWER IMPINGING: HEARING ATWOOD'S VISION

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Margaret Atwood's poetry is not restful; it will not soothe careworn sensibilities. Its effect is more like being slammed through the looking-glass, or yanked out of the audience to play a part in a scene between the voice of the printed page and the ear of the reading eye. In such a dislocation, one gropes for metaphor, feeling like poor Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who, on waking from his true dream, stammers, "I have had a most rare vision." Rare vision indeed is both given to and required of those who choose to be involved. The curtain-raiser for *Selected Poems,*[1] "This Is A Photograph Of Me," exemplifies the rhetorical relationship assumed between author and reader: an incipient intimacy is established during which the preliminaries have been concluded and we are now thumbing through the family album together. The reader is understood to be actively involved in the poems, to be a transmitter as well as a receiver; the voice of the poem seems to assert that the reader, a nonpoet, is completely capable of "rare vision":

> but if you look long enough
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.

This voice understands the uses of power.

But the impact of the *Selected Poems* does not depend solely upon their power to seduce the reader. Often, although the tone is not exactly hectoring, they seem to harass or threaten in some way and, whether evoking good or bad feelings, to impinge upon, collide with, the reader's sensibility. It is hard to be indifferent to them. The source of their power is not obvious: the voice is so very cool and dry, ostensibly dispassionate; the laconic verses are unadorned by ruffles or flourishes; they neither sing jaunty tunes nor chant the music of the spheres; they do not declaim or descant, will not soar or swoon. Here is no "poetic diction," but a style almost ascetically

[1]Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976). All further references to Atwood's poetry are to this edition.

direct, to the point, and these are nearly all short poems. Even when the language seems dull or downright vague, as in "This Is A Photograph Of Me," its opacity transmits significance. For example, a series of imprecise expressions establishes the incentive for the reader to discard disbelief: the sound of sincerity. The voice of the poem understands our initial failure to perceive, sympathizes with our inability to "get the picture" directly and guides us gently through the mist: "some time ago," "at first," "seems to be," "smeared," "blurred lines," "grey flecks," "blended," "a thing that is like," "part of," "what ought to be," "It is difficult to say," "where precisely," "how large or small," "distortion," "eventually." That is a long list of ambiguities, but as we "scan" the poem more carefully, another list emerges: a sequence of confident assertions, beginning with the title and concluding with "you will be able to see me." If we "look long enough," we also see a pattern or picture, framed by declarations and broken into seven fragments, of which the three central ones are unequivocal statements surrounded by "blurred lines." Just as the "I" of the poem is "in the centre / of the picture," so is the pith at the centre of the poem:

> It was taken some time ago.
> At first it seems to be
> a smeared
> print: blurred lines and grey flecks
> blended with the paper;
>
> then, as you scan
> it, you see in the left-hand corner
> a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
> (balsam or spruce) emerging
> and, to the right, halfway up
> what ought to be a gentle
> slope, a small frame house.
>
> In the background there is a lake,
> and beyond that, some low hills.
>
> (The photograph was taken
> the day after I drowned.
>
> I am in the lake, in the center
> of the picture, just under the surface.
>
> It is difficult to say where
> precisely, or to say

how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

"This Is A Photograph Of Me" establishes a tone for the entire volume. Although it cannot be transcribed into prose, because, as T. S. Eliot remarked, ". . . anything that can be said as well in prose can be said better in prose,"[2] one can say that the poem is concerned with perception, with the way we look at "what there is," and, in a manner of speaking, it puts the reader "in the picture." Nearly all of the poems are preoccupied with pictures, backgrounds and foregrounds, vistas and viewpoints, landscapes and locales, travel from one milieu to another. As examples of the relationship of this poem to the others, "Girl And Horse, 1928" evokes "the other side / of the picture," while "Journey To The Interior" illuminates the phrase "what ought to be a gentle / slope" by speaking of "the hills / which the eyes make flat as a wall, welded / together. . . ." Along with pictures and visions, eyes are conspicuous in the poems. The epigraphs to *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie* and *Power Politics* focus on them, while the second "journal" begins a poem, "The Double Voice," in this way:

Two voices
took turns using my eyes.

