

POSTMODERN VOICES FROM BEYOND: NEGOTIATING WITH THE DEAD IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD*

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I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail...

...the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth.

Adrienne Rich, "Diving Into the Wreck"

(qtd. in Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*, 2003, 158–159)

Debates over the slippery characteristics of Western postmodernism have always been dear to the hearts of Canadian scholars as well as foreign critics of Canadian literature. In slight exaggeration, one might say that postmodernism is as Canadian as the maple leaf, the beaver or the Royal Mounted Police. Clio, the Muse of History, amusingly reminds us that Jean-François Lyotard published his *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport slur le savoir* (1979) as a report commissioned by the Quebec government. Marshall McLuhan's theories of communication toured "the global village" from his office at the University of Toronto, forever changing our ways of understanding contemporary societies and earning the Canadian professor his notorious

title of "the oracle of the electronic age".

Other than that, postmodern concerns in Canada have also been voiced alongside the broader political issues of postcolonialism and national identity, to which *Unhomely States* (2004), a recent collection of articles edited by Cynthia Sugars, is a fine testimony. Linda Hutcheon in as early as 1988 commented on the postmodern character of Canadian literature. Her study *The Canadian Postmodern* brought together fictions by leading Canadian authors to discuss their awareness of, among others, the linguistic, regional, ideological, and cultural identities of their works. Is it any wonder that Hutcheon's theorising of postmodern narrative modes in Canadian writing found its place in her more general

commentaries on Western culture in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989)? If anything, it has invited a reinterpretation of a famous line that ironised the Canadian national sensibilities on the CBC in the 1960s: postmodernism may be just that, “as Canadian as...possible under the circumstances.”

The nature of this paper is no less ironic. It attempts to read the most recent novel by Margaret Atwood against the backdrop of her writing as well as within the theoretical context of literary postmodernism, with which she is usually associated. This is, then, the first loop of irony: the dialogue between a young literary critic and a voice of a literary legend that unfolds in a limited space of the written medium and uncovers as much the slips of the critical judgement as (possibly) those of the writerly imagination. This paper also endeavours to read Atwood’s novel in the light of the recent critical speculations about the exhaustion of postmodern narrative forms and a return of realist fiction such as we find in the works of Ian McEwan or Kazuo Ishiguro. This is the second ironic loop: the observation of the current trends in English literatures eliminates the temporal distance characteristic of the pleasures of retrospective criticism and puts forward the razor’s edge that is brought by the tentative conclusions of the eye-witness. The human – and, by extension, critical – mind being what it is, these ironies are inescapable. We know that there is no *beyond* language, but is there a *beyond* literary postmodernism?

To answer this question we have to consider the paradigmatic shift in Western consciousness that occurred after the Second World War and inspired writers, philosophers and literary scholars to advance a new creative and critical agenda in the arts. John Barth’s essays “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967)

and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979) come to mind as first advocates for a new kind of literature: one that acknowledges the collapse of traditional mimetic forms and flourishes in intertextual games. As signs of the end of modernism also came the awareness of the rise of consumer society, the erasing of boundaries between high and low cultures, the enhancement of axiological relativity and the indulgence in ideological pluralism, to name but a few. However, in his *Paradoxy of Modernism* (2006), Robert Scholes effectively shows that modernism’s Great Divide between high and low, as between avant-garde and kitsch – forms that postmodernism claims to bring together – was more of an arbitrary line than a given fact. Apparently, modernism was more heterogeneous than we liked to believe and more paradoxical than we dared to acknowledge.

