

As you can see, that poem starts as another "poem for an audience of one," a poem for a specific girl named Cathy with whom I'd had a discussion about biography and the poet. But the "you" who is addressed at the end of the poem is probably not so much Cathy as another distant anonymous reader who may read the "brittle wafer leaves" of my poetry--or someone else's poetry--some time in the future, and find herself (himself?) encountering the "real presence" of the poet (myself? somebody else?) in a kind of mystic transubstantiation of paper into flesh and blood. It's something I've felt when I've read other poets: I guess I'd like some people to feel the same way about my poems.

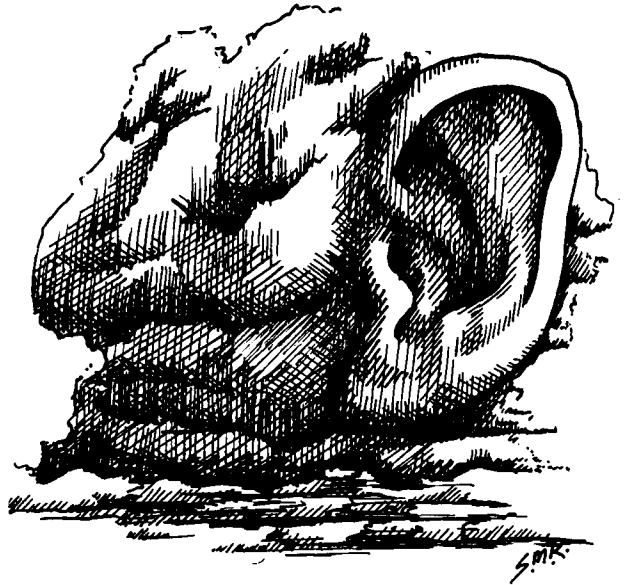
Margaret Atwood

When I first started to write poetry I had no audience, nor could I imagine one. I was sixteen and in fourth year high school. The year was 1956, the accepted stance for girls was collecting china and waiting to get married, and although my immediate friends did not conform to this mould--one wanted to be a doctor, one a psychologist, one an actress--none of them wanted to be poets. The only Canadian poem I had ever heard about was Wilson MacDonald's, "The Scarlet Maple Tree," as Canadian literature was not taught much in the schools. So I had some vague notion that I wanted to write

but no idea that I would ever be read by anyone. My first poems were fairly impenetrable, even to me, which was probably just as well.

By the time I began publishing in anything other than school magazines, I was in third year university. I was now conscious of an audience. It was small, to be sure, but it did read poetry and it bought and devoured the same "little" magazines I did. There was not a large number of these in the late fifties and very early sixties: Fiddlehead, The Canadian Forum, Tamarack Review, Delta, Prism International and a few more. You could keep up with them all, and those interested in poetry did. I was not conscious of any "womens' audience," but I realize now that my writing and my gender overlapped at least two points: I published under initials rather than a first name, to avoid rejection as a "lady writer," which everyone knew was just about as bad as a "lady painter;" and I was convinced I would never get married. The biographies of nineteenth-century authors and the ladies' magazines were very clear: you could write and be classified as neurotic, or you could get married and be "fulfilled." Being fulfilled sounded very dull to me. I chose to write.

Gradually, during the sixties, my concept of my audience changed as the audience itself changed. With the growth of public readings, indigenous



Canadian publishing houses and sales figures, it became clear that there were more people interested in poetry than the few bearded or black-stockinged "arty" types who used to patronize the readings at the old Bohemian Embassy in Toronto.

I feel that there is a real connection between what gets written and the poet's idea of who she is talking to --and though you may be writing for the ideal reader in the sky, it matters who is down here on earth reacting to the results. Canadian poets, because of the small size of the population and the large per capita readership for poetry, have a much better chance of being able to feel

they are speaking to and for a community than do, for instance, American poets. Poets in Quebec have an even better chance. Many woman poets have an increased sense of speaking through a community that is not confined within national borders, that attempts at any rate to transcend the usual barriers, just as the fact of being female transcends these barriers. In 1960 I thought that the Ideal Reader in the sky was tiny, infinitely

wise and knowledgeable, with grey hair and a long grey beard. I thought in fact that he bore some correspondence to Milton Wilson, the poetry editor of the Canadian Forum and was dismayed when I met that gentleman to find that he was quite young and quite large.

I still think the Ideal Reader in the sky is tiny, infinitely wise and knowledgeable, and grey-haired. But she's female.