
SHE CANNOT DENY ANYTHING HUMAN: ATWOOD AND TECHNOLOGY

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In 1980, Margaret Atwood delivered an address, "An End to Audience?" in the *Dorothy J. Killam Lecture Series* at Dalhousie University in which she had this to say about the role of the writer:

Writing, no matter what its subject, is an act of faith; the primary faith being that someone out there will read the results. I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are. If the writer is very lucky and manages to live long enough, I think it can also be an act of charity. It takes a lot to see what is there, both without flinching or turning away and without bitterness. The world exists; the writer testifies. She cannot deny anything human.¹

Second Words, p. 349

I cite these words because I want to establish at once that despite desperate rumour otherwise, Margaret Atwood is not a shaman, a witch, a magician, a dermatophobe, an agrophobe, a proto-Marxist — or whatever else it is she has been called. She thinks of herself (rightly I would say) in a clear-headed, tough-minded way as a novelist/poet/writer, trying "to see what is there". One who writes *fiction*. And though she does have a rather moralistic sense of her role, she would no doubt at once deny that — saying "no morality, only seeing".

The argument of this paper, which proceeds through summary accounts of recent critical theory concerned with her work, is that Atwood's poetry concerns perception — is technically perceptual and reflexive — but in special ways that I think creates difficulties. It is virtually impossible to talk of her work without moralizing it, without seeing it in allegorical and moral

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terms. Her conceptual framework is existential psychology, derived, I think, from the work of Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing; her mode ironic, affirmation by denial; her concern the invisible, the mythic, the edge of fantasy, a structure of images of all that *isn't* there. The consequence is that for the reader misreading is virtually inevitable and this accounts both for the fascination of her work and the wide difference of opinion about the nature of her achievement.

I mean also to say that there are special difficulties in addressing problems like that posed by the discourse on technology with respect to a novelist like Atwood, or any novelist or poet, for that matter. I certainly want to put limits on what can sensibly or comfortably be said about Atwood and technology despite the fact that the rich texture of imagery in her comments hints at quite extraordinary possibilities, about vision, transformation, metamorphosis, about compassion and knowledge. There is in her work an intriguing contrast between plainness and complex wisdom that hints at but does not finally reveal what could be called a final position, an ultimate statement. Her art, in the end, consists of not saying, of holding back. Reticence. As she says in "*Mushrooms*:"

Here is the handful
of shadow I have brought back to you:
this decay, this hope, this mouth-
ful of dirt, this poetry.

True Stories, p. 93

In the collection of critical essays which she and Lorraine Weir edited, Sherrill Grace provides, in her article, "Articulating the 'Space Between': Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings," an intellectual context from two points of view for viewing Atwood's work: 1) Atwood's *system*, that is, the structuralist way of referring to a set of codes that structure a writer's work (text), linguistically or imagistically; and 2) comparatively, considering the work of writers contemporary with her. This has to do with the Canadian tradition specifically, most particularly with writers like Dennis Lee and David Godfrey.²

Addressing the first set of terms, Atwood's system, Grace emphasizes what she calls the synchronic aspects of Atwood's, its coherence. Her "system" does not change or develop over her career.³ Grace distinguishes four basic elements of structure in her work: duality, nature, self, and language. It is perhaps not at all surprising that these are at once recognizable as elements of contemporary critical theory, or that very different views of their importance and values have been held from Barthes and Foucault to Derrida.

Grace addresses herself to three questions about these structural elements

of Atwood's work: 1) her use of cultural codes (the means deployed to develop the recurrent dualities of her work — culture/nature; male/female; straight line/curved space; head/body; reason/instinct; victor/victim); 2) the system of values or ethical position that directs her art; and 3) that illuminates how and why she articulates the "space between" the area where the dualities are resolved, if indeed they even are or can be. The intent of this questioning or analysis becomes clear in Grace's distinction between a static system and dynamic process, the crucial point in her analysis of Atwood's dualities.

Atwood's system, in this sense, is not a static but a dynamic process in which the works constitute a coherent argument, a dialectic (which is closer to Marx than Hegel because it eschews transcendence), while each individual text functions dynamically, moving through a series of poetic or narrative strategies. ... Furthermore, Atwood identifies human failure as acquiescence in those Western dichotomies which postulate the inescapable, static division of the world into hostile opposites. ...

