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AND THE POWER OF BEING, BELONGING,
AND CELEBRITY**

By Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson



THE ECCLES CENTRE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES
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The Fourth Eccles Centre for American
Studies Plenary Lecture given at the
British Association for Canadian
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INTRODUCTION

'If you write a book on me,' Margaret Atwood asserts, 'you have to have a chapter on hair.'¹ In an interview with me in Toronto in the summer of 2007, Atwood claimed, 'I have the hair criticism. I get criticism of the book, criticism of the ascribed personality and then criticism of the hair. That's why you have to have a chapter on hair.' Early photographs of Atwood indeed do focus on her remarkably curly hair – and underscore the unsurprising truth that female authors battle against a link between their appearance and their critical reception (indeed, several of the critical books on Atwood use her photograph as the front cover). If Atwood's reputation now firmly rests on her output and not her appearance, nevertheless, the effects of this early focus on her looks are apparent in her critical and creative output, and show in one small way how celebrity necessarily has an impact upon a writer's life and her work.

David Staines has gone so far as to claim that, 'As Atwood discovered her voice as a Canadian writer of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, she helped the country discover its own life as a literary landscape' (Staines 19). Whilst this may be an overstatement, according Atwood more power than she would wish to accept, Staines' linkage of Atwood and Canada in the same critical space is not unusual and speaks to the power accorded the writer in Canada – or at least, the famous writer.

Atwood and other best-selling Canadian writers are both *cultural commentators* and *cultural exports*, and there is an acknowledged tension between these various roles – particularly if what the authors have to say is not entirely to be welcomed. Indeed, in our interview, Atwood argued strongly that her role as an artist was to be a mouthpiece, principally so that the government voice was not the only one which resonated outside of Canada. Commenting on the federal government's proposals to cut funding for the arts and promotion of Canadian art, Atwood was clear where she stood politically:

¹ I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the Canadian High Commission, whose financial support through the Faculty Research Program made possible my research trip to Toronto in the summer of 2007. As a result, I was able to spend two weeks in the Atwood archives at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and to undertake the invaluable interview with Atwood, from which I quote extensively in this article. All unattributed quotations from Atwood come from that interview, conducted on 8 August 2007 at L'Espresso Bar Mercurio in Toronto. Permission has been granted to quote from the interview. My thanks are also extended to Rachael Walters, who carefully transcribed the interview.

Well they hate us. Basically they hate artists. There's no other explanation. Because why else would you make 600,000 mouthy enemies? That's how many people are affected by the arts or who work for the arts in Canada, and there's no reason for doing that; it's not a smart move. There's no reason other than an ideological reason: we hate artists. And 'I Stephen Harper want no voice to resound abroad except mine.'

Yann Martel makes a similar argument in his *crie de coeur* about arts funding, published on a website entitled 'What is Stephen Harper Reading', as well as in the 14 April 2007 edition of *The Globe and Mail*. Like Atwood, Martel is a successful Canadian export whose work has worldwide appeal following the publication of his award-winning novel *Life of Pi* (2001). Martel makes a provocative point about arts funding in Canada:

Just so that you know: the parliamentary appropriation this year [2007] for the Canada Council for the Arts is \$173 million. Next year it will be \$182 million. Does that sound like a lot? Let me put it into perspective. A budget of \$182 million translates to \$5.50 per Canadian per year. Most Canadians I know spend more than that in a week on parking, some in a day on coffee.²

Licensed to speak by and for Canada through their very position as successful exporters of Canadian culture, writers like Martel and more importantly for my purposes today, Atwood, offer up *their* versions of Canada, versions potentially at odds with the one that the government might like to reproduce.

Atwood herself, in an interview with Linda Sandler, suggests, 'The literature of one's own country is not escape literature. It tells truths, some of them hard' (Sandler 31). The concept of 'truth' is also, of course, critically debated, and its status in relation to the author-as-spokesperson (as well as author-as-celebrity) is at best tricky: a phenomenon that Atwood herself addresses in both her critical and creative work.