Could this be the reason for postmodernism’s inherent ambivalences? Hutcheon has noted that postmodernism has had a love-and-hate relationship with modernism, being “both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to [it].” (Hutcheon, 2003, 88) What, then, is postmodernism if it has not cast off the modernist robe? Phenomenologist George Steiner has named it “the epoch of the epilogue” (Steiner, 1998, 91), thus commenting on the depressing impact that the poststructuralist critique of Western metaphysics has had on hermeneutic practices. Lyotard, on the other hand, has more readily embraced the poststructuralist agenda, translating the Foucauldian notions of discourse and power and the Derridean mistrust of signification into his own definition of the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1993, 6). Jean Baudrillard, in turn, has taken the postmodern sense of disillusionment even further, suggesting that our epoch is dominated by the principle of *simulation* that has transformed our universe into a *hyperreality*

– a realm of codes and signs around which we organise our experiences of the real. (Baudrillard, 2002)

Postmodern literature certainly partakes of this wide range of philosophical observations about the changes in Western epistemology in the second half of the 20th century. One needs only to think of the historiographic metafiction of E. L. Doctorow, Michael Ondaatje, Peter Ackroyd, or Salman Rushdie and the postmodern dystopias of Margaret Atwood and Timothy Findley. In Canada, Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991) is a fine example of how conscious postmodern writers are of the devastating effects of the capitalist industry in which everything is doomed to become a commodity. Coupland's masterpiece blends the narrative framework which is reminiscent of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* with the techniques of visual arts to communicate a postmodern sense of apocalypse against which the book opposes salvation through creative storytelling.

Robert Kroetch's much-quoted suggestion in 1974 that Canadian literature "evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern" (qtd. in Bessner, 1992, 16) is another example of how happily postmodernism was welcomed into the Canadian critical embrace. Since then, Walter Pache notes, Canadian postmodern fiction has often been read along the lines of its relationship with American postmodernism, the legacy of modernism and the notion of national history. In lamenting the disappearance of a structurally unified world that was open to human experience and its description, Canadian postmodern writing, like its American counterpart, celebrates the collapse of mimetic fiction and refuses to sanction the reader's desire for easy identification. To quote Pache,

While modernists were seen as vainly struggling to cope with an increasingly fragmented world by using more and more subtle narrative devices, the new experimental writers abandoned any attempt to describe and analyse the 'real world'. (qtd. in Kroetch and Nishik, 1985, 65)

In a sense, postmodern fiction has turned the exhaustion of the literary system into a catalyst of its replenishment, and by undercutting the referential function of language, lay open the rules that govern both the creative process of writing and the ways in which the reader perceives it. Such is the postmodern paradox that Hutcheon has championed in her *Narcissistic Narrative*, arguing that the reader both acknowledges the fictionality of the text and engages with it intellectually and emotionally:

...while he reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However, paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. This two-pull is the paradox of the reader. The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader. (Hutcheon, 1985, 7)

Although postmodern writing is generally identified with the decline of realist fiction and the parodying of the literary conventions of the past, limiting literary postmodernism to certain writing techniques poses serious problems for a conceptual understanding of the range of postmodern fiction. In Canada, for example, the realist mode of writing has never come out of date, with historical narrative being a predominant genre through which literature has imagined its national community. This is especially true of regional literatures and ethnic minority fictions that have emerged since the 1960s. Think, for example, of Aritha

van Herk's *The Tent Peg* or Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. These novels use realist narration while at the same time parodying the conventions of exploration narratives, the Bible and Aboriginal mythology, to name but a few. Perhaps postmodernism's leap *beyond* realist writing has been less radical than we often tend to assume?

What appears to be true is that literary postmodernism is haunted by the spirit of duplicity. By exposing its artificiality, fiction both suspends the readers' identification with the characters, and directs their intellectual and emotional investments towards the production of meaning. At the same time, while seemingly rejecting the literary conventions of the past, postmodern literature uses them to subversive ends and cannot help reinstalling them albeit in a guise of structural or ideological difference. Umberto Eco has noted that the intertextual nature of postmodern fiction has allowed it to be appreciated by greater audiences, "which ought to have been put off by avant-garde stylistic elements, such as the use of interior monologue, metanarrative play [or] the plurality of voices..." (Eco, 2006, 215) In this, postmodern literature may be likened to the Roman god Janus – a god with two faces, simultaneously looking in opposite directions. It is a literature of the edge – the edge that glorifies the tension between continuation and rupture, intellectual appreciation and physical *juissance*.