Grace, *Atwood, Language, Text and System*, p. 5.

The dialectical aspects of Atwood's cultural position can be taken first, in materialistic terms (a causal connection between a culture and the economic foundation of the society in which the culture is found — to use the terms Rick Salutin uses in his essay on Atwood in the *Malahat Review*^A) and second, in psychological or linguistic terms — in the relation between culture and the artist, presumably through form and language. One notes that this last matter creates a terrible paradox or contradiction, not ever, I think, satisfactorily resolved. I deal with this point later.

In brief, Sherrill Grace's analysis serves to focus the major questions about Atwood's cultural vision, the nature of the dualities she poses and the degree to which those are either broken down or resolved. For the purpose of this discussion of technology, of course, the important duality would be taken to be world and self, manifesting itself in nature as opposed to culture, the opposition head/body, or male/female. It should be obvious that to raise a question as to the resolution of oppositions is not to question Atwood's *attitude*. There is no question as to which side she is on, or that she would seek to transcend or resolve oppositions. Her success is another question entirely.

To say that the means of resolution of the dichotomies is language also seems to me to serve no purpose at all, at least so long as the examples given are essentially hortatory:

When will you learn

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the flame and the wood/flesh
it burns are whole and the same.⁵

This example, after all, is part of a larger poem with its own resolution and paradox. Grace, we note, does not quote any of the rest of the poem. I cite the last half:

You attempt merely power
you accomplish merely suffering

How long do you expect me to wait
while you cauterize your
senses, one
after another
turning yourself to an
impervious glass tower?

How long will you demand I love you?

I'm through, I won't make
any more flowers for you

I judge you as the trees do
by dying

The other of Grace's examples seem to me to imply the same moralistic rather than linguistic effect, the same devout hope rather than linguistic resolution. If the space between dualities is somehow *in* language, the instances describe but do not *effect* it: "A Place: fragments" (*The Circle Game*), "A Book of Ancestors" (*You Are Happy*), *Two Headed Poems*, *Surfacing*.

The nature/culture distinction developed in *Survival* and *Surfacing*, for example, may provide Atwood's most elaborate account of the significance of technology in contemporary society in nationalist, feminist, and ecological terms. It also connects with Grace's second set of terms for viewing Atwood, the comparative, or the connection between Atwood's writing and her contemporaries. There is no question that in the seventies Canadian writers, notably but not solely Atwood, Lee, and Godfrey, mounted a sustained critique of North American liberalism conceived, in George Grant's language, as technology. The connection of technology and fate in Grant's analysis permitted a kind of neo-primitivism to arise as a means to redemption, somewhere out of civilization in the wilderness. But as a *resolution* to oppositions, this approach is no more certain than elsewhere in contemporary work. Atwood's hedging about native Indian cosmology or speech patterns is no more positive than her so-called dynamic dualism or

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violent duality (to use Sherrill Grace's term). Primitivism might provide the "necessary model for a more integrated holistic view of life" but as Marie-Francoise Guedon remarks of *Surfacing* "Neither the heroine nor author makes any attempt to recreate or display an Indian perception of the world nor do the rare Indian characters. The setting is thoroughly modern and Euro-Canadian." ("*Surfacing: Amerindian Themes and Shamanism*", *Atwood: Language, Text and System*, p. 91). So much too for shamanism. "In *Surfacing* ... the essence of the shamanic world is absent."

My position is that Atwood's dualism of mind/body or technique/instinct remains unresolved, either in primitivistic perceptions or in linguistic revisions or phenomenology. I use two examples, one from *The Animals in That Country*, the other from *Power Politics*. I use these because one provides a very strong version of the duality implied in the treatment of technology as a mind/body division, the second an equally powerful example of the male/female dichotomy in terms that connect with cultural imperialism, technique, pop culture, and the culture/nature dichotomy. Both provide fine examples of Atwood's poetic technique and themes consistently developed throughout her work.⁶ "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein" offers one of the examples. Gothic, scientific, rationalized, it gives us the torn body, the decimated being of man perceived dualistically, rationally, and as Ellen Moers tells us in a brilliant analysis ("*The Female Gothic*", *Literary Women* [New York: 1976]) reduplicated monstrously:

I was insane with skill:
I made you perfect.

