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Margaret Atwood's Poetry: Against Still Life

Adrienne Rich tells us that the poet develops a voice to "speak for those who do not have the gift of language."[1] With such a voice, the poet makes us aware that although language often binds us, it can offer us a way to revise ourselves and our world.[2] However, we speak in many voices, and before any revisions can take place, we need to develop a voice commensurate with our sense of who we are.

The relationship between our speaking voice and our inner experience, for example, is frequently an uneasy one. Generally, we do not speak our inner feelings in a clear, unhesitant voice; even if language were transparent enough to allow our inner experience to shine through, our voice still might hesitate, or raise, or break. And its timbre might create for us, even as language does, a new realm of inner experience. Voice is not just a vehicle for the transmission of inner feelings, for it can stir up those feelings and in some cases, call them into being.

The relationship between voice and inner experience becomes even more complicated when we discover that the inner domain has itself been shaped by the speaking voices we would rather not identify as our own. Certainly, the self-conscious woman poet almost necessarily encounters this latter problem. Tillie Olsen puts the problem this way: "The pressure toward ... accepting, abiding by entrenched attitudes, thus falsifying one's own reality, range, vision, truth, voice, are extreme for women writers (indeed have much to do with the fear, the sense of powerlessness that pervades certain of our books ...)."[3]

Margaret Atwood's poems present the struggle of a voice, a woman's voice, to reformulate the bases of personal power by moving us beyond the falsifications we may glibly or inadvertently accept.[4] To her, voices of anger or of passive surrender suggest the powerlessness of despair. In their place, she attempts to construct a voice that speaks from a source of imaginative power. This enterprise, however, is a

difficult one, for her speakers often remain poised between a language that deadens and the unnamed possibilities of a renewed strength.

Although the development of voice entails the discovery of alienation to Atwood, she often uses speakers who misapprehend its meaning. These speakers, often frustrated or fearful, describe their worlds with an almost clinical kind of detachment. Articulating the experience of alienation may be a victory of insight, but such a victory often means that we are but conventionally wise about our situation— and comfortable with it. Alienation is not freedom, nor does its articulate acknowledgement do more than perpetuate it.

The speakers of many of Atwood's poems, then, articulate with precision the habits of thought that keep them confined. These speakers seem devoid of feeling, and they often cannot move beyond the naming— however incisively they name— of their confinement. Their articulation itself is another form of imprisonment, for their authority grows out of a fascination with their condition. Like so many of the characters in Atwood's novels, this kind of speaker can define a problem but cannot transcend it. As a result, the speaker is trapped because her self-proclaimed strength depends on the very structures she wishes to destroy.

At worst, the ability to define a problem breeds an almost arrogant complacency. In this case, the speaker fails to acknowledge that real strength lies within forms of articulation. This kind of strength does not emerge from the brittle composure of the diagnostician. Rather, the energy of an image revises our relation to the world by making us experience it in a new way. Whatever power the voice develops comes from the energy and imagination released by the image, which, of course, exists within the structures of language.

For example, Atwood's poem "Against Still Life" expresses the speaker's need to break through flat surfaces, and yet the poem suggests a respect for the ability to order space. A still life is a two-dimensional form existing at a distance from our lives. The speaker wants to enter this form. She wants to enter the "[O]range in the middle of a table" to discover "everything it has to say." Like-wise, she wants to enter the mind of her lover, and she expresses frustration when she fails. His substance remains that of the silent and self-contained passivity of the still life.

> Your silence
> isn't enough for me
> now, no matter with what
>
> contentment you fold
> your hands together; I want

anything you can say
in the sunlight:

stories of your various
childhoods, aimless journeyings,
your loves: your articulate
skeleton; your posturings; your lies.[5]

She wants the stories that confer some form to the "orange silences" of another intractable being. She wants them so much that she is tempted to "crack your skull / like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin / to make you talk, or get / a look inside." Her violence, a violence that proceeds from frustrated desire, contains its own kind of failure. The speaker cannot enter the object and possess it. In fact, the speaker must fail in that she desires to turn another person into an arrangement of stories and lies. Yet, because the person is not an object and not even the color contained in a still life, but is rendered as an image— "orange silences" — she can discover energy of the image by gently holding it. If silence engenders frustration and violence, violence can become transformed by the power of the image.

