

The Other Side of Atwood

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We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall...It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be...It's the obvious heaviness of their heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life anymore to hold them up. The heads are zeros. Though if you look and look, as we are doing, you can see the outlines of the features under the white cloth, like gray shadows. The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting...What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. This isn't what I feel. These bodies hanging on the Wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They've come here from the past. What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't. (*The Handmaid's Tale* 32)

This is the beginning for Margaret Atwood, Canadian author of novels, short stories, essays, and poetry. Atwood's published works include over twenty-five volumes of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. A truly amazing woman, she is as mysterious as she is prolific; she defines her process in interviews only by what it is not: she does not outline, she does not plan, she has no specific writing rituals or routines. She offers few clues to account for how she has produced so much in her lifetime. She starts, as she explained to an interviewer for *Writer's Market 2005*, "with some voices. Or an image or a place. *The Handmaid's Tale* started with the scene of the bodies hanging from the wall...I'm compelled by something to go and find out more about it" (qtd in Godsey 12-13). One can see why reviewers conclude that Atwood "'puts blood on the wall' as she depicts women's deep anxieties and fears, their passions and desires for revenge" (Grace 79). Widely considered a feminist writer, Atwood proudly proclaims that her novel *The Edible Woman* was the first in the genre of "chick lit" (Godsey 11).

Atwood's primary concern seems to be about gender roles in society. What separates her from countless others in her genre appears at first to be her ability to manipulate cultural images so skillfully. Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay "Culture," describes literature as a study in cultural constraints. Good authors, he claims, improvise within cultural constraints. They recycle different cultural norms and ideas in new combinations in order to stretch the boundaries. Atwood is one of the artists that Greenblatt might describe as "highly self-conscious" about the communication of societal roles (561). She takes her role as a writer very seriously, and given the subject matter of her prose, it seems that Atwood's writing is intended first and foremost to push the bounds of the roles of women in society.

Her essay "Laughter vs. Death," an exploration of the social ramifications of violent misogynistic pornography, stands as a perfect example of her feminist beliefs. Atwood adamantly proclaims that such material steers society in the wrong direction. She questions who has power over the female body and who is to decide what morals are for individual determination and what morals should apply to everyone. She argues that although freedom of expression is vital in our society, there is a point when such violent and damaging acts should be controlled.

Atwood is not, however, merely a crusader for radical feminist actions that encroach on civil liberties. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a first person narrative of a woman in Gilead, a dystopian theocracy that recently overthrew the liberal government of the United States and Canada. In this society, women are not permitted to read, hold jobs, own property, or, in her case, have children or a husband. Offred, her protagonist, is given the position of a handmaid, a woman whose role in society is to carry the babies of the Commanders in houses where the wives of these elite political figures cannot conceive. Atwood grapples with the way sex influences society and how we distribute power as a result. Although the novel heavily criticizes the reactionary society, Atwood does not just condemn the patriarchal religious right. Instead, she warns about the danger of taking any belief too far. In one chapter, Offred watches in horror a Gileadean book burning. This triggers a memory of time before Gilead, when her radically feminist mother participated in the burning of pornographic materials. Atwood juxtaposes two seemingly opposing cultural forces, feminism and right wing Christianity, to show how strict lines separating the labels in ideology blur in practice. A disturbing comparison, the analogy leads the reader to an understanding that any ideology can turn against us when applied adamantly to the real world.

Greenblatt's notion of juxtaposing existing cultural identities to manipulate them comes to life in such examples of Atwood's writing.

In the essay "Napoleon's Two Biggest Mistakes," Atwood takes a new approach to exploring power. She begins by describing the experience of listening to the "Overture of 1812" without having an understanding of the historical context. In her typically conversational fashion, she offers that "in case you had a similarly vague musical appreciation experience, here's the deep background" (277). She describes, in a straightforward and logical fashion, how Napoleon got himself in too deep in both Spain and Russia. Spain brought trouble because while Napoleon thought he was freeing the population from the oppression of Catholicism, he was desecrating their deeply rooted beliefs. In Russia, he failed because he could not simply stand and fight the retreating populace. She then brings up a parallel, explaining how Iraq is no Japan. In Japan, the United States found moderate success in renovating the government. In one smooth move she has likened Spain and Russia to Iraq, and the unsuccessful Napoleon to the leaders of the United States. Instead of presenting her beliefs first and her evidence later, she slyly presents a logical argument under the guise of innocent conversation, and then springs her opinion before the reader has a chance to put his or her guard up. She manages, too, to gain the reader's confidence and trust with her beautiful yet informal style of writing. The essay seems more like a conversation than a work of non-fictional prose, and she uses this to her advantage, again juxtaposing unlikely companions to make a point.