I should have chosen instead
to curl you small as a seed,

trusted beginnings. Now I wince
before this plateful of results:

Core and rind, the flesh between
already turning rotten.

I stand in the presence
of the destroyed god:

a rubble of tendons,
knuckles and raw sinews.

Knowing the work is mine
how can I love you?

(*Selected Poems*, 66)

Dr. Frankenstein addresses his creation here in unmistakable language.

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This *is* what a botched creation is, the means of a death/birth confusion that is the real meaning of technology. *Not* by any means, the articulation of the spaces between. Of course, Atwood doesn't approve of Frankenstein. That surely is the meaning of the poem. But disapproval is not a resolution.

So too in that epitome of the technological isolation of man and woman — *Power Politics*, the poetry speaks in the unmistakable language of dualism as in "They Eat Out":

I raise the magic fork
over the plate of beef fried rice
and plunge it into your heart.

There is a faint pop, a sizzle
and through your own split head
you rise up glowing;

the ceiling opens
a voice sings Love is a Many
Splendoured Thing

You hang suspended over the city
in blue tights and red cape,
Your eyes flashing in unison.

... ..

As for me, I continue eating;
I liked you better the way you were
but you were always ambitious.

(*Selected Poems*, pp. 144-145)

Now, what has been said to this point is by no means an analysis of Atwood's language, only a version of characteristic tone and imagery. Elsewhere, notably in the hallucinatory passages of the climactic section of *Surfacing* and increasingly throughout the later poems — in *True Stories* and in *Two-Headed Poems*, the subject/object duality we notice begins to disappear into a kind of processual, phenomenological speech that takes us into experience in special ways. This effect has been commented on but so far as the purposes of this paper are concerned to very little effect;⁷ two notable exceptions, of course, are the stylistic analysis of Atwood's prose by Robert Cluett and comments by his student, Jayne Patterson.⁸

Both show, through stylistic analysis, how the language and style of Atwood's novels portray the process of objectification — that is, of dehumanizing — and how subsequent humanization occurs to the narrators. In short, each provides a graphic account of the fusing links of language

and technology in society. Cluett's marvellous introductory phrases to his article provide a beautiful impressionistic version of the analytical discussion that follows and because it is one of the best accounts of Atwood's speech and performance I know I take the liberty of quoting it in full:

As anyone knows who has been to one of her readings, the peculiar lingering flavour of Margaret Atwood's poetry read aloud derives only partly from the text and its brutally skewed ikons. What truly stays with one is the remarkable bleached voice from which all devices of oral colouring have been ruthlessly laundered: the reading is given with no variation in either pitch or volume and with as little provision of stress as the English language will allow; the ikons hang starkly in the air, suspended almost as though self-willed, with no specifically human intervention.

(*Atwood, Language, Text and System*, p. 67)

The self-willed ikons of Atwood's prose, like those of her poetry, show us the images of the dehumanized world her language largely portrays. And if, as Cluett and Patterson suggest, her novels (and I suspect her poetry) in the end move elsewhere (say to the "spaces between" where dualities are resolved), the main effect is, as Cluett says, of the world we, sadly, inhabit.

I close with a final point. It has to do with the difference between technology conceived as material rationalization or as a definition of the world as object — an objective view of nature, versus technology defined or understood as information processing or a definition of the world as language, technology understood as neurological operations. A distinction of this sort or one very like it lies somewhere behind what we have come to speak of as the difference between a modernist culture and a postmodern culture. In Canadian writing it is, I suspect, the difference between the terms in which Atwood understands or conceives of technology and those in which writers like Robert Kroetsch, B.P. Nichol, and Christopher Dewdney understand technology. It is the difference between *True Stories* and Kroetsch's *Field Notes*, Nichol's *Martyrology*, and Dewdney's *Alter Sublime* or more especially his recently published *Predators of the Adoration*.⁹

