

MARGARET ATWOOD'S HANDS

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There is a question that occurs often to Margaret Atwood's readers: how much of this is a mask, how much is Atwood, and is there some of it that is neither? Atwood's quarrel with readers who want to see her fiction as autobiography is well known. The disguises she wears to avoid too much recognition when she travels are thought to be an imposed consequence of her remarkable fame. But readers of her poems have always known that she likes to play with windows and mirrors, to explore the territory between soul and identity.

There is nature and there is creation; and for the poet they both occur as poles of her art, but they are never apart. In her fine book, *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), Atwood for the first time treats the experience of motherhood. In giving birth and tending a child a woman becomes aware more than theretofore that she is in the centre of nature's stream, and also that she is an actress, recreating the role that she has till then seen from outside. How many newly-weds or new parents have felt that momentary distancing during which one observes oneself playing house or imitating one's parent?

What I am saying is that the poet speaking out of such experience would be hard put to avoid a persona. We have, then, a question of degree and emphasis. The excellence of the poems has nothing to do with the percentage of real-life-Atwoodness in the "I" of the poems. But the layering of identity has always been a feature of Atwood's verse, and a source of power. To enter the world one must look like the world, adopt its dress, if you like; the poet who keeps the world rather than his self at a distance will end up dramatizing a caricature, with head in oven or rifle among the trees.

It should be no secret, despite the banalities of so much magazine verse, that truth requires artifice, that the real is seen when the veil called nakedness is removed from before one's eyes. "PHANOPOEIA," said Ezra Pound, "is a casting of images upon the visual imagination." The poet casts images as the magician casts spells, the fisherman a net, the sculptor his bronze, the gambler his

dice. Nature and creation: even a photographer catches the light and makes a picture. In *You Are Happy* (1974), Atwood's persona, Circe, says:

You may wonder why I'm not describing the landscape for you. This island with its complement of scrubby trees, picturesque bedrock, ample weather and sunsets, lavish white sand beaches and so on. (For which I am not responsible.) There are travel brochures that do this better, and in addition they contain several very shiny illustrations so real you can almost touch the ennui of actually being here. They leave out the insects and the castaway bottles but so would I in their place; all advertisements are slanted, including this one.

You had a chance to read up on the place before you came: even allowing for the distortion, you knew what you were getting into. And you weren't invited, just lured.

But why should I make excuses? Why should I describe the landscape for you? You live here, don't you? Right now I mean. See for yourself.

So the real mother of *Two-Headed Poems* is an interesting and most attractive persona. Lately I have been thinking about her in relationship to earlier ones — for instance the wife better known as a writer in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and the lover as politician in *Power Politics* (1971).

The aptness of the term "mask" is nowhere more clear than in the plans for the limited edition of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. They called for a cover picture of Mrs. Moodie, with the eyes cut out, and Atwood's eyes looking through the holes from the half-title page. Though that design did not materialize, the reader will find in the book a poem that speaks of such work with scissors and sight. One enters one's book, perhaps, as one enters the world, to put it together. Readers were confused about Atwood's intention in her use of the first person through a sequential poem whose title suggests possession by the nineteenth-century writer. What she did was to write the journals of Mrs. Moodie for our time.

In a suite of poems published the same year, George Jonas declared that "in the face of death/ Fragments are all I can hope to write." Fragments are bits left around from something that has been broken or allowed to fall apart. In the Modernist tradition that something is usually classical European tradition. Pieces, on the other

hand, are bits we may connect with one another in order to assemble an artifact we then may contemplate for our pleasure and edification. Margaret Atwood tends to work in that more optimistic fashion.

She is not so much a survivor in the European tradition as she is a creative participant in the New World tradition. Hers is a consciousness, a voice that is always entering, here entering the dance of the New World transcendentalists, the rise and fall of all things from leaf to star. She wants to share the world (even its authorship, as we see in the *Journals*) rather than possess it. Whereas Jonas asks, "Why can't it be summer forever?" she knows how the earth tilts in its orbit, carrying all people with it. Her voice, in that inescapable movement, finds place.

But not passively. She did not assemble a long "found poem" from Mrs. Moodie's memoirs, as some people expected — that is a process best saved for one's own amusement, though not enough Canadian editors think so. Of the relationship between the poem and Mrs. Moodie's writings, the poet says in her afterward: "Although the poems can be read in connection with Mrs. Moodie's books, they don't have to be: they have detached themselves from the books in the same way that other poems detach themselves from the events that gave rise to them." That would suggest that Mrs. Moodie's books are a source similar to landscape, for instance, that those books show that their author managed also to enter the nature of Upper Canada/Ontario. In fact the last section of Atwood's book has the Moodie/Atwood voice rising from the ground of Central Canada.