For Atwood, touching implies a relinquishment of will and mastery. Rather than appropriation, touch implies the release of the object:

if I take the orange
with care enough and hold it
gently

I may find
an egg
a sun
an orange moon
perhaps a skull; center
of all energy
resting in my hand

Yet this kind of touching seems almost to depend on the distances that will not be bridged:

and you, man, orange afternoon
lover, wherever
you sit across from me
(tables, trains, buses)

if I watch
quietly enough
and long enough

at last, you will say
(maybe without speaking)

Her use of parenthesis in the above line as well as in the poem's next stanza suggest the life that inheres within the stillness of life:

> (there are mountains
> inside your skull
> garden and chaos, ocean
> and hurricane; certain
> corners of rooms, portraits
> of great-grandmothers, curtains
> of a particular shade;
> your deserts; your private
> dinosaurs; the first
> woman)

Yet, this life *is* parenthetical; it exists only as a supposition of the speaker.

The poem contains no assurance that any object or any person will reveal its secrets. Instead, the poem hints that the speaker makes no discoveries, reveals no secrets. These secrets only reflect the speaker's need. Yet, from this need emerges the series of felt images which the speaker releases when she relinquishes will for touch. These images do move beyond the rather conventional ones —"garden and chaos, ocean/ and hurricane; ..."— projected onto the lover's being. Paradoxically, then, energy comes from the still life after all.

Atwood's poems, then, chart a territory and yet remain sceptical about traditional forms of charting. These traditional forms are the myths we readily use in order to avoid undergoing certain kinds of experiences. We would rather diagram experience and make an abstraction of it than enter or feel it. A chart is such an abstraction, and any abstraction, like a map, confers distance and comprehensibility on the ambiguous and complex.

> So now you trace me
> like a country's boundary
> or a strange new wrinkle in
> your wellknown skin, stuck
> down on the outspread map
> of this room, of your mind's continent
> "The Circle Game"

This poem's persona, fixed and wriggling, wants "to break/ ... all the glass cases,/ erase all maps." Likewise, the speaker in "The Reincarnation of Captain Cook" knows the "mistake was my acknowledging/ of maps." This speaker calls for a new geography but also tells us, like Circe in the "Circe/ Mud Poems," that "It's the story that counts" and that "the story is ruthless." We live perilously close to the stories about us. And these stories are abstractions, myths, structures.

These stories are also maps. Like maps, they are not the world but refer to it. Discovering the parallels between ourselves, the land we inhabit, and the stories about us help us determine our connection to nature, how we do live in the world, and what possibilities for living are available to us. Atwood therefore brings person and place together to suggest how they've been similarly treated. In this sense, Atwood is a landscape artist of sorts; the landscape is a cross-section of the social and the natural, the political and the personal.

Atwood's poetry demonstrates the failings of those who speak from within the confines of structures, notably that of language itself, while ostensibly estranged from them. She writes for those who "would rather be trees" ("Circe/Mud Poems,"), not because she necessarily wishes to escape into the vegetable, but because nature provides a corrective to our myths. These myths lead to the falsehoods of the "silver paradise" ("Bus Along St. Clair") built with a bulldozer. Yet, if "at the last/judgment we will all be trees," that time is not yet with us. And, that time is not human time. As she acknowledges:

> ... There are great advantages in being a vegetable, you know, except you lose certain other things, such as the ability to talk. Life is very much simplified. If you think you're a watermelon, you don't have to do anything, you can just sit around. The ideal though would be to integrate yourself as a human being, supposedly.[7]

Yet, this ideal is not attainable in the historical present, and Atwood is a poet of the present tense.

