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Margaret Atwood. Photograph by Anne Lattimore (April 1985, at The University of Iowa).

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET ATWOOD

Shannon Hengen and Joyce Meier

WORKING TO ELUCIDATE and promote the literature of her native Canada, Margaret Atwood has edited and introduced *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982) and written many essays on the topic, including her comprehensive *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). In addition, Atwood has published nine works of poetry and eight works of fiction—including *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, *The Edible Woman*, and the recent science fiction bestseller, *The Handmaid's Tale*. In her creative writings, Atwood explores issues of both gender and genre. Frequently centering on the problems faced by women in society, her works have been described as “feminist,” while, structurally, she has experimented with that fine edge between prose and poetry, the prose-poem. The following interview was conducted during her April, 1985, visit to the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Let's talk about your poetry. I recently taught an untitled poem of yours and the women's reactions to it were unclear and ambiguous whereas the men were saying, “this poem is about power and dominance and rebellion.”

It's a funny thing with poetry. I still haven't figured it out and I probably never will, but poetry as a construct is often such that men feel closer to it, in a way, than women do. Women feel closer to the lyric side of it, you know the expression your “nice emotions” side of it, the kind that usually gets tagged as sissy by people who dismiss poetry. But if you're looking at the thing as a made thing, or a thing that works, a thing that fits together or that has a shape or that has a structure, that is the model airplane part of men. They will say, “oh, I can see how this grommet fits into this slot down here and then you wind it up and it flies.”

At your reading last night I was surprised that you put mathematics, poetry, and music in the same category.

They're all constructed—if you do algebra, poetry, and music, you are working within certain arrangements in time. The elementary things about music are analogous to mathematics in that this equation over *here*, when you work it all out, comes out to the same as this construct over *there*. In other words, there are certain time intervals and certain arrangements of sound that you're dealing with and it depends on which music it is; you know, different musics are constructed on different axioms. Western music is constructed on the scale that we know, but the Doric mode leaves out a couple of those notes. Anyway, the male students may understand that poems can be written in a key. Well, they *are*, as you know. Or the idea of the *Four Quartets* makes sense to them, and I think it could equally make sense to women if that area of their learning were stressed in the way that it is for boys. I mean, boys are taught “here's how you oil the engine, here's how the little parts of it fit together, and this is how it goes.”

How would you relate that to the form of the novel? If the poem structure is in some ways linked to the structure of a machine. . . .

That was merely an analogy. Let us not say that a poem is a machine; it isn't. But when you're working with a poem in a workshop and you say, “this doesn't fit,” that is the kind of statement you're making. Doesn't fit with what? Well, it doesn't fit with the tonality of the poem; it's the wrong word, unless you want something that doesn't fit, unless you want a break at that point.

Do people talk about novels the same way?

Novels. I think the similar thing would be attempts to break up the linear structure of the novel—you know, this happened and then as a result this happened—because the Western mind is very hooked on causality and linear sequence. There are other ways of thinking about time; in other words, you can think of events as in some way simultaneous, or of time as folding back on itself and overlapping. Kant and Einstein would tend to suggest that time is relative and a human construct, so lots of experiments have been done in the novel incorporating those ideas in which the linear structure is broken or in which you get events repeated in a choral fashion with variations.

This reminds me of Sharon Cameron's Lyric Time. What is the time setting

of a lyric poem?

Eternity is the time setting of a lyric. Novels are about time and poetry is about eternity. Ha Ha . . . It doesn't work all the time but it's a good thing to drop into the conversation. But I think it's probably true; it's certainly true about lyric poetry that what you wait for is the moment of breaking free of time. That's what I wait for.

I was just trying to think about the difference between reading novels and reading poems. When you read a novel, you're holding in your mind plot sequence and characters. When you read a lyric poem, transformation is possible because there are different things held in the mind.

Yes, you can do those transformations in novels but only from time to time. If the whole novel were like that it would be unreadable. But even in a poem you have to lead up to those jumps, and in a novel you certainly do.

In a novel when you read things letter by letter by letter it's a linear movement; how do you transcend that linearity?

Well, I think one of the things that happens is that it's not like the wake of a boat that disappears a few feet from the boat. Once you have read paragraph one, paragraph one then stays with you, and when the author then replays the leitmotif of paragraph one on page eighty-two, there's a conscious or an unconscious memory of that and page eighty-two therefore acquires more resonance.