"Journal I" relates to *Roughing it in the Bush*. "Journal II" relates to *Life in the Clearing*. "Journal III" relates Mrs. Moodie's consciousness during her dying, her years in the grave of Ontario earth, and her haunting of present-day Ontario. An understanding of the mythic process — woman enters the forest and finds that it has entered her — will be quickly attained by anyone who has been touched in any way by the spirit of the University of Toronto.

The mother in *Two-Headed Poems* is known to the world by her hands. In *Journals* the persona does not touch very much; she is most often to be found using those eyes that regard everything from the page, as in the lovely clear entry called "The Wereman":

My husband walks in the frosted field
an X, a concept
defined against a blank;
he swerves, enters the forest
and is blotted out.

Unheld by my sight
what does he change into
what other shape
blends with the under,
growth, wavers across the pools
is camouflaged from the listening
swamp animals

At noon he will
return; or it may be
only my idea of him
I will find returning
with him hiding behind it.

He may change me also
with the fox eye, the owl
eye, the eightfold
eye of the spider

I can't think
what he will see
when he opens the door

Later, having been watched and entered herself, she is able to imagine, to see. As the mother will find that she feels every touch she lays on the world, so this earlier wife finds out that the watcher never sees as much as when she has become the watcher watched.

So Margaret Atwood the poet generally operates on the basis of a tactile world hallucinated and at the same time organized by her imagination. Thus a bowl of fruit or a photograph is never simply discovered "there," but rather composed so that the form is understood to be wrought for its greatest intensity. That is, all phenomena, all we are allowed to see, *mean*, and the author is always behind or inside, leading, pushing, giving, perhaps, but never giving away.

She cannot give it away, because as I have said, she does not possess the world; but that is not to say that she will simply throw open the door. She gives you what she wants you to have, and

while that is almost always enough for beautiful poetry, you often want to know more, probably more than you should. *Power Politics* is a book of beautiful poetry. It offers a lot of refracted material for the sense and opinions; and it remains a puzzle, or maybe a mystery. I think that the author wanted it that way.

If there is one thing that Margaret Atwood was on top of in the early Seventies, it was the sense of love as a political struggle. Such complication found its way into the composition of the book, where one loves the writing, and the writing is political act. A very popular literary novel of the time was Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and its balance of esthetic and politics is perhaps analogous. In *Power Politics* Atwood gave voice and leadership to post-Sixties attitudes here concerning relationships between the sexes and between the English-speaking peoples of North America. It was the best verse that Atwood had composed to that time, because it took itself seriously as subject, not as conveyance of already formed feelings. Consciousness and composition are the same thing, as Gertrude Stein said. One will be nicely instructed on reading the following quatrain aloud, for rime and line:

You take my hand and
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,
it goes on and on and
why am I fascinated

The book is a sequence of lyrics on the state of affairs which tend to become affairs of state. The episodes from the contiguous lives of the lovers are treated violently quite often and are usually inflated in imagery, all the while couched, as they say, in quiet detached narration. Atwoodian trademarks, one might say, but here centrally located, relentlessly focussed. "I raise the magic fork/ over the plate of beef fried rice," and she plunges it into him, whereupon he escapes his mortal head to become a cosmic-or-comicbook superhero flying over the heads of the town. In bed she arranges his body into the shape of a crucifixion and then a *pietà*. One finds it difficult to decide whether she is feeding his fantasies or her own. Such is the nature of politics in our day, or the power of poetry.

The images are often of the sort just mentioned, people turned into their iconic representations. He becomes a statue of a general, she the hanged (wo)man of the tarot pack. He becomes for a while a saint's effigy she has set up so that she can pray to him, and she

enjoys the power that that gives to the artist; then she expresses fear when he "cheats," becoming a real person demanding the vote she owes:

These days my fingers bleed
even before I bite them

Can't play it safe, can't play
at all any more

Let's go back please
to the games, they were
more fun and less painful

But she sometimes lifts the mask to take a breath; she too breaks the rules, fracturing the artificial construct, turning the "I" of the poem into Margaret Atwood the poet in political trouble. For instance (and here I refer to the "more" one would like, *ex-poetica*, to know) one often hears that the lover may be using the established poet for gain in his own, presumably artistic, career. She accuses him of

giving me
a hard time again for the fun
of it or just for

the publicity.