In "The Reincarnation Of Captain Cook," which looks for a "new land cleaned of geographies," we learn that "The eyes raise / tired monuments." Whether we scrutinize a photograph or "my country under glass" ("At The Tourist Centre In Boston," p. 54), a disquieting question remains to be answered — or asked:

Do you see nothing
watching you from under the water?

Two presences dominate the poems: the watcher and the watched. Distinguishing one from the other is no simple matter. Although "This Is A Photograph Of Me" has fun with the phrase

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[2]T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry & the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 152.

"just under the surface" and with the status of "eventually," which occupies an entire line, the thrust of these conceits emerges better after reading "Against Still Life." An orange in the centre of a table makes a vivid image, and in this poem, nothing is indistinct or "blurred" about the orange. Yet it doesn't *say enough,* even when viewed "at a distance," nor does the man reveal his essence from "a distance." In both cases, violence is considered as a means of getting at them, but ripping things apart seems not to be the way to get inside them. At stanza seven there is a turn, a new hypothesis:

> But quietly:
> if I take the orange
> with care enough and hold it
> gently,

it can become "whatever I desire / it to be." Furthermore:

> if I watch
> quietly enough
> and long enough,

the man will say "(maybe without speaking) . . . all I need to know." "Quietly" is a fine choice of words, for the adversary is "Still Life." Like "The Reincarnation Of Captain Cook" in which the speaker longs to clear away all old maps, charts and guideposts, the speaker in "Against Still Life" seeks "the centre / of all energy," which can bring new life, vibrancy, to apprehension of the world. Heightened awareness revivifies the look, sound, taste, feel, smell, the essence of one's life situation. Although "seeing" in this way may not always delight, and may often alarm, it can satisfy:

> When you are this
> cold you can think about
> nothing but the cold, the images
> hitting into your eyes
> like needles, crystals, you are happy.
> ("You Are Happy")

Survival, the poet's "Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature," elucidates her own work. In regard to attitudes about "seeing," she says:

> Imagine a picture of a landscape in which everything is dark grey — sky, lake, shore — except for a few points of light — a

> red flower, or a small fire, or a human figure. . . . You can look at the picture with two attitudes. You can decide that the grey landscape is so large and overpowering that the points of light are totally dominated by it, rendered insignificant. Or you can see the points of light in contrast to their surroundings; their dark background sets them off and gives them meaning in a way that a bright one would not.[3]

In these terms, attitude determines the way we see and gives meaning to our images and visions. Notice, too, that in the above passage, as in the poems, Atwood directs her remarks to the reader, to "you." This is perhaps not unusual, but it is consistent with the speaker's posture in the poems: she does not adopt the disinterested stance indicated in such constructions as "one can decide . . ." because she wants to generate a dramatic dialogue between the voice of the poems and the eye of the reader. That dialogue, however, has the depth and dimensions of engagement or involvement. To read Margaret Atwood's poetry is to become in some way *implicated.* (A glance at *Power Politics* soon sets in motion the reverberations of that metaphor.) But the drama is played out against a significant background, like the one in *Power Politics,* which is formed by the ragged fabric of human relationships. Moreover, we should not expect that background always to be passive: sometimes the reader may find it necessary, in order to listen effectively, to assume a role, perhaps of the landscape or background, which listens and watches and also has a voice. (See "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" p. 70.)

Although it may seem outlandish to suggest that readers and backgrounds speak in the poems, clearly these verses are no place like home. In the mythical land of the "Circe/Mud Poems," for example, intrepid explorers searching for the source of power can find the following:

> *Through this forest*
> *burned and sparse, the tines*
> *of blunted trunks, charred branches*
>
> *this forest of spines, antlers*
> *the boat glides as if there is water*
>
> *Red fireweed splatters the air*
> *it is power, power*

[3]Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 245.

impinging, breaking over the seared rocks
in a slow collapse of petals

You move within range of my words
you land on the dry shore

You find what there is.