In tone, Atwood's poetry offers a flat landscape of the historical present. Her speakers experience the inner divisions of those who live within an historical present of myths and maps. This explains, in part, Atwood's interest in maps and the relation between a "map" and a poem. She writes that

> What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind.[8]

When, however, a map is a two-dimensional arrangement, it is a "cynical fiction" and a reduction. In "At the Tourist Center in Boston," she finds her native Canada "under glass,/ a white relief—/ map with red dots for the cities,/ reduced ...." Yet, we do need maps, as her guide to Canadian fiction suggests, for they reflect the way we see the world. "Part of where you are," she writes in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Fiction*, "is where you've been."[9] In this sense, a map suggests our complex relation to our past and our present, for it helps us see how we conceive of ourselves. A geography of the mind, moreover,

can help us comprehend the landscape of inner experience as it moves us beyond the falsifying structures of diagram.

The map, like the poem, is a necessity, for it points to the territory of self, a territory that needs rediscovery. Atwood is a poet who refuses to surrender the distances implied by maps or even by language. Distances must be maintained to confirm individuality and to provide a structure through which a voice may speak. These distances, the source of her irony, are also the subjects of her poems. In "This is a Photograph of Me," we discern the meaning of these distances in terms of another dominant image, that of the photograph.[10] The photograph records a distance, for its image suggests the discontinuity between past and present— "It was taken some time ago." The photograph is itself a kind of map, and like the map it can violate the spirit of place while constituting it. Like a still life, the photograph represents a static arrangement of objects. By using images such as these, Atwood renders the abstractions she denounces. Yet, the photograph, the map, and the still life represent the paradoxical nature of a form which denies life while it simultaneously releases the power of the imagination through its structure.

In the case of the photograph, a composed abstraction denies life in the name of celebrating a moment of it. The photograph stops, preserves, and distorts time. Even if the photograph implies the photographer, that central perspective which organizes the scene, the photographer is certainly absent. The photograph is a tableau, not a living thing. Yet, the tableau speaks. The arrangement of objects tells a story by reproducing time. The picture "talks" to us.

Of course, the photograph is not the speaker, for the speaker in the poem is "in the lake, in the center/of the picture, just under the surface." The speaker lives, in the poem, between the parenthesis of the last four stanzas:

> (The photograph was taken
> the day after I drowned.
> ....
> but if you look long enough,
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.)

Obviously, the speaker is constituted by the images of the poem Nonetheless,

> 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

Whose difficulty is this? It is the reader's in that the reader must enter the lost landscape of the poem for the speaker to come alive. We, as readers, must see clearly to the light beneath the water. At the same time, the difficulty is also the speaker's, who is implicity pleading for recognition. The speaker implores the reader to look beneath surfaces.

The speaker's voice emerges from a dead arrangement of objects and asserts both death and life. Life comes from the implicit plea to be seen, which is a plea to be heard and to be connected to other living things. Yet, the voice also suggests that it is produced, ironically enough, through modern technological apparatus. Technology, and even artifice, shape the self. In the schism between a self completely conditioned by the instruments of culture and a self that asserts its own value, Atwood develops a contemporary voice.

Atwood's dry idiom therefore creates the flat, map-like scene whereby we can see, as Emily Dickinson says, "internal difference/ Where the Meanings, are." The voice she creates often speaks of the need to transform the landscape. Yet, these transformations depend on the structures internalized by the speaker. For example, the speaker of "They eat out" exerts a certain kind of power over her lover as they "argue/over which of us will pay for your funeral/though the real question is/ whether or not I will make you immortal." Ironically, she resolves the argument by raising her "magic fork" to murder him and to change him thereby into a parodic superhero:

> the ceiling opens
> a voice sings Love is a Many
> Splendoured Thing
> you hang suspended above the city
> in blue tights and a red cape,
> your eyes flashing in unison.