What about a post-modern novel like Graeme Gibson's Communion? Is that more difficult to read?

There again, it depends on who's reading it. Some people find it a snap—yes, indeed—because it is constructed like a piece of music. Ho ho, yes, and once they catch on to that constructed quality of it they then surge forward. It also depends on what kind of frame of mind they're in. I would say that the number of people who find it intensely readable in that way is probably smaller because it's more esoteric, its construction is more esoteric. I think we come to novels with certain kinds of expectations and we expect that the novel will be about a definite, isolable character called "Fred" or whatever, and *Communion* doesn't allow you to do that because you aren't just too sure whether the characters are set in that way—solid—or whether they are fluid and whether they flow into one another and whether certain things

that happen are happening to the so-called central character or whether they're happening to someone else, or whether they're happening in dream time or whether they're happening in real life, or whether those two things are as separable as we like to believe. So, I think it challenges our ideas of the novel and also our ideas of what time is and what reality is, and therefore people have to make more of an effort to keep up with it. Some people, yes; other people, no.

I taught *Communion* when I was teaching a course called Southern Ontario Gothic. I also taught Robertson Davies, Alice Munro, and *Perpetual Motion*, and James Reaney who's a playwright and very Gothic; Timothy Findley, *The Wars*, and his verse novel, and several others; Marian Engel's book, *Bear*, in which a woman has a love affair with a bear. It was one of the favorites of some of the people in the class. And of course it is a sort of Grimm's fairy tale only it's done as an entirely realistic novel. She doesn't entirely succeed in her love affair with the bear, but that's instructive as well. Some men reacted badly to it when it first came out because they felt that it was saying that bears were preferable to men.

How did you learn your craft? There are all these writers' workshops now. . . .

There weren't any then. There weren't any for Canadians. There was something called English Four 0 that you could take but not for credit and it was for the handful of us in the late 50s in Toronto, Ontario, Canada—for the handful of us who wrote. We also did all the other cultural things at Victoria College (University of Toronto), it seemed. We were in the theatrical things and we painted sets and we edited the literary magazine and wrote much of it under different names because there wasn't a lot of choice. It wasn't the way it is now. There weren't thousands of aspiring young writers; there were girls who wore twin sets and cashmere coats and then there were girls who wore long black stockings and black turtleneck sweaters and read Ionesco. There were people known as artsy, which I was. I didn't have a black sweater but I had a dark blue one. We just sat around, and I think the good thing of it was that it gave some reinforcement for what we were doing which was considered *outré* by everybody else. You must understand that we were the odd people out. It wasn't a large supportive community composed of writers and people interested in writing. The professors were quite good and kind about it at my particular college and they didn't laugh openly about what we were writing, but it wasn't anything like a writing workshop or anything like that. Now, the first time I encountered such a thing was when I was already teaching

university out in British Columbia. I think the first one in Canada was there at the University of British Columbia and it was started by a poet called Earle Birney. I sat in on one of his classes once.

So, I learned writing by doing it. I mean, it was very much hit-and-miss. I read a lot, I always read a lot anyway, but then I discovered modern literature, which I didn't discover until I was in college. When I hit college and encountered T. S. Eliot I literally couldn't read it, it was so foreign to me. So I worked away at that. It was like riding a bicycle, you know—one day I got it. But I had to read it for quite a long time without understanding at all what was happening because it wasn't the kind of poetry I was used to. I was used to Shelley and Byron. Then I started writing like that, you see. My poems then became full of garbage cans, coffee cups, all those T. S. Eliot things that weren't in Shelley. But I wrote for ten years before I did anything worthwhile, I would say.

But you were published almost immediately, weren't you?

No, I started writing at the age of sixteen in high school and my early poems were like Byron's and Poe's because that's what poetry was as far as I knew.

Did anybody else write in Canadian high schools?