Part of "what there is" belongs to sorcery; in the "Circe/Mud Poems," we come under the spell of one practised in transformations, but we also enter the realm of impressibility. The little oblique stroke in the title signifies that whichever word seems most appropriate may be chosen — plainly a witch's trick. But this trick is crucial, for it indicates the complexity of involvement. According to the epigraph, the reader moves "within range" of the speaker's words, but who is speaking? Who has the reader "in the sights"? If the voice of the poems had simply adopted the persona of Circe, the reader might easily slip into the role of Odysseus. But the poems are neither concerned with cut-out figures nor with alleged perfectibility: on page 214 we are told that it would be "so simple" if there were only a "mud woman" whom no one could equal; and the equivocal title declares that this is a world of complexity, of transformations. The poetic voice speaks from a knowledge of magic wands and of malleable mud: its persona is neither fixed nor definitive.

The reader, who may be merely "another traveller just passing through," must therefore take heed while moving "within range" to hear and see what *is* there, instead of writing a "travel book" with a "white plot" into which he can conveniently disappear when baffled by complexity. This is a way of reminding us that we tend to compose biographies and "travel books" for ourselves as we tour the landscape of our lives; and although the scenarios and travelogues that form our plans for the future are aids that make the way less alien and alarming, if we submerge ourselves in these plots, not only do we risk missing something, but we may *transform ourselves* into fabrications, so that we exist, not in the world, but in a fiction: "You add details, you colour the dead red . . . in the clutch of your story, your disease, you are helpless./ But it is not finished. . ." (p. 217). Unawares, the reader has been transformed into a *writer,* facing an interrogation: "Is this what you would like me to be, this mud-woman? Is / this what I would like to be?" Identities have begun to blur, so that the speaker now seems unsure of both her own desires and those of the supplicants and "writers" who make demands of

her: "Those who want nothing / want everything" (p. 205). When we are not constructing a mythology out of mud, we are fashioning one out of mythology. Against those who will not "speak in the received language" (p.204), we resort to violence, for without structure, maps, "travel books," we become frightened and dangerous. In the "Circe/Mud Poems," the terrain is treacherous: it approximates the other worlds we think we know, in which one may be transformed or transform without always being certain just which is happening. The question may be whether the reader wants to listen to a sorceress — or become one.

These poems are witty, vigorous, powerful; they jolt us out of a world of received ideas and stock responses, where everything, like a carelessly focused snapshot, looks grey, grainy, and indistinct. In the epigraph, the image of fireweed bursts upon the mind's retina:

> Red fireweed splatters the air
> it is power, power
> impinging, breaking over the seared rocks
> in a slow collapse of petals. . . .

"Within range" of this gentle yet bloody image moves a "you," while in *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie,*

> The petals of the fire-
> weed fall where they fall
>
> I am watched like an invader
> who knows hostility but
> not where
>
> The day shrinks back from me
> ("Paths and Thingscape")

These lines give shape to an image of a watched watcher, and a speaker becomes a listener in the following: "I spend my days with my head pressed to the earth, to stones, to shrubs, collecting the few syllables left over" (p. 204); "when you leave will you give me back the words?" (p. 221). If such odd remarks sound strangely, disconcertingly, familiar, the reason is that the speech rhythms and discontinuity emulate the timing of everyday conversation: "There must be more for you to do. . ." (p. 206); "Don't you get tired of. . . ? (p. 206); "She's up to something. . ." (p. 218). But despite the homely flavour, the poems are emphatically unlike the daily