The difference more specifically reflects a change in contemporary poetics and culture from a psychology of depths or surfaces to a poetics of the field of linguistic texture and its parallel in neurological patterns. The design of Dewdney's work, remarks Stan Dragland in his perceptive afterword to *Predators of the Adoration*, "... is 'to reduce a certain/inevitability into dance. ...'"¹⁰ What lies behind this new neurology of speech and poetry is the dismantling of what has been called "the metaphysics of presence" and accordingly the replacing of duality of mind/object with process which "punctures ... the apparently solid compartments of the physical world and

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the mind."¹¹ It is in the "spaces between" that the poetry of process exists but (and this is the argument of this paper) we find that not in Atwood's reticences but in Kroetsch's multiple narrative voices and linguistic play or in Dewdney's dialectical puns, syntactical feedbacks and parenthetical deconstruction of continuities. One example from Dewdney will have to do, a "breathtaking leap" that opens the poem to a new space on the other side of the words:

The Parenthetical HER SWEET UNDERWATER PUDDINGS

Like sticking your arm through the dry plaster wall of your bedroom and having it emerge out the other side. The next room is dark and filled with warm water. Your arm is immersed to the elbow and slippery creatures brush your skin. This is the dike of your mind. You are a Dutch boy and the only person *this* ocean belongs to is *you*. And you can't stand there forever.

Like sticking your arm through the dry plaster wall of your bedroom and having it emerge out the other side. The next room is dark and filled with warm water. Your arm is immersed to the elbow and slippery creatures brush your skin. (like sticking the wall through a dry plaster bedroom of your skin) (your arse is endured to the elbow by slippery animals that review your sins) (you are constantly filled with the creatures and your reasoning for them) (this then is the wretched repose of our elders in latin). This is the dike of your mind. You are a Dutch boy and the only person *this* ocean is real to is *you*. And you can't stand there forever.

Like (alike) sticking (it out) your arm (or) through (glass) the dry (words) plaster wall of (remote-control) your (nerve-studio) bedroom and (merely watching) having (undergone before) it emerge out (the other side of) the other (way) side. The next (scene) room (hitherto unsuspected) is dark and filled (constantly)

with warm (fluids) water. Your (muscular contraction) arm is (buoying) immersed (solid) to the elbow and (furthermore) slippery (reels) creatures brush (matrimony) your skin. This (then) is the (reasoning) like of (gold) your mind. You are (wretched) a Dutch boy (pure) and the only (delay) person *this* ocean (wonder) belongs to is you. And you (cannot) can't stand (it) there forever.

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Notes

1. Margaret Atwood, *Second Words* (Anansi: Toronto, 1982). All references are to Atwood's *Selected Poems* (Oxford University Press: Toronto, 1976) with the exception of *True Stories* (Oxford University Press: Toronto, 1981)
2. Sherrill Grace, "Articulating the 'Space Between': Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings" in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System* eds. Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir (University of British Columbia: 1983), p. 4.
3. We notice the connection between Grace's critical methodology and her conclusions.
4. Rick Salutin, "A Note on the Marxism of Atwood's *Survival*," *Malabar Review* 41 (1977).
5. Grace, p. 8.
6. If there is anything to Grace's view of Atwood's synchronic system, then examples from Atwood's early work should be as potent as from her later. We need not look for corrections of early mistaken emphasis through any development or maturing. See Grace, p. 4.
7. See Mandel, "Atwood's Poetic Politics," Grace and Weir, *Atwood: Language, Text and System*. Frank Davey, *Surviving the Paraphrase* (Turnstone: 1983).
8. Robert Cluett, "Surface Structure: The Syntactic Profile of *Surfacing*," *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*, eds. Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir (University of British Columbia, 1983); and M. Jayne Patterson, "The Taming of Externals", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, (Vol. VII, November, 1982).
9. Christopher Dewdney, *Predators of the Adoration, Selected Poems, 1972-82* (McLelland and Stewart: 1983). For my own discussion of Dewdney's poetry elsewhere see "The New Phrenologists: Christopher Dewdney", *The Literary Half-Yearly* (New Delhi, Nov. 1983).
10. Dragland, "Afterword", *Predators of the Adoration*, p. 195.
11. Dragland, 198.
12. Dewdney, *Predators of the Adoration*, pp. 95-96.