What does making a step *beyond* this edge entail? Can we say with full precision and confidence? This speculation is evidently fraught with dangerous blunders. While it may guide us on a Dantean journey towards spiritual salvation, it may also lead us to a less graceful Miltonic fall. At best, what we can do is look at the most recent Western fictions and ask

ourselves if they satisfy the appetite of postmodern theories. Admittedly, no fiction ever does. With this in mind, I take Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *The Penelopiad*, as a medium of her artistic response to the current trends in Anglophone literatures and cultures. Recently longlisted for the 2007 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, *The Penelopiad* stands in a wonderful company of John Banville's *The Sea*, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* among many other distinguished names and titles. Some more evidently postmodern than others.

To find Atwood's novel on this prestigious list is not surprising. In fact, it would be surprising not to find it there, for as Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes remarked in 2002, she "has won just about every prize going." (Reynolds and Noakes, 5) One might say that Atwood is a writer turned myth – an alchemist of words and sometimes a prophetess, as novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* might suggest. Graham Huggan has dedicated a whole chapter of his study *The Postcolonial Exotic* to the discussion of the Atwoodian industry – "the public codes of recognition through which her work and the academic industry that nurtures it accumulate a naturalised prestige". (Huggan, 2001, 226) To be sure, Atwood's writings, much like those of Rushdie, McEwan and Banville, emanate celebrity glamour and have a wide-ranging appeal for readers both in English-speaking countries and elsewhere. However, while her postmodern fictions may share certain similarities in narrative techniques with those of Rushdie or Banville, they are quite unlike the works of McEwan, who masterfully resists literary pigeonholing.

As *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006), which boasts the most recent

collection of articles on her writings, shows, she has been hailed both one of the best writers of her generation and one of the severest critics of Western society. Atwood is characteristically described as a postmodern female writer, who constantly experiments with different genres (i.e. historiographic metafiction, dystopia, crime fiction, Gothic fiction etc.) and remains “profoundly sceptical of the ‘picture theory’ of language which sees language as depicting reality.” (Vevaina in Howells, 2006, 90) Her writings are also acutely aware of the relations of power that construct our social roles and organise the discourses through which we imagine ourselves and others and through which we make sense of the present and the past. Anyone who has read *Lady Oracle* and *Bodily Harm* or the poems in *Power Politics* will find it to be indisputably so. *The Penelopiad*, too, brings us back to these concerns as it rewrites the mythical story of Penelope and Odysseus.

Arguably, though, in her latest novel the Canadian author steps on dangerous ground. This is not to misjudge her postmodern critiques of the grand narratives – *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Alias Grace* are wonderful examples of such literary effort – but the myth of Odysseus and Penelope seems to be less of a grand narrative today than is its interpretation in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. For today’s literary scholar, there is hardly any other hermeneutic access to Odysseus’s journeys than through Leopold Bloom’s wanderings in Dublin. For Atwood, however, ghosts inhabit Joyce’s text as much as the Grecian myth itself. To negotiate with the dead means to reopen the Teiresian memory of Western culture and give voice to the silent spectres that haunt the couloirs of its intimate stories.

Ulysses uses the Grecian myth as a narrative form through which it builds the

allegory of the modern man, exiled body and soul in the modern city and the universe. Thus Eco reads Joyce’s novel as “a Work-as-Cosmos” (Eco, 1989, 33), whose symbolic effectiveness largely relies on its medieval nature that “provides not only a literal but a moral, allegorical and anagogical sense.” (ibid, 48). *The Penelopiad*, on the other hand, has different ambitions. Atwood’s novel aims to uncover what Roland Barthes named the “constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form” (Barthes, 2000, 118), which characterises myth as a second-order semiological system. This means that Atwood is concerned with the process of naturalisation that obliterates the distortion of meaning at the interface of two semiotic structures in myth. In other words, *The Penelopiad* questions the myth of Penelope and Odysseus as “the physique of the alibi” (Barthes, 2000, 123) that constitutes the tradition of its interpretation.