Just before turning him into the superhero she says, "the real question is/ whether or not I will make you immortal." But she knows the game when it is there: "Please die I said/ so I can write about it." Politics makes strange bedfellows. Politics is a dirty game. But politics is everywhere, at a table, in the study, inside every closet you open. This is another way of saying that the trail of innocence fades as one gains knowledge and skill. "Do you want to be illiterate?/ This is the way it is, get used to it."

But the experienced one, even the persona, longs for the ideal:

A truth should exist,
it should not be used
like this. If I love you

is that a fact or a weapon?

When she is in this frame of mind she resorts to the simplicity of the body, in heat, naked, making a noise to smother thought. Of course it does not work:

The earth doesn't comfort,
it only covers up
if you have the decency to stay quiet

Thus the "you" slips, toward the "I", as we are told it does in dreams, or in this instance at least toward the "I" of Susanna Moodie in her unquiet bed of earth.

The politics of love can test the fit of a mask more than one might expect. At times this lover becomes utterly bitter:

Next time we commit
love, we ought to
choose in advance what to kill.

One senses that yes, the old story, these two lovers will burn themselves, destroy each other with their relationship; but more broadly, that that is the only kind of man-woman relationship there is. Some are only more intense than others. Death is, after all, inevitable, whether slow or fast, whether of a snail or the sun. We have had poetry to teach us that all our lives.

With that as the inescapable fact one is not satisfied. One wants against ease to know the variations of encounter in the heat or the decay. Filled with that desire is the body of this book. It is also the purpose of the form, a sequence as I said, or lyrics that do not diverge from one another in subject, but present the subject and say to hell with it, you are going to get it all, with as much art and event as possible in the time covered. So *Power Politics* does something that few books of poetry do nowadays. It hurts. Because there is manifestly a mask, we know there is a face behind the eyes cut open.

Many people think, probably, that a poet assumes a persona in order to recite conclusions already made. But I think that it is more likely that the poet reaches for the externalization of the persona in order to step beyond the version she has of her self. One becomes aware, while reading a succession of Margaret Atwood's books, of a

progress in her vision, and especially of a maturing in her concept of the relationship between individual woman and the world. While it is true that just about every poem she has published till recently suggests some sort of menace in the offing, it is also true that the speaker of the newer poems has become more of a comfort herself. That is especially so in *Two-Headed Poems*.

It is not that the mother who speaks those poems is speaking as *your* mother — what an unsettling persona that would be! But it is with a feeling of pleasure that one comes to the realization again that the poet has changed and improved her vision's imprimatur. One has always known that she can make clear sounds, and that she can always make magnificently realizable images. But in her last volume of the Seventies the emotion, or ours, bids fair to endure to a degree not achieved earlier. Among the book's verses one finds more people than ever before, and they are surrounded by caring thoughts. Here Atwood, a family woman living in a home on the earth (formerly a runic stranger), has put out her hands, often into the dark, and they touch. Now we think of her earlier words about what kind of old lady she will be. One now has confidence that she will be a warm old lady, as poet anyway, in the manner of H.D. or Marianne Moore, both of whom were accused of being brittle in their early days. Entering the world is done by a laying on of hands, the archetypal mother's act. And as Atwood reminds herself and her reader and her persona, in the later book, *True Stories* (1981): "What touches/ you is what you touch."

One does not want to give the impression that the new voice is no longer that of the charm-making young verse-witch we have been so properly entranced by. She does not throw away her tricks simply because she has presented a child to the world and *vice versa*. We find her still fascinated by face-masks and mirrors that already resemble and mimic and parody the given world. Paper-bag heads, home-made dolls, hand-puppets, cookies with faces on them, all duplicate and enact the world through fancy, populating and resembling the poems. "Note from an Italian Postcard Factory" is a poem that diminishes and attacks the process, laconically offering a carefree trip for people (readers, etc.) who fear the disfunctional toilets of Europe. The postcard tourist can look without worrying about being touched. He can remain, that is, estranged from old mother Europe.

Atwood also has a penchant still for the poem as complete unit,

for finishing the poem with a statement à la Robert Frost. See "Burned Space" or "Foretelling the Future." There are times when she parodies her spooky self, thereby, perhaps, exorcising it: "She can change her form, / and like your mother she is covered with fur." Observe, in a poem called "Two Miles Away," this light Atwood imitation:

In the turned furrows, around our bed,
wild carrots, pinkish-mauve and stealthy
creep over the rug, the cleared space,
an invasion of savage flowers
reclaiming their lost territory.