No, not then. I'm sure they do now; they probably pour it out. But that was a period when Canada was emerging from a number of things. It was emerging from being a British colony and it was also emerging from being very Puritanical, which is still there under the surface—if you scratch it you will still find it. It was because it had been a colony and had thought like a colony. That meant that it had decided that writing was done elsewhere and then you imported it, particularly good writing. I grew up thinking that there were writers, then there were Canadians and then there were Canadian writers, which was really a contradiction in terms. All you ever saw were writers' names in the papers on the Ladies' page because some kind soul had given them a charitable tea, that kind of thing. Every once in a while somebody would write deploring the lack of this and that and examining why there wasn't this and that. So the focus of my young writing career was not "I can't do this because I'm a woman," but "this is rather daring for me to be doing as a Canadian; will I be able to get away with this?" and, "probably I will have to move to London." I thought during my undergraduate years that certainly I would have to leave Canada, and the generation before mine did because there was

no audience. Publishing a book in Canada, you could expect from poetry an audience of 200 copies, and that's coast to coast, and for a novel you were doing well if you sold a thousand. Mordecai Richler claims that his first novel sold three copies in Canada. And it changed in 1965.

Why?

Nations hit that period. It changed in the States, I think, in 1820, but from 1776 until that time you underwent the same sort of stuff—people saying, “why is there no great American genius?” and “when will the great American painter arise?” It wasn't until the 1920s that the fight was won to make literature of the United States a teachable university subject. It wasn't respectable before then and that was what we were going through in Canada right at that time. You would find English departments that would just, you know, sneer and throw up at the mere mention of doing this because it was considered so beneath and so out of the question. And that is still going on; it hasn't been won in Canada, although Canadian literature courses are springing up all over the United States, in Europe, and so forth. You still have to make a special pleading case to get them in certain places in Canada. So, the writers became respectable before the literature was accepted in universities, which are traditionally quite conservative anyway.

Did Canadian artists have to reject European standards in a pattern like American writers and artists at an earlier time?

Yes, well, it's trying to find a style and a way of dealing with a reality which is not the same as the reality described by other conventions, and that was certainly what they were trying to do. They felt that Wordsworthian lyricism just didn't fit the bogs, mosquitoes, rocks, logs, mountains—you know, rough, jagged. “Nature always will forgive the heart that loves her”—I mean, when you're up to your neck in the swamp you don't necessarily believe that, though you can believe it in Wordsworth country. I saw that; it's all gentle and rolling and they think, “that's a mountain” and they think “that's a lake, and isn't it cute?” I had more respect for it after I heard that people drowned in it. It looked awfully small to me. So, that has been the exploration that has been going on.

Since 1965?

Oh, I think it burst forth in 1965, but there were in fact writers before that. It was that they hadn't achieved any public prominence, they weren't generally known. They were known only to other writers. And the interesting thing about writing in Canada in the late '50s and early '60s was that if you did it at all, or at all well, you immediately got rushed into the middle of it as into a vacuum cleaner, and you immediately could meet the foremost practitioners of the art because they were so few in number and so welcoming of anyone who read their work or was trying to do it themselves. And there you were. It was like being able at the age of twenty to immediately connect with Wallace Stevens. Or Hemingway. You were just immediately there, because the whole thing was so small.

What direction do you think Canadian literature took then?

Do you know my essay on Canadian monsters? Well those aberrations are now blossoming forth into a full-blown tradition of their own. And I think two of the starting points of that for me were two short stories by James Reaney that appeared at the end of the '50s. One of them is called "The Bully," and the other one is called "The Box Social." Remember the box social? Well, in Reaney's "Social," a church box social takes place, and the boy auctions the little box from the girl, and he opens it up and there's an aborted fetus in it. And the work ends with a lovely sort of lyrical dream sequence. You should see Reaney's plays. They're so eccentric.

What, as an American, can I learn from Canadian literature?

Well I think that one thing is this. The United States is a very large country. And people often get lost in it. That is, they can't figure out where they are in it, or how they fit. And they feel that the literary scene is quite dominated by New York. Or, increasingly, by the West Coast. And if you're from the middle, who are you? And so forth. I think that Canadian literature gives hope to people from small, unnoticed places, because the trajectory of the literature has to do with how you make a silk purse out of a bunch of old tin cans and carrot tops. I mean, who would have thought Alice Munro from Wingham, Ontario, would have ever turned Wingham, Ontario into a literary place? She has, and we know Wingham, Ontario as if we lived there. That's why Faulkner is the most influential writer for Canadians. Because he took this world that no one paid any attention to, the backwater, the hick town, and he made it a literary place. And it's why he is so influential in Latin American writing as well. Because they too

came from these ignored, fringe, marginal backwoods, sneered at by major cultural centers.