In "Napoleon's Two Biggest Mistakes," she brings the question of national power into the equation. She illustrates the idea that religious and moral beliefs cannot be determined by outside sources ignorant of the existing culture. This parallels her theme of the dangers of men controlling female sexuality. She uses her writing consciously to manipulate the bounds of culture, forcing them to stretch simply by the questions and vivid images she plants in our heads.

Atwood's strong viewpoints about the nature of feminine sexuality in society allow her to write with power and jurisdiction over the topic. Under her casual style is an authoritative voice asserting itself in a society that may be ignorant of the ramifications of its gender roles. Her portrayal of women and choice of subject matter place her in the genre of feminist literature, and her control over common cultural images places her in the realm of truly significant writers. Given the certainty of her convictions, however, I am confused by my reaction to the writing. The morals of her stories are more elusive than I would expect, and they often leave me with more questions than

answers. Rather than stirred into action, I find myself paging through her novels, searching for solutions that I cannot find, looking pensively out the window and pacing up and down my dorm room, then returning once more to her prose. Atwood is too in control of the impact of her work for me to write this off as an unintentional byproduct; I owe her more thought than that. What, then, does she want me to figure out?

Atwood's book *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing* casts light on this question. *Negotiating with the Dead* is an enigmatic, and therefore often frustrating, collection of thoughts on writing. True to form, Atwood gives nothing away. The only obvious conclusion one can draw is that Margaret Atwood has a deep and passionate commitment to the art of writing and views the writer as a servant "to this mystic entity—Art with a capital A—by assisting in the creation of a sacred space" (61). In short, the tradition of writing should be a celebration of an otherworldly power that governs our lives. T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," deals with the overwhelming importance of tradition in writing. He presents the notion that the creation of art is "a continual surrender of [the artist] as he is at the moment to something more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (567). He suggests that as an artist improves and begins to contribute to the rich tradition Atwood refers to, he makes more and more distinct the difference between the "man who suffers and the mind which creates" (568). A writer, therefore, cannot be present both in the real world and in the world of his work. In order to achieve some sort of harmony and beauty, he must separate the two.

Negotiating with the Dead seems in many ways a tribute to Eliot's notion that the artist must strike all personality out of the work. Although on the surface this notion seems implausible (after all, Atwood's style is highly conversational and she frequently references her own experiences), a closer look reveals that Atwood puts stock in Eliot's theory. Rather than making this a self-indulgent or excessively personal expose of how she has survived in the field, she deals with the more significant question of what it is for a writer to write. Her voice and personal ideas are stated as the point of view through which she sees the world, and she acknowledges that, so that we can understand the high level of subjectivity in the discourse. Because of this concern, the book has the feel of a conversation between two writers. At the point in which other writers would interject their own opinions, she poses questions to the reader. This forces us to develop our own thoughts and opinions. She endeavors to inspire writers to find their own meaning rather than impose her meaning on others, a tribute to her faith in the noble tradition.

She also has a deep understanding of the deviant nature of her work. Art, as my acting teacher always says, is an act of ruthless murder; it demands that the artist make choices, thereby killing all other possibilities by selecting only one. A writer must allow one world to flourish, thereby denying all others the right to exist. Also, to portray the world realistically can be violent and shocking simply in its honesty. Atwood understands the necessity of surrendering to the violence and deviance of her work in order to give way to the essential story. As T.S. Eliot so aptly explains, “Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (569). This escape becomes necessary in the writing process, both to protect the writer and to protect the work. Again, though, I find myself pacing restlessly. In theory, I can understand the need for a separation. But how can it come together in practice?