So much for the ambitious desire to achieve immortality through art:

> The other diners regard you
> some with awe, some only with boredom:
> They cannot decide if you are a new weapon
> or only a new advertisement.

The speaker's composed authority betrays itself, however. She renders herself powerless with the very stereotypes she transforms. In "She considers evading him," the speaker asserts that she "can change my-/self more easily/than I can change you," but the changes signify her own defeat. The speaker's sarcasm turns back on itself, and she seems actually resistant to change. Disparaging stereotypes is easier than altering them. Her range of choices suggest as much, for they include the descent into the vegetable, or stasis; regression to the

"woman image" of fertility; or an ironic movement forward into the picture of "arthritic and genteel" old ladies. These changes signify no change, so that the final alternative, the "one twist further," represents less a disparagement of the man than of the speaker herself:

> I could collapse across your
> bed clutching my heart
> and pull the nostalgic sheet up over
> my waxed farewell smile
> which would be inconvenient
> but final.

Presumably, the speaker condemns the traditional patterns established from women, but these evasions— which she only considers— lock her into the pattern she mocks.

A formed or structured identity represents the absence of living experience. Yet, without such an acknowledgement of structure or identity, we can have no voice at all. Atwood's poems do operate from the tacit recognition that a poetic voice is a "dead" voice. In "This is a Photograph of Me," she suggests that art, something like the photograph, produces a scene from which a living being is perforce absent. The human element that inhabits the scene can only be discerned with the assistance of the reader. "You" appears in the poem as early as the second stanza. Yet, "I" does enter the poem. The poetic voice asserts itself, however ironically, even as a voice from the dead.

In other words, poetry provides certain conventions by which a voice may come into being. This commonplace becomes more interesting when we consider it in terms of Atwood's, and possibly women's, poetry generally. The conventions available to a self-consciously female voice are often considered particularly destructive. Traditional conventions of speech and habits of thought, part of anyone's self-image, need to be excised, but Atwood also knows that this is a potentially self-mutilating prospect.

For example, the speaker in "The Double Voice" articulates its own split experience, and suggests a larger problem connected with the development of a voice. We do not of course listen to Margaret Atwood speaking her poems; rather, as in "This is a Photograph of Me," we watch the process involved in the creation of a voice:

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

This voice represents an identity but also indicates that identity is temporary, evanescent, and depends on many things, from the listener or viewer to modern technology.

Similarly, in "Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age," the speaker confronts her reproduction:

> but whose is this vapid face
> pitted and vast, rotund
> suspended in empty paper
> as though in a telescope

The daguerreotype evokes the past and hints at the way memory distorts the past. Moreover, the daguerreotype shows us how a sense of self is developed and the ways we are simultaneously distanced from that image of self. The image records a distance, which is our distance from ourselves. So self-divided, we are dismembered:

> I take this picture of myself
> and with my sewing scissors
> cut out the face.
>
> Now it is more accurate:
>
> where my eyes were,
> every-
> thing appears[11]

Yet, in Atwood's poetry, we often begin to see through dismemberment. By mutilating a picture of ourselves, we can learn to see through it. We can move from the two-dimensional to the world beyond. Of course, we are still conditioned by an image and still made to peer through vacant eyeholes. After all, to begin to see *because* we have been dismembered is not a comfortable prospect.

In attempting to overcome the divided sensibilities mapped onto us by the world in which we live, Atwood's poetry makes us enter the flat world. She does so by employing a voice horrifying in its suppressed anger, self-deprecating irony, and cool detachment. Of course, the poetic risk is a great one, for Atwood's poetry often appears as cool and detached as a still life. Yet, this poetry occupies a significant place in the development of a contemporary women's poetry. It suggests the dangers of an overly objectivized reaction to the very things that dehumanize all of us. At the same time, it does not rest with a facile humanization of the world or with an easy surrender to self-expression.

