

FROM THE NEW JERUSALEM TO THE WASTELAND: MARGARET ATWOOD'S APOCALYPTIC POETRY

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At first I was given centuries
to wait in caves, in leather
tents, knowing you would never come back

Then it speeded up: only
several years between
the day you jangled off
into the mountains, and the day (it was
spring again) I rose from the embroidery
frame at the messenger's entrance.

That happened twice, or was it
more; and there was once, not so
long ago, you failed,
and came back in a wheelchair
with a mustache and a sunburn
and were unsufferable.

(Power Politics)

Margaret Atwood is among those who confront most vehemently the problematics of power politics in their writing. Her poems, like many of her novels and short stories, are often an indictment of society's driving forces of violence, conquest, domination and death. Many a reader has felt the physical impact of her representations of cruelty, such as those in "A Women's Issue", a poem from her 1981 collection *True Stories*, that is a graphic, crude yet clinical representation of practices inflicted on women's bodies from east to west and from past to present - practices such as rape, mutilation, penetration, prostitution and murder. Consequently, much criticism has focussed on the dimension of social analysis in Atwood's works, on her acerbic and rather frontal attacks on all paradigms of dominance and subservience. But in fact, Atwood is a master of shifting and indirection who resorts systematically to an oblique mode in both prose and poetry. Among her strategies is the indirect language of literature posited by Roland Barthes, who argues that literature names *things* in detail so as to suggest *concepts*. In the poem that this paper examines, we shall also see how Atwood explodes the mode of realism with her special blend of magical realism and neo-surrealism, mixes the lyric and the narrative, shifts focus from the centre to the margin, displaces point of view, disrupts and dislocates temporality, and through a strategy based on

ellipsis and acceleration, drives the receiver towards an ending that desacralizes a powerful apocalyptic tradition by paradoxically suggesting an apocalypse through lack of closure.

The poem analysed is an untitled one taken from the 1971 collection *Power Politics*. Blending the strategy of story-telling with the rhythm and intensity of lyrical poetry and its central concern of love and loss as concretized by the violets and fading snapshot, Atwood's prose lyric pivots around the metaphorical resonances of conventional objects grounded in the real and the allegorical. Although the term itself is absent, war is everpresent in the semantic field of machinery, technology, and battle gear. The poem is an indictment of the endless wars that tear our social fabric, that destroy lives - not just the lives of those killed, but of those left behind. Like "A Women's Issue", it shifts focus from centre to margin, and examines war not from the perspective of those who go off to fight and die, but from those who must stay and wait. The poem is in fact grounded in the motif of waiting, which encapsulates the concepts of passivity and powerlessness, as Atwood suggests in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the novel, the protagonist Offred muses on the nineteenth century obsession with painting harems, of representing "fat women lolling on divans", and wonders about the allegedly erotic function of these "studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there"(79). She concludes, with a strikingly significant anacoluthon:

They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women *do* it, for men.(79, emphasis mine)

Part of the unsettling originality of the poem, then, is that it focuses on intervals, on the amounts of "unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing" that Offred describes as "white sound" (79). Even more unsettling is the fact that it takes the point of view of these 'objects not in use', left in 'suspended animation'. An enigmatic 'I' addressing an absent 'you' turns out to be a generic 'I' representing all women since Eve, whose apparent retrospection blends lyricism and narrative in vignettes that fit together to make up a fable or parable, about the human condition throughout the millennia.

Time before last though, I remember
I had a good eight months between
running alongside the train, skirts hitched, handing
you violets in at the window
and opening the letter; I watched
your snapshot fade for twenty years.

And last time (I drove to the airport
still dressed in my factory
overalls, the wrench

I had forgotten sticking out of the back
pocket; there you were,
zippered and helmeted, it was zero
hour, you said Be
Brave) it was at least three weeks before
I got the telegram and could start regretting.