The German word *doppelgänger*, literally translated, means “double goer,” or, more aptly put, co-walker. It refers to a spiritual double of each person that walks beside them, hidden in the shadows until the time of death, when the *doppelgänger* reveals itself. Much lore is centered on the *doppelgänger*. They are elusive creatures, whispering advice to their doubles throughout the walk of life. However, they are often thought to be malicious and mischievous, causing trouble for their counterpart.

Atwood holds a particular fascination with this notion of a double. She mentions the creature in her book *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, posing the question that “at least one half is poet. But which, if either, is real?” (38). The *doppelgänger* closes the difference for her between Eliot’s notion of a poet and her own intensely personal style of writing. She describes herself as “a nice, cozy sort of person, a bit absent-minded, a dab hand at cookies, beloved by domestic animals, and a knitter of sweaters with arms that are too long” (35). Yet she claims she was “fated to be a writer—either that or a con artist or some other type of criminal,” explaining that when she pens cold-blooded words on a piece of paper she is “not [her]self” (35-36). Her creative process, therefore, involves passing control of the writing hand over to her other self, her “slippery double,” as she prefers to call it (36). The sacrifice is imperative to tell the story truly.

Going back to the way her process develops, I think of her arresting starting point in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: an image of bodies of traitors hanging limp on the Wall. This writing creates more of an impact than if she stuck to what she knew best and was most comfortable with the real world. Clearly the knitter of sweaters has another side to her. By escaping her personality, she can surrender to the necessary deviance. Suddenly the image of the romanticized

writer takes on a new dimension. I find myself drawn to an image of a sort of murderous grandmother.

Atwood is obsessed with these sorts of dualities, flipped sides of a coin that cannot exist one without the other, perhaps because she is forced to exist perpetually on two planes at once. She writes them into her works as well, tackling issues by stacking opposing forces side-by-side in order to see where the push and pull lands the reader. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood tackles one of her predominant topics: the struggle between the safety of totalitarianism and the freedom of anarchy. She presents the duality in an alarming way: she kills off the freedom that anarchy offers by creating a totalitarian society in Gilead. She presents only one side of the equation, demonstrating that, when one force ceases to exist, the other begins to collapse upon itself. Offred's Commander, for example, a leader in the Gileadean society, takes his own personal freedom against the will of the government by taking Offred to a brothel. The necessity of an opposing force causes even those responsible for killing the freedom to secretly recreate it. One cannot exist without the other. An interesting notion, considering that she questions the same thing about the writer and his double: "can an 'author' exist, apart from the work and the name attached to it?" (*Negotiating* 45). Atwood forces us to consider the double by its absence. It involves the reader on a much more inclusive level because in order to consider this notion, the reader must create the double in his or her own mind.

But engaging the reader in this interactive style is more of a trap set to ensnare us than it is the central preoccupation. Not one to give the reader an easy time of it, Atwood begins to chip away at the cognitive process involved in the untangling of complex ideas. She uses a first person narrator to tell the story. Even Offred's name is not her own, but rather the name assigned to her after the coup. This leaves an absence of identity that allows the reader to step into Offred's shoes. She is a seemingly blank slate that we can superimpose ourselves on.

The novel is, as Offred continuously tells us, a "reconstruction" of a time (134). Even in the world of the book, we discover that Offred recorded these thoughts years after they actually happened. During the course of the novel, Offred constantly questions the validity of her own story. She states that her memory is unreliable, and she even admits to making certain parts of the story up as she would have liked it to happen. She fills the blurs and white noises with lies, like those she tells herself of her husband's supposed whereabouts, in order to maintain her sanity. Her desperate need to tell the story so that it can be understood leads her to lies. This gives us insight into the

nature of Atwood's writing side, and we can begin to understand why it is imperative that her narration is so intensely personal: she must communicate that, although her story has value, it is also subjective.