chatter we know so well. What they say has no reference to events in space or time, conveys no practical information, does not deal in ideas, could never pass for small talk. What makes it sound like ordinary speech is the "necromancy" of poetic craft: the language of poetry, imagistic and associative, has been fashioned to imitate the rhythms of discursive language, or the cadences of common speech have been transformed into highly patterned poetic language. (See "This Is A Photograph Of Me" for parallelism, assonance, symmetry of form). Some of the images are bizarre, at times may even evoke a gothic horror (p. 215), but they arrive without finery or fanfare, almost seeming to irrupt in the reader's awareness. The epigraph to "Circe/Mud Poems" states, "You find what there is," and the poems focus on exotic langscapes and cross unfamiliar borders so subtly that the reader feels like the discoverer.

Atwood's landscape of language is so "cleaned of geographies" that the associative aura surrounding words emanates from the reader's personal reservoir of thought and experience. In a poem that talks about landscapes, on page 207, we are reminded that we were not invited to this place, "just lured." "Lured" says so much more about the reader's participation than the notion of responding to an invitation would. But again, it is more a matter of involvement or implication than taking part: "Why should I describe the / landscape for you? You live here, don't you? Right now I mean. See for yourself." Lured by the voice of the words on the paper, the reader listens and, behold, sees "what there is": maybe a remodelled setting for part of *The Odyssey,* perhaps a pilgrimage to an oracular high-priestess, *Power Politics* as a period piece, or a journey to "the Interior." Since there is no trace of sentimentality in the poems, they convey an illusion of sincerity, which is no false impression, but the illusion of art, the "semblance of truth" that Coleridge says can procure "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith."[4] Much "poetic faith" flows from the power of these poems to persuade the reader to see with "rare vision." Because there is nearly always a "you" addressed, the reader tends to escape feeling harangued by assuming the role of the *speaker.* But regardless of what role the reader plays, involvement is paramount; one cannot read this poetry passively. The verse style is therefore highly rhetorical.

[4]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 264.

That assertion contravenes some remarks made by Robin Skelton in a thoughtful and illuminating essay about the structure of Atwood's poetry.[5] Skelton states that the poems belong "more to the ideogrammatic than the rhetorical tradition" and that because the structure is "modular," parts of many poems may be rearranged like so much office furniture without doing them harm because they are not "concerned with a sequence of action or of thought." He offers a number of examples, but citing one or two will suffice for my refutative purposes. Skeleton contends that the epigraph to *Power Politics* has reversible stanzas. Thus:

a fish hook
an open eye

You fit into me
like a hook into an eye

This reversing of the order of the two stanzas so perverts the intention of the piece that one is at a loss to account for the impulse behind it. The original verse is simply a version of a very old joke technique, in which a generalization is condensed to a particular. ("Great day for the race. The human race.") It follows a rigid logical sequence, is totally dependent upon a "sequence of thought" for its effect. The significance of the version reproduced above is obscure. Another example of moveable, "modular," verse is the poem from "Circe/Mud Poems" on page 209. Having reorganized the stanzas into a pattern of 4,2,1,5,3, Mr. Skelton claims that the poem still works because all of the images are intact. But this poem follows the logic of the situation, which is progressive renunciation, and, like the short verse mentioned above, it travels from the general to the particular: from the small possession to the greater, from the impersonal to the absolutely personal. The first stanza makes an opening general statement: "There are so many things I want / you to have." Nor is it accidental that the first line says, "There are so many things I want." The renunciations move from names, to food, to the land, to water, to the flesh — a steady reduction to essentials — and all of this must occur before the commentary on the taker can have any significance, for the taker has taken *everything*. Taking these things is precisely what we do when we read the poems, "without noticing it":

[5]Robin Skelton, "Timeless Constructions: A Note on the Poetic Style of Margaret Atwood," *The Malahat Review*, No. 41 (January 1977), pp. 107-20.

There are so many things I want
you to have. This is mine, this
tree, I give you its name,

here is food, white like roots, red,
growing in the marsh, on the shore,
I pronounce these names for you also.