Situated at the intersection of free verse and story-telling, the implicit and the elliptic, this prose lyric shatters modes, or rather explodes the realistic mode by intermingling it with a disturbing magical realism, or rather neo-surrealism, a mode which characteristically immerses us into the irrational, into madness or dream. Although the poem is true to the neo-surreal current choosing the general and the universal over any specific time or place, a certain 'effet de réel' is produced in small brushstrokes by the matter-of-fact conversational tone (enhanced by rhetorical devices producing the illusion of orality, such as epanorthosis or parenthesis), and by recourse to homely, utilitarian objects such as the snapshot, wheelchair, or wrench. But this is simultaneously disrupted by the accelerating time sequences that cannot be the experience of a single 'I', that cannot be other than a magical vision that blurs hindsight and prophecy in the manner of much apocalyptic literature.

But recently, the bad evenings
there are only seconds
between the warning on the radio and the
explosion; my hands
don't reach you

and on quieter nights
you jump from
your chair without even touching your dinner
and I can scarcely kiss you goodbye
before you run out into the street and they shoot

The oneiric, surreal quality generated by an 'I' narrator who is simultaneously Multiple and One, and who never dies, is compounded by the proteiform effect of the 'you' who dies over and over again. As Helmut Bonheim points out in his study of second person narrations, the 'you' is always "a Protean shape-shifter". In Atwood's poem, notably, the 'you' is an addressee both within the fictive world and outside it. The 'you' as internal addressee contains a neutral 'one': it is a more dramatic form encapsulating all men, all the while implicating more particularly the external receiver or reader, who thus finds that his or her act of reading has taken on a certain performative aspect. As Bakhtin remarks in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the 'you' throws a supplementary light on our perception of ourselves, for never being able to see

ourselves entirely, we need the gaze of the Other. Atwood's 'you' is in effect the readerly 'I' in the eyes of the Other.

With Atwood's vignettes in which events are endlessly re-lived rather than remembered, the eye of the mind fuses with the physical eye - fast forward to the present and beyond. The rhetorical strategy involved is inherently that of anamnesis, or calling to mind, in which the evocation of past event is substituted for the expression of a present feeling or idea. The Catholic Church makes use of anamnesis in its liturgy, notably in the prayers following the consecration that are devoted to the memory of the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, and that serve to make sense of present experience. In literature, too, remembered events or flashbacks are often re-experienced in the present by the protagonist and the receiver, and serve to throw light on actions or motivations. Some writers, Faulkner and Atwood among them, go further, using anamnesis to conquer Time, fusing in a flash of immortality past and future into an eternal present imprinted with the origin/ality of experience, of the dawn of creation.

Interestingly, the 'I' of Atwood's prose lyric straddles past, present and future as does the God of *The Apocalypse*, who alone can be conjugated in all tenses. No one can fail to remark that in *The Apocalypse* or *The Book of Revelation*, Saint John repeatedly presents or invokes God in ternary structures of preterite, present, and future tenses. Unlike the Beast that "was, but is not" (17:8:1-2 (emphases mine unless specified otherwise). God is "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending (...) which is, and which was, and which is to come" (1:8:1-4)¹. We remark that John innumerably positions the present tense first, in a significant flash back and flash forward technique that breaks away from linear temporality and places God in a cyclical, eternal present.

In Atwood's poem, too, Time is elastic, both expanding and contracting. At first sight, time is compressed, even obliterated. The contraction of intervals is such that past, present and future are interchangeable, fused into one. Atwood presents the paradigm of violence and destruction in a cyclical mode of exponential acceleration directly proportional to the decreasing duration suspending death: the further we go in time, the greater the speed, in a mathematically escalating fashion heightened by the systematic use of run-on lines. The countdown from centuries to years, then months, weeks, hours and seconds to an ersatz "zero hour" and beyond, are concretized by conventional objects that signal an evolution in modes of communication and transportation.