This leaves the audience in a place of imbalance. We must accept that there are both truth and lies in the story because of the facet of human understanding and memory. This forces us to question not only the evidence given in the book, but also the way that we interpret it and connect it to our own lives. Which of our own memories and associations are born of fact, and which of our own creation? Atwood forces us to question our own ability to understand and retain information, thereby instilling a distrust of our stories and of the stories of others. Can we trust the tales of the past that we tell ourselves? Perhaps the storyteller in all of us is our personal doppelganger; if so, how can we trust it? More frightening still, how can we not?

My reaction to her writing seems, then, to make more sense. But I am still at a loss: there is an inconsistency. She insists, bases her entire process, in fact, on complete surrender to this slippery double. Yet she warns us, passionately, desperately, against some facet of understanding linked to the way we find truth in the lies of stories. What is she warning us of?

This line of questioning brings me to one of my favorite writers: Tim O'Brien. His "How to Tell a True War Story" seems to ask the same question: how can we find truth in lies? "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible crazy stuff" (71). I begin to compare the two, hoping that perhaps Tim O'Brien's tales from Viet Nam can tell me something Atwood would want me to hear. Both use an intentionally personal style, Atwood's flowing, lyrical prose a sharp contrast to O'Brien's sharp staccato phrasing. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, especially "How to Tell a True War Story," is a story of action; whereas, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows Offred waiting, thinking, sitting, contemplating: a story of passivity and inaction. Both authors show their commitment to storytelling through their characters. Rat, one of the storytellers in O'Brien's work, writes a letter to his dead best friend's sister, filling it with all of the good times that they have and the acts of bravery Curt Lemon performed. He tells her the stories that would otherwise go unremembered by all except the men with him. Offred, years after escaping Gilead, sits down to record her tale to expose the brutality of the society of her past. Neither of the characters can stop their compulsions to tell their stories, and perhaps both authors created their texts with a similar drive.

The most important distinction, perhaps, comes in a closer reading of the texts. O'Brien uses light as a motif in his piece, at one point explaining his memory of Curt Lemon the moment that he stepped on a land mine, when he "watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight...the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up" (70). For Lemon, and for O'Brien, the moment of the definite, final, and undisputable truth of death was the moment of stepping from the shadows into the light. O'Brien explains later that "when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*" (71). O'Brien understands that in each story there are lies, but he uses these lies to drive passionately towards the greater, ultimate truth. With O'Brien, there is the sense of the wanderer in Plato's Cave, searching desperately for this "final and absolute truth" that perhaps our minds can only comprehend with the assistance of these lies (76).

Atwood looks at writing from a different angle, believing it to be, in essence, "motivated, deep down, by a fear and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (*Negotiating* 156). For Atwood, writing takes place in the shadows, and is ultimately about bringing these shadows to life. Her doppelganger, her co-walker, is thought of as an unseen shadow, appearing only, according to the mythology, in death. As passionately as Tim O'Brien drives towards the light, Atwood drives against it. The warning that she works into her prose is perhaps an urgent admonition against the appeal of Tim O'Brien. "Where is the story?" Atwood asks us, then answers her own question: "The story is in the dark" (*Negotiating* 176). The concrete certainty of a world with absolute truths seems ideal in its ease and simplicity, but she entices us back into the shadows with an urgency that I can only begin to comprehend. She teaches us to recognize duality and complexity. She teaches us to exist in this paradox as she has learned to, rather than striving for the unattainable Holy Grail of absolute truth or worse, convincing ourselves that we have found what does not exist. Even in death, which Tim O'Brien treats with such finality, Atwood sees opportunity. She claims that "because the dead control the past, they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth," and she therefore begs us to learn to live in the romantic, uncertain world of our doppelganger (*Negotiating* 156). She begs us not to fear it, as a mark of death, but to embrace it, as a way to help us understand life.

The feminist notion of truth being entirely subjective seems to fit directly into her line of thinking, and we see another connection to her as a feminist writer—a feminist writer who, in a way that would make Greenblatt

proud, takes cultural images and reshapes them, redefines them, and changes the world around her. But the limits of feminist literature, with the connotations that it has in our culture today, do not do her justice; she is not merely a crusader for women's rights. Margaret Atwood, the knitter or the lyncher, has something more to say.

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