So I don't know that people in New York have a lot to learn from Canadian literature, but I expect that farm kids from Iowa do. Because it says, "yes, there is hope." It's not the place that you're in, but the act of making that place important. Or as Northrop Frye put it, your center is where you are, and your circumference is however large you can make it. It underlies such works as *The Donnelly's*, which is James Reaney's play in three sections, because there he takes this backwoods murder and makes it into an epic tragedy without violating any of the speech forms or dirt or junk or ignorance or any of those realities that were there. In fact he draws it out **from** those realities.

Does drama have some kind of special place in Canadian literature?

Special? Well it's another one of those things there wasn't very much of until the late '60s. There were little theatre groups, and there was Stratford, Ontario, and that was about it. And I remember the first Shakespeare play I ever saw was performed by a group called the Earle Grey players, which consisted of Mrs. Earle Grey, Mr. Earle Grey, and two other people. And they went around to high schools and did the Shakespeare play that was on the exam that year. And the students then got to play all the minor parts. So if you wanted to be in *Julius Caesar*, you had to bring your own bedsheet and stand in the crowd. And that was theatre. . . . And I think the good thing about that sort of thing was that you didn't feel there was a huge barrier between art and yourself. Art was just what Earle Grey was doing on the stage of the high school, and therefore you could do it too. So you weren't intimidated by it. And so, when I went to the States, and rather blithely announced at my graduate residency that I wrote, graduate women students there were rather taken aback by this. They thought that writing was something you really had to work up to. And be quite courageous to do. And I didn't feel that way at all. They of course felt they were in competition with Melville, and Faulkner, and Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. And there weren't any visible American female writers except Emily Dickinson. So it was hard. There was this feeling that one shouldn't be so rash.

That's interesting, that a Canadian would take that position. . . .

Well, there was nobody telling me not to. You see? There were no large, deified Canadian writers hovering over me.

Whereas now new Canadian writers would have a more difficult time?

Now they're up against me, you see.

Is that good?

There are good things about everything. I think it's good for them in that if you want to be a chess player—this is James Reaney's analogy—and you come from a country in which chess is not played, you have not as good of a chance of being a really world-class chess player. You may be able to become a chess player who is good enough to beat the few other chess players there are in the country. But then if you go up against a chess player from Russia, you will be whipped immediately. But if you come from a country in which chess playing is the norm, and if you rise to the top in that country, then you're the best. So I think it's good that more people are writing. The competition is much greater than it used to be—well, there didn't used to be any—that makes things possibly a little bit harder for young writers today, but once they get into it, they have more . . .

Models?

Not just models. They can't get lazy. Do you know what I mean? It's not as easy for them to get lazy. But it was very swift, you see. It went from nothing to a hundred in three years. And then there was a period when everybody's backed-up manuscript that they had been unable to publish for years because people wouldn't publish Canadian literature—those came flowing forth. And it looked as if there was this huge mushroom, instant Good Writers, but in fact they were just writers who had been writing for thousands of years and had been unable to get published.

Tell me more about the nineteenth-century Canadian woman poets you mentioned yesterday (at the question-answer session).

Isabella Valancy Crawford. Her poetry is much more rip-roaring than many of her male counterparts'. And the other one is Pauline Johnson. And she has a lot of poems in which there are massacres and murders and butcheries—all kinds of really gory stuff. It's Hiawatha stuff, it's narrative poetry, but it's quite gory.

That's just an amazing tradition to have as a woman writer. I can't think of any parallels in American literature.

It's very tough. There is a poem in the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* in which a woman gets abducted by a rival guy, and she does him in. She kills him. And Susanna Moodie—even she puts all this very tough, murderous gory stuff into her books. So . . . sometimes when you write things like that, people say, “well, those are boys’ toys, you shouldn’t be playing with those.” But I don’t divide it that way. I think that a woman ought to be just as entitled to write about that kind of reality as men are. It’s more noticeable; people will say, “isn’t that mean,” or “that’s rather brutal,” whereas they might not remark upon it if a man did it. But I think all material should be available to everyone if they can handle it.