To humanize the world is to avoid dealing directly with an experience of the world in all its horror. To name the world is to reinvigorate falsifying structures:

> In that country the animals
> have the faces of people:
>
> ....
>
> the bull, embroidered

with blood and given
an elegant death, trumpets, his name
stamped on him, heraldic brand
because
....
he is really a man
"The Animals in that Country"

Yet, without these structures, we have no way to begin, however painfully, to cut through them. Yet, Atwood asks us "[I]f a man feels he can survive only by amputating himself, turning himself into a cripple or a eunuch, what price survival?"[12] Cutting is an act of violence, and violence, unfortunately, is a feature of this country, this landscape:

In this country the animals
have the faces of
animals.

Their eyes
flash once in car headlights
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant.

They have the faces of
no-one.

Denise Levertov writes that the poem is a "record of inner song,"[13] something different from everyday speech though dependent on it. To her, the poem records an inner vocabulary of rhythms and sounds, a vocabulary different from that used by our speaking voice. Atwood, like so many women poets, suggests that the life of this inner song is ransomed by the many speaking voices we have internalized. As a result, both inner song and speaking voice are divided against themselves.

Atwood's poetry explores these divisions but not merely to name them and surrender to them. Rather, her poetry intends to bring us closer to those images which evoke the precious transiency of life in this country.

Close your eyes now, see:
red sun, black sun, ordinary
sun, sunshine, sun-
king, sunlight soap, the sun,
is an egg, a lemon, a pale eye,
a lion, sun
on the beach, ice on the sun.[14]

A poetry that charts the terrain we inhabit, however divided, and the terrain inhabiting us, is a poetry that takes measure of our place in the world. This is a poetry of risk, for it is a poetry of flatness that threatens to stay flat. However, within it we may be able to open new spaces and to discover a world less single-mindedly dependent on measurement than ours. Muriel Rukeyser gives us an insight into this process when she says:

> If our imaginative response to life were complete, if we were fully conscious of emotion, if we apprehended surely the relations that make us know the beautiful, we would be— what? The heroes of our myths, acting perfectly among these faculties, loving appropriately and living with appropriate risk, spring up at the question. We invented them to let us approach that life. But it is our own lives of which they remind us. They offer us a hope and a perspective, of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future.[15]

NOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, ed., *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 119.
2. See also Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979), pp. 33-56.
3. Tillie Olsen, "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One out of Twelve," *College English* 34 (October 1972), p. 16.
4. See Jane Lilienfeld, "Silence and Scorn in a Lyric of Intimacy: The Progress of Margaret Atwood's Poetry," *Women's Studies* 7 (1980), p. 183, who argues that Atwood's work represents the struggle against the "male embodiment of the voice women in this culture have ingested with their selfhood."
5. All poems in this essay, unless otherwise noted, can be found in Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).
6. See Gordon Johnston, "The Ruthless Story and the Future Tense in Margaret Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems'," *Studies in Canadian Literature* V (1980), p. 176: "Circe's attitude toward the ruthlessness of myth is inevitably ambivalent." He argues that Atwood conceives of myth as a kind of pattern, and "the intellectual comprehension of the pattern is sometimes in conflict with the intuition of immediate truth about it," p. 168.
7. Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi Press Ltd., 1973), p. 26.
8. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi Press Ltd., 1972), p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
10. For a fuller discussion of this poem and its place in the volume *The Circle Game*, see Arnold E. Davidson, "Entering *The Circle Game:* Margaret Atwood's Beginnings as a Poet," *Concerning Poetry* 12 (1979), pp. 47-54.
11. For a more complete examination of the voices in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* see Arnold E. Davidson, "The Different Voices in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie," CEA Critic* 43, vol. 1, pp. 14-20.
12. Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Fiction*, p. 33.
13. Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 24.
14. Margaret Atwood, "Two-Headed Poems," in *Two-Headed Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 65.
15. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., Inc., 1974), p. 41.