But in the same poem, in fact immediately following that passage, she speaks so that the air opens a lovely precise image that could not have been offered more than this once:

Is this where I want to be,
is this who I want to be with,

half of a pair,
half of a custom,
nose against neck, knee thrown
over the soft groin

Two-Headed Poems contains many endearing verses about the farm near Alliston, the family, the husband and the daughter (the book is dedicated to them). Now the mythopolitico-psychological menace of the earlier poems is seen realistically to surround the speaker's unsuspecting baby daughter (could Atwood have had a son?) in a setting not far from that which entered Susanna Moodie, and it makes of the woman a mother.

So the sequences called "Daybooks" form an interesting part of this book. They are journal lyrics rather than occasional poems, and they seem to count upon the world as seen from the table at the kitchen window. The point of view brings to light some marvelous images, such as "a knitted hand squashed flat." Atwood's persona-occupant muses on the consciousness of the family's living where others, recent and far past, have passed their times and become part of the detritus that is history super-imposed upon nature, an Ontario in poetry, what Atwood has always, we know, been best at giving us.

So domicile and habitude are first grudgingly accepted, then fondly celebrated, and they drive the menace away — let another poet, another head, keep it alive. In a three-page poem called “The Bus to Alliston, Ontario,” we see the movement from fear to settlement in a newly familiar ride “along the invisible road towards home.” When in *True Stories* (p. 30) that road becomes dangerous, it is only because people are driving along it because they have left what is home and have to return.

As the woman of the farm settles into family life, she also finds her place in a country of ancestors, ghosts who have earlier settled on the surface of this earth under the weather. From time to time during the narrative of the book, these presences are glimpsed in the fields or in the made objects that show the effects of having been placed there some time ago. Near the end of the book they make way for the realized presence of a god-like “something” that provides apples every year.

Readers will probably feel a sense that the speaker of these poems is moving *toward* a good deal more than have her predecessors. One sees that movement in the first poem, “Burned Space,” which evokes memories of “It is Dangerous to Read Newspapers,” but which shows a gain in subtle grace, and especially the conviction that its speaker is never now a spectator. It, and the following poem, “Foretelling the Future,” use the pronoun “you,” but while carrying the sense of “one” or “I” as *one of*.

Despite the title of the book, its most important anatomical image is of hands. Hands wear puppets, reach out over a darkened staircase, stroke the air around bodies, fashion clothes and toys for a child, grapple with one another as emissaries of the bicameral mind, and appear over and over, trying to touch a world the eyes can not always see. Hands act to complete the locution of the first poem:

In a burn you kneel among the
reddish flowers and glowing seeds,

you give thanks as after a disaster
you were not part of,

though any burn
might have been your skin:

despite these liquid petals
against smoked rock, after a burn

your hands are never the same.

and a hand appears as the last word of the last poem, a word to a daughter who will use it to begin her meeting with the world.

Atwood has been more than ordinarily involved with the production of her books, having a hand in the making of the covers, for instance. It therefore means something to *Two-Headed Poems* that the cover illustration is a photograph by her husband of two heads made for the daughter by the mother. They are Christmas-tree wafers made by hand. One is smiling and one looks sad or scared. The sad one is upside-down, like the favourable aspect of the Tarot's hanged man, or the hanged woman on the cover of *Power Politics*. They are the masks of comedy and tragedy. They are with less success Canada's two ways of seeing. They also show the author's handling of Julian Jaynes' double-head. The title poem dramatizes by the way of double masks, the voices of the Siamese twins joined at the heads, who speak for the rubes at the CNE freak show.

Curiously, that title poem is one of the least satisfying, perhaps because the layering of the voices leaves Atwood's personal voice too deep. It sums up a decade of Canadian literary nationalism *versus* American invitation to a beheading. It is a promising subject — but it has the disappointing inevitability of all our national allegories, such as Earle Birney's "Canada: Case History." It was perhaps composed to satisfy an expectation of Atwood's public persona, the literary nationalist. A longish piece, it does have some excellent passages in it, as one would expect:

In these cages, barred crates
 feet nailed to the floor, soft
 funnel down the throat,
 we are forced with nouns, nouns,
 till our tongues are sullen and rubbery.
 We see this language always
 and merely as a disease
 of the mouth. Also
 as the hospital that will cure us,
 distasteful but necessary.

More exciting is a sequence called "Five Poems for Grandmothers." It offers a new balance for the Canadian canon of habitual grandfather poems. While the typical grandfather is shown working his will against the weather, these grandmothers are shown suffering and strong and sweet, ensuring the country's needed

continuity: "Sons branch out, but/ one woman leads to another." Atwood personalizes her paeon in this nice stanza:

Goodbye, mother
of my mother, old bone
tunnel through which I came.