Atwood's mode consisting in naming *things* so as to suggest *concepts*, corresponds, as I have already suggested, to the strategy that Roland Barthes has identified as the indirect language of literature:

¹. Also see *Revelation* 1:4:3-5, 4:8:5-6, 11:17:2-3.

nommer en détail les choses afin de ne pas nommer leur sens dernier et tenir cependant sans cesse ce sens menaçant, désigner le monde comme un répertoire de signes dont on ne dit pas ce qu'ils signifient. (232)

In essence, the practice of naming an object alone makes it possible not to limit the sign to a single meaning, and to allow it to resonate in a fertile way, or, to use Barthes's poetic term, to 'tremble'. Atwood's objects resonate more than any concept she or we could name, for as Barthes has noted, " le sens de l'objet tremble toujours, non celui du concept " (232). But in her repertory of objects that signify beyond their referent, the stasis of the cave era rather allegorically gives way to the mobility of the jangling horse, and then of the train and the plane, accompanied by a shift from soothing liquid consonants to the staccato of plosives and dental consonants. In a parallel fashion, the news of the death of the husband or lover is 'never' relayed in prehistoric, prerecorded times, is transmitted orally through a messenger in pre-literate days, then in modern times through the letter, and finally through the more technological medium of the telegram². The acceleration picks up such speed that in a mirror reversal, the radio message precedes the death, and in a final cyclical movement, there is no announcement at all. The litany-like patterns of symmetrical structures, repetition, augmentation, and variation culminate in an ultimate shifting of gears signalled by the final blank space of the visual lay-out, the coordinator 'but', and the shift from preterite to present tense. These devices paradoxically reinforce the dimension of ineluctability, even permanence, all the while calling attention to the vertiginous process.

Meanwhile, time also expands, slows and stops. Space and distance are distorted, mobility and immobility fused. In the last two stanzas particularly, we witness a blurring of movement with stasis. The shift to the iterative aspect vehicled by the present tense produces endlessly repeated explosions and shootings, hands eternally reaching, forever grasping empty air. The intervals preceding and following death are confused and blurred. The elision of intervals is progressive: " several years between " in stanza 2 become " only seconds between " in the second last stanza, replaced in turn in the last stanza by negative sememes (" without ", " scarcely "). The plain adjunction of events, no longer presented as being successive, but as being simultaneous, is underscored by polysyndeton, the excessive repetition of the coordinator 'and'. The shift from capital letter at the beginning of each stanza to the lower case beginning the last stanza, in effect cancelling the blank space that visually separates the units, also contributes to the impression of filling in gaps, of closing in. But the final stanza is not final and does not close. It aporetically breaks off yet opens out, with a deliberately open-ended structure and absent full stop raising the possibility that things can continue

². The vestimentary code also works in parallel, with the transition notably from long skirts to factory overalls.

in this way *ad infinitum*. The effect is that of a coexisting double actualisation - both interruption and continuity. The protean 'you' is shot down in the street, his life cut off even as the sentence structure is cut off. In the understated, indeterminate cotextual environment generated by a majority of feminine endings, the masculine ending here reinforces the finality of rupture that the anacoluthon of " the bad evenings/ there are only seconds " has proleptically announced. These multiple breaks or deaths embody or concretize the ultimate interruption of cosmic collapse in all its irrevocability. Yet in a complementary fashion to the iterative announced by the plural " on quieter nights ", the absence of the full stop as well as the blankness of the page that follows make the shot ring around the world, freeze the acts of violence and death and project them into the realm of the absolute. The 'you' who is us all is doomed to die always forever, sign of the impending apocalyptic cataclysm forever looming.

In *The Apocalypse of Saint John*, the apostle mingles exophoric references to historical, geographical sites, such as the Euphrates river or the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and other parts of Asia, with references to locations such as Jerusalem and Babylon that exist geographically but that function metaphorically, even synecdochically (Babylon ironically enough signifying in Jewish and Christian circles not only the abstract concept of corruption, but also the physical city of Rome, its concrete embodiment.) The layered nature of these sites is blurred even further by the juxtaposition with mythical, visionary spaces such as the court of Heaven. These are spaces of the mind, or mystical spaces, and yet they bear the material attributes of physical spaces: the apostle's description of the throne of God evokes a surprising minerality. The one who sits on it is like " a jasper and a sardine-stone " (4:3:2), it is surrounded by a rainbow like " an emerald " (4:3:4), and " a sea of glass like unto crystal " (4:6:2). The creatures sitting round the throne are identifiable species (a lion, a calf, an eagle), but are marvellously hybrid in ways that are remarkably detailed - one has a human face, and they all have six wings full of eyes. Saint John's use of numbers is another instance of the apparently factual as mere container for the symbolic, the precise as mere vehicle for the general or universal. The repeated occurrences of 3, 4, and 7, the figures of perfection, the 12 x 12 mode of 'calculating' the number of those predestined to be saved from the 12 tribes of Israel, the 1600 stadia covered by the blood flowing out of the wine press of the wrath of God, the 10 kings who will receive power for 1 hour to rule with the beast (17:12:4-5), the 12-gated city, New Jerusalem, which stands " foursquare " (21:16:1), its 12,000 furlong length, width, and height equal and perfectly symmetrical - all are falsely precise because they are (explicitly)