This is mine, this island, you can have
the rocks, the plants
that spread themselves flat over
the thin soil, I renounce them.

You can have this water,
this flesh, I abdicate,

I watch you, you claim
without noticing it,
you know how to take.

Because the structure of an Atwood poem is, Skelton argues, "modular" and the content concerns percepts instead of concepts, because it evokes imagism, not ideas, it is called "ideogrammatic." It is true that the images burst forth upon our consciousness full-blown and without corresponding pictures or verbal description, but it remains to say that the poems are made from many threads, and an ideogram is not, by definition, devoid of rhetoric. On the contrary, depending upon its context, the associative environment in which it is discovered, it can be a metaphor.[6] Margaret Atwood's poetry draws upon such a store of associative material and poetic traditions that the milieu for an ideogrammatic percept can be, and usually is, arranged with sensitive attention to detail. If these poems were as "modular" as Skelton believes, moreover, there would be little point in providing them with titles, and if the reader were meant to "free-associate" at random, they would not so often be grouped around a particular thematic symbol ("Circe," "Susanna Moodie"). Although artistic symbols cannot be transcribed into exact verbal formulations corresponding to specific ideas or clusters of ideas (always allowing for the fact that all verbal formulations are

[6]See Northrop Frye, on "Rhetorical Criticism": ". . . the ideogram is neither purely grammatical nor purely logical: it is both at once, and rhetorical as well, for like rhetoric it brings an *audience* into being, and reinforces the language of consciousness with that of association. The ideogram in short, is a metaphor. . ." (*The Anatomy of Criticism* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957], p. 334).

metaphors), even their implicit meaning can be highly rhetorical. When we find ourselves "reading between the lines," for example, we do so because what is *not* said speaks as eloquently as, or more so, than the actual words. Meanwhile, when reading Atwood, we should never forget that no matter how involved we may be, we have been "lured." The technical skill of good poetry is partially determined by its ability to interweave the threads of a variety of traditions with the bright strands of imaginative vision without showing how it was done. The outward casual appearance of a poem, its apparent informality, does not deny craft and design. To achieve her distinctive voice, Atwood draws upon any useful tradition available to her, and, along with others, the "rhetorical tradition" lurks behind nearly all of the *Selected Poems.*

In *Philosophy in a New Key,* Susanne Langer argues for a kind of "logic" of art, distinguishing, but without rank, between what she calls "discursive" and "presentational" symbols. She contends that where art is seen as "significant form," its significance depends upon the perfection of that form. The following quotation reinforces incisively my reservations about Skelton's analysis of Margaret Atwood's verse:

> "Artistic truth" does *not* belong to statements in the poem or their obvious figurative meanings, but to its figures and meaning *as they are used,* its statements *as they are made,* its framework of word-sound and sequence, rhythm and recurrence and rhyme, color and image and the speed of their passage — in short, to the poem as "significant form." The material of poetry is discursive, but the product — the artistic phenomenon — is not; its significance is purely implicit in the poem as a totality, as a form compounded of sound and suggestion, statement and reticence, and no translation can reincarnate that.[7]

Even though we are not required to accept at face value the literal assertions of the words of a poem, a substantial part of its significance is contained in the way the assertion is made. The physical arrangement of the words on the paper and the white spaces surrounding them have meaning; they are rhetorical. Margaret Atwood's *Selected Poems,* so specifically addressed to an audience — "you" — and so reader-involving, so intentionally "impinging" upon the reader's sensibility, use rhetoric to achieve power. The

[7]Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 261-62.

force of the poems is such that it makes *the reader* ask, "When you look at nothing / what are you looking at?" (p. 218). Who speaks, who hears, who sees, who is seen in her poetry? The poem replies:

> My face, my other faces
> stretching over it like
> rubber, like flowers opening
> and closing, like rubber,
> like liquid steel,
> like steel. Face of steel.
>
> Look at me and see your reflection.
> (p. 210)

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