At the centre of Atwood’s novel we find Queen Penelope, who speaks to us from the Underworld and comments on Odysseus’s version of their story:

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn’t think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. Hadn’t I been faithful? Hadn’t I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. (Atwood, 2005, 2)

As befits postmodern fiction, it is knowledge that Penelope is preoccupied with – namely, the story of her twelve Maids, who helped her to resist the Suitors’ advances and who were

consequently hanged once Odysseus came back from his wanderings. Thus Penelope's narrative contests the official account of the Grecian myth and does so by exposing the power relations that structured the social hierarchies of Grecian society: the enslavement of female servants, the silencing of aristocratic women, and the glorification of male heroes. Symptomatically, it is only after death that Penelope is at liberty to criticise her father, husband and son and to contradict the grand narrative of history turned myth. Her story suggests that the myth of the faithful Penelope and the wise Odysseus was created at the expense of the murdering of her twelve Maids:

‘The ones who’d been raped,’ I said. ‘The youngest. The most beautiful.’ My eyes and ears among the Suitors, I did not add. My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves. (Atwood, 2005, 160)

Thus *The Penelopiad* writes back to Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* to uncover the ideological manipulations of language through which linguistic signifiers, as Barthes reminds us, are robbed of their meaning and turned into the “speaking corpses” of mythological concepts (Barthes, 2000, 133).

For Atwood, writing and storytelling are political acts. To paraphrase Adrienne Rich, whose poem I used as an epigraph for this paper, Atwood knows that “words are purposes” and “words are maps”, which is why she comes after the spirit that wrecked the original story. Her dead Penelope has the body of the Word that returns to deride the illusory innocence of the mythical story. Unlike Joyce's Molly Bloom, who interprets the world through the carnal desires of Nature, in *The Penelopiad*, Odysseus's wife stands for the voice of Reason that exposes the carnal nature

of the social bodies: “And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood pudding.” (Atwood, 2005, 39) While Molly is a swelling travesty of Penelope's marital fidelity, Atwood's Penelope seems to echo the Homeric vision of female loyalty: “I would lie on my bed and weep, and wonder what on earth I should do. I certainly didn't want to marry any of those mannerless young whelps.” (Atwood, 2005, 109) Nevertheless, Penelope's memories also suggest a parodic take on the myth of her faithfulness to Odysseus: “I can't pretend that I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this...I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that.” (Atwood, 2005, 104-105) Such is the ambivalent character of the postmodern Penelope: she both questions the social structures of the dominant order and remains dangerously complicit with them.

Madeleine Davies points out that Atwood's female protagonists “speak the unspeakable, reveal the secrets of the living and the dead, subvert received notions of ‘history’ and undo ‘the work of death’.” (Davies in Howells, 2006, 69) But in certain cases writing as an act of resistance and willed existence reaches us long after its narrator has passed away. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, Offred's narrative is found in a form of an audio tape that survived the fall of Gilead's totalitarian regime. Similarly, in *The Penelopiad*, death embodies the distance in time which enables the words of the previously silent women (Penelope and her Maids) to contest the traditional and, by implication, male interpretation of the Grecian myth.

Much like Professor Pieixoto, who presents a commentary on his archaeological findings in the chapter titled “*Historical Notes on The*

Handmaid's Tale", the dead Maids give their own reading of the Grecian myth in "The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture":

Presented by: The Maids

Thus possibly our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. The chief of them, notably Odysseus, would then claim kingship by marrying the High Priestess of our cult, namely Penelope.

No, Sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap. We can understand your reluctance to have such things brought out into the open – rapes and murders are not pleasant subjects – but such overthrows most certainly took place all around the Mediterranean Sea, as excavations at prehistoric sites have demonstrated over and over. (Atwood, 2005, 165–166)

This metafictional explanation is reminiscent of the findings of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a study of the cults of the dying deity in the Ancient World. In a sense, the Maids operate as the ultimate hermeneutists of the Grecian myth, referring the readers to the clash between the ancient ritual of the dying king and the new patriarchal institution enforced by Odysseus: "But usurping strongman Odysseus refused to die at the end of his rightful term. Greedy for prolonged life and power, he found substitutes." (Atwood, 2005, 167) What this reading of the myth of Penelope and Odysseus suggests is that its official version naturalised the patriarchal concepts which distorted the old system of social relationships. The myth, then, is interpreted as a battlefield of power relations, in which the female figures become sacrificial substitutes for the annual death of the divine male king.

Atwood's engagement with the issues of power, whether in terms of sexual politics or discursive coercion, and the parodying of

discourses that serve as the novel's multiple intertexts is as familiarly postmodern as is the novel's structure. *The Penelopiad* is arranged in a form of Greek drama, with the chorus of the Maids following Penelope's narrative to comment both on the official story and Penelope's interpretation. One of such commentaries is titled "The Chorus Line: The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids", where Atwood ironises court room procedures and the conventions of the dramatic narrative:

Judge: What's that commotion in the back? Order! Ladies, stop making a spectacle of yourselves! Adjust your clothing! Take those ropes off your necks! Sit down!

The Maids: You've forgotten about us! What about *our* case? You can't let him off! He hanged us in cold blood! Twelve of us! Twelve young girls! For nothing! (Atwood, 2005, 177, italics in the original)

Again, the Maids' chorus subverts the expectations of mimetic reading, replacing the visual medium of the videotape by writing, which inevitably reiterates the postmodern ironies of the audio tape in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Also, Atwood's latest novel makes the reader aware of itself as discourse already in the Introduction, where it uncovers the implied author, who lays bare her narrative programme:

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself. (Atwood, 2005, xv)

Atwood's narrative voice itself becomes an important intertext – an autographic *paratext* in Genette's terms (Allen, 2003, 106) – which not only guides the reader's interpretation of the stories, but also gives license to *The Penelopiad's* dialogues with an extensive corpus of Atwood's other works. By uncovering the author's creative and critical agenda, the novel's Introduction projects an intertextual context in which it gains its ideological impact, a gesture that welcomes *The Penelopiad's* conversation with *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, but not so much with Joyce's *Ulysses*. As ever, Atwood looms over her own creation.

Arguably, *The Penelopiad* is as much literary criticism as it is fiction. Atwood remains loyal to her postmodern experiments and her ideological views. Her latest novel, like most of her works, challenges the *grand récits* of Western culture, blends genres, parodies discourses, and plays with the practices of reading. However, in doing so, *The Penelopiad* confronts us with the familiar rather than with the strange. Having in mind that the aim of rewriting a metanarrative is to defamiliarise the customary, Atwood's novel falls somewhat short of its own goals: her narrative strategies are too familiar to unveil joyful surprises. Perhaps in remaining faithful to her literary

agenda, Atwood herself has become somewhat like Penelope? Too good to be true?

In all fairness, however, Atwood is far from being the only writer persistently loyal to her aesthetic programme. For example, McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) brings back his distinct interest in medical discourse as well as his preoccupation with family relationships. Coupland perpetuates his postmodern experiments with narrative form: *JPod* (2006), his latest novel, is structured as a computer game, in which the concept of life itself is staged as an Internet communication. The two novels are certainly very different both from each other and Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: McEwan appreciates realist storytelling and the creative spirit of Mathew Arnold whereas Coupland explores the potential of visual media and pays tribute to the ideas of McLuhan and Baudrillard. What they remind us of, however, is that postmodernism loves disparities. There is no *beyond* its controversies: readers and writers are accomplices lost in a state of a limbo, in which the future cannot open up but in a form of the past retold. Perhaps this is ultimately what Atwood's Penelope is trying to say: storytelling is our only way of going *beyond* – beyond the present and the past, beyond the real and the imaginary?

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