symbolic³, or rather allegorical, as are the thousand years of Satan's imprisonment, and the eschatological Second Coming of Christ, as Christian thinkers since Saint Augustine have admitted.

Rather in the same vein, Atwood blurs prehistorical, historical, and ahistorical modes, as well as subjective notions of perceived time and scientific notions of clocktime. The clash between the determinate and the indeterminate is present in the spatial terms which are simultaneously vague and specific, both somewhere and nowhere (in caves, in tents, in the mountains, at the train station, airport, or dinnertable). But the tension is most striking in the poet's use of temporality - meticulously, yet falsely, precise. The time measurements are painstakingly specific - 'twenty years', 'eight months', 'three weeks' - but do not allow us to situate the events in our historical framework, although they are as empty of symbolical resonance as those of John are full. The markers of duration are combined with increasingly narrowed markers of frequency - 'twice', then 'once' - only to be cancelled by the rhetorical device of epanorthosis in which the speaker retracts, corrects, or nuances her statement:

That happened twice, *or was it*
more; and there was once, *not so*
 long ago (28).

To these floating markers of duration and frequency, the poet adds a plethora of temporal markers generating a logical linear progression that brings the diegetic time closer and closer until it fuses with the time of narration: 'at first', 'then', 'time before last', 'last time', 'recently'. But although the markers produce an impression of accuracy, we readers never really know where we are in time, since we have never been allowed to situate the time of narration which remains the measuring stick. Consequently, we remain in the mythical atemporal dimension of the 'I' that, god-like, fuses past, present and future into an eternal present.

This eternal present implies in effect that from prehistorical to modern times, nothing has changed. The evolution in technology and communications merely signifies progress, or rather escalation, in the art of warfare, as well as extension in the scope of the battlefield, which moves away to more and more distant spaces but also arrives right at our doorstep. Moreover, the war is never named or justified; it is the same war, always indeterminate, protean, like Orwell's programmed, controlled, endless War in *1984*, with its ceaseless shifting of allies and foes. Atwood's untitled poem is doubly

³. A revision of the Challoner-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate, such as the Confraternity version edited in 1941 for catechetical purposes by American Catholic scholars, gives for instance certain exegetical comments on the symbolism of the numbers that are not made explicit in the text itself.

apocalyptic, in both message and means. First, the blinding speed of progress is an illusion, revealed to be merely the blinding speed towards a final apocalyptic doom. Secondly, the very act of revealing is true to the root meaning of 'apocalypse', which suggests an unveiling, since it stems etymologically from *apokalyptein* (to uncover), *apo* signifying 'from' or 'away', and *kalumma* signifying 'veil'.

Atwood's poem as visionary revelation thus belongs in a full sense to a body of apocalyptic literature striving to unhide the hidden, and giving a dæmonic panoramic view of history from beginning to end. In a joint paper entitled " 'Closing Time': Apocalyptic Imagery in Canadian Culture ", given at the ACSUS'99 conference, Donna Bennett, Russell Brown, Lora Carney, and Marlene Goldman argued that from prairie evangelists and political parties such as the Social Credit to artistic movements such as the Group of Seven, from thinkers like Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye to poets and novelists like Leonard Cohen , Michael Ondaatje or Timothy Findley, the apocalypse has been a key motif. The Canadian imagination seems to churn out visions of ruin, a conflation of wreckage after wreckage. Atwood's poem is thus exemplary of a Judeo-Christian prophetic vision that has been desacralised by the shattering impact of modernity, and in which the New Jerusalem has been replaced by the Waste Land.

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