But the most memorable achievement in the book is likely to be the already-famous piece, "Marrying the Hangman." First encountered in *The Capilano Review*, and many public readings, it was recognizable immediately as a future Atwood classic. It is also an illuminating departure for the author, into the fruitful unnamed territory between verse and prose, between history and creation; and therefore a nice space into which to enter, disguised and naked. It is, in its fashioning of history into an emotional present, much more subtle than the end of *Susanna Moodie*. It is a story once hidden and now by the real magic of this writing contemporary feeling. It is a great story for amateur Canadian historians and those who want to rescue buried women from history's thematic neglect.

The principal characters of the story have been imprisoned for dueling and stealing, and must meld their class distinctions for the woman's survival. She must create in order not to be destroyed. She will raise herself with her voice to *Survival's* famous "position Four." She is, perforce, a poet, who will then have to live with the awful creation she has made in the mirror.

In a theme to be extended in *True Stories*, Atwood also brings to present the shameful torturing of the farmers of Lower Canada after the failure of the 1838 rebellion there. In "Four Small Elegies" there is a stanza that tells why the stories folded into history should emerge in our poetry:

A language is not words only,
it is the stories
that are told in it,
the stories that are never told.

There are, one hates to say, occasional banalities in these pages. They usually occur during the overtly political poems: "How can I teach her/ some way of being human/ that won't destroy her?" Or when the poet plays upon her old image, making assertions of magic, saying things about the witch and the thunder-father. That is a way

of offering the low energy of similies without being caught at it. It is inviting the public to hang one's old mask over one's mask; Robert Frost, for instance, allowed that to happen, and Irving Layton thrives upon it. But even in a rather contrived poem about making bread (obvious alchemical scenario), Atwood encounters this wonderful ear's notation:

to know what you devour
is to consecrate it,
almost.

But enough of reservation. *Two-Headed Poems* is a good book, an unusually good book for the most part. On reading it one knows that there is an expert's *substance* there, more poetry per line than one is accustomed to finding in one's habitual reading of poetry books.

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There is a mystique among certain minor poets about straight talk. Straight talk does not work in poetry because there are no straight lines in the universe. The idea of straightness is thus an imposition of will upon nature. Similarly, those poets who would claim to come to the reader naked are emperors pretending that they are wearing no clothes; as D.G. Jones puts it: "Nakedness is a disguise: the white/ Is dark below." Thus the good poet's mask, formed by the truth of the imagination, is worn not to hide but to reveal the truth of the emotions. Adepts in the audience for Japanese theatre will know how that works.

There is another mystique that often accompanies the illusion of straight talk. That is the illusion of freedom. The universe has something to say about that, too. But one has always been aware of the simultaneity of free will and mortal restraint. In poetry there have always been masters who express the beauty inherent in language by accepting some constraint and then pressing with all their faculties at the edges of it. The classic examples might be John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In her latest work in verse, Margaret Atwood has been doing that concerning her persona. While we know that it is impossible to find the real Margaret Atwood by casting our eyes over the pages of the aptly titled *True Stories*, we feel with conviction that the space between woman and speaker of the poem is next to snug, is

compressed and saturated with energy. I see the surface tension that keeps a mound of water on the bowl of a spoon. In a poem called "Use," she dismisses her favourite image from her first book of poems, and urges the favoured "hands" of her previous book, and now especially the constant image of this one: skin:

What do I want
 you for? If there's an
 answer it's nothing, you're
 of no use in my life, a
 pure indulgence. What
 would I want a picture
 on the wall for? To look
 at, why why? All such
 questions end in stillness; yet I
 want you too
 much, I want
 also to use you, I want you
 to be used & to glisten
 with it, like hot muscle or metal
 against stone or a shape
 of wood caressed
 by years of hands, to some
 purpose. If I'm to be
 burned slowly cell by
 cell or worn down that's
 how. Of what use is the body
 dancing, except to mark
 the vacancy against which we
 measure sound? Close your
 eyes, out of sight is out of
 time, draw your hand
 again & again over my
 skin & watch me vanish
 into darkness, flicker
 and reappear, this is my use for
 you, shine with it, give
 out light.

When people in their most vulgar moments ask what is Margaret Atwood "really like," they are unwittingly asking for a comparison, and they are requesting that one put aside her being as a poet. She is of course real, and perhaps different from the persona that speaks the art, but her skill in finding and fashioning that persona is her reality. One is. One makes. That is how we got here.

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