Your works have a lurking violence that sometimes becomes transparent, and yet they play off of a genteel tradition, a Gothic novel tradition, which in turn has its own violence.

Well, you see, Canadian girls are brought up to be nice. Like lots of other kinds of girls. And, in fact, Canadians in general are told that there are things that are nice and things that aren’t nice, and that in general you ought to be nice.

Was Life Before Man a really hard book to write? Because of all the different points of view?

No. It was very easy. I loved writing it. It flowed. As a construct, it’s a perfect triangle. Because from the point of view of Elizabeth, both Nate and Lesje are behaving badly. And from the point of view of Lesje, both Nate and Elizabeth are behaving badly. And from the point of view of Nate, both Elizabeth and Lesje are behaving badly. So I wanted an equilateral triangle, in which standing at any given point you saw the other points as a negative. In some ways. Because that’s what those triangles are like in real life.

I’ve heard it said that few women writers are funny. Do you agree with that?

No, I don’t agree with it at all. A lot of women writers are funny. British women writers are hilarious. And a lot of Canadian women—Alice Munro, Marian Engel, Audrey Thomas. She has a new novel out called *Intertidal Life*, in which this strange husband is speaking to the wife about the love affair he’s been having, that he’s left the wife because of, and he says, “you know, it was just fate, we were flotsam and jetsam on the beach.” And she says, “and which were you—

flotsam or jetsam?" And he says, "pardon?" "Well," she says, "it makes a difference." Yes, I think women writers are quite funny. And in America there's Eudora Welty. I think Flannery O'Connor is often, you know, acerbically funny. And Southern women writers in general tend to be funnier, maybe, than others. I think some black women writers can be pretty funny. At times. Though it's a subversive humor. Unless you're just doing whimsy and Tinker-Bell kind of stuff, humor *is* subversive. Because we laugh at things which hurt us, annoy us, embarrass us, or are subversive to our ideas of normalcy. Or undercut romantic notions. I was talking to Alice Munro recently about Marian Engel who had just died, and I was saying, "what do you remember about Marian," and she said, "well, I remember sitting around the kitchen in the '50s with my women friends and indulging in this hilarious, desperate, subversive humor, which I wouldn't have thought of using in my writing, because you just weren't supposed to do it, and it wasn't considered literary material, and you know, it was jokes about men and about themselves, and those rather hysterical moments in one's life." And she said Marian was one of the first women to use that as literary material. Which she was. . . . Margaret Drabble can be pretty funny. But sometimes it's the humor that men don't get or appreciate. Just as men's humor about women, we don't always appreciate it. It's like ethnic humor—because within the group it's acceptable but an outsider saying it is racist or sexist or cruel. I mean, I taught at a crippled children's camp one summer when the place was riddled with cripple jokes. It was the children telling them to each other and laughing their heads off. But it was a subversive humor. And then they would do it to you. And of course, it was really an aggressive act. Because if you laughed, you were mean. And if you didn't laugh, they'd caught you. Either way, they got you.

We read, in another class, your poem "Siren Song" out loud, and I was laughing by the end . . .

And they said, "why are you laughing?"

The men in the class, especially.

Yes, but it's not limited to women, you see. If they think that men don't do that wounded partridge act, they're quite wrong. It's one of the best hookers in the whole repertoire: "My wife doesn't understand me; only you can save me from drinking." It's absolutely usable by either sex. The techniques are different. Or, shall I say, the details are different. But it's the same appeal to chivalry. To men it's an appeal

to chivalry, to women it's an appeal to nurturing. But either way it's an appeal to the saving parent in people. You know, the white knight to the rescue is Daddy coming to pull you out of the mud puddle.

Or Loulou. Your character Loulou, from your story by that name. She's a savior.

Oh yes. She's entirely hooked into saving the poets. . . . And you know Jean Rhys? She's from England. She can be awfully funny. She structured her whole life around helplessness. I mean, she really did. She was unable to sew on a button, fix her own wig. For that reason, she really couldn't. And she would take it to extremes. She would starve to death rather than arrange to get food. And for that reason she had this retinue of servitors. If you're that willing to take it to the extreme . . . I mean, if I fell down on the floor right now, you'd help me . . . wouldn't you?

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