Atwood as a 'mouthy enemy' is a force to be reckoned with, given her global sales, her status as a politically engaged and intellectual writer, and her popularity with a range of readers. Atwood has written everything from

² See www.whatisstephenharperreading.ca/about/, last accessed 15 March 2009.

children's books to literary and cultural criticism. Her work has been translated into over twenty-two languages and forms the basis of course syllabi from A level to postgraduate work, and an entire academic society – The Margaret Atwood Society, with whom she has an uneasy relationship – is devoted to the study of her creative outputs. The annual Modern Language Association (MLA) convention reserves space for two sessions on Atwood each year. A recent Annotated Bibliography on Atwood (compiled by the Society) listed 133 scholarly works published on the author in one year alone³, and there are currently over thirty-five specialized, academic monographs or edited collections that take her as their primary or sole author (not including books focused primarily on the teaching of Atwood's individual texts or those which explore her work in a comparative context). As one fellow writer, Ray Robertson, noted, "'Any author whose work...can be found in both airport newspaper shops *and* on graduate school syllabi all over the world must be doing something right'" (quoted in Pache 120, ellipses in original).

In 1997, in a postmodern twist on the packaging of an author, Atwood's face was superimposed on the plastic bags that Barnes and Noble used to sell their books (York, *Literary* 102), a decision taken by an American big business precisely to increase sales. Atwood sells – and sells well, and the commercial aspect of celebrity cannot be underestimated. Moreover, the very fact that Atwood can package and sell her collected book reviews and occasional writing – work that is really only of interest because of its connection to Atwood-as-author – suggests just how much force she has in the literary (and business) world.

Taking all these facts together, it's clear to me that I could just as easily have called my presentation "Curious Pursuits: An Exploration of an Icon" – a title that automatically invokes Atwood's recent collection of 'occasional writing', published in 2005, which combines interviews, obituaries, newspaper columns, reviews and miscellaneous musings on everything from the act of writing to world politics. In it, Atwood plays around with her own interests, hoping they will interest others. In exploring her title, *Curious Pursuits*, for example, Atwood notes:

'Curious' describes both my habitual state of mind—a less kind word would be 'nosy'—as well as the subject matter of some of

³ See *Margaret Atwood Studies* 1.2 (December 2007); the Margaret Atwood Society annually collects information on Atwood's publications and publications on Atwood.

these writings. Like Alice, I've become curiouiser and curiouiser myself, and the world has done the same. Another way of putting it: if something doesn't arouse my curiosity, I'm not likely to write about it. Though perhaps 'curious' as a word carries too light a weight: my curiosities are (I hope) not idle ones. 'Passionate' might have been more accurate; however, it would have given a wrong impression, and disappointed a few men in raincoats. (*Curious xv*)

Such a collection speaks to the range of writing that Atwood undertakes, as well as the scope of her reach into both academic and popular fora, a reach that offers Atwood up as a celebrity writer, a writer with a following—a writer with, as mentioned above, an entire society named after her, despite her chagrin, and a presence on the social networking site Facebook. (It is possible to become a 'fan' of Atwood on the site, and there are both open and closed sites devoted to her.)

With this celebrity comes power. Following P. David Marshall, Lorraine York argues that although celebrities themselves do not (usually) obtain political power, 'they do articulate systems of cultural power, particularly those involving concepts of individuality and collectivity' (*Literary* 15). Indeed, it is the very tension between individuality and collectivity that ends up being resonant in any discussion of literary celebrity, given the voice that the individual (for example, Atwood) claims to have (or, is claimed to have claimed) in speaking for others. Hence the uneasiness articulated by literary celebrities, who may find the public and private boundaries of information and behaviour confuse even themselves (York, *Literary* 4). Today I wish to address aspects of being and belonging in relation to Canadian literature, and examine how individuals, such as Atwood, explore their own celebrity and use it to provoke contested meanings in relation to Canadian Literature.

The academic focus on literary celebrity has been in the ascendancy since the end of the twentieth century and the advent of the twenty-first. John Cawelti was writing about US literary celebrity in the 1970s (contrasting it with literary fame) and the work of Daniel Boorstin in the mid-twentieth century takes a primarily dim view of the topic. Joe Moran's monograph *Star Authors*, focusing on four US writers, came out in 2000; in it he argues that celebrity is 'an unstable, multifaceted phenomenon – the product of complex negotiation between cultural producers and audiences, the purveyor of both dominant and resistant cultural meanings and a pivotal point of contention in debates

about the relationship between cultural authority and exchange value in capitalistic societies' (3). It is thus the relationship between the individual and the audience that is key—a relationship that is by no means assured or easily maintained. Atwood herself is aware of the precariousness of the relationship between author and audience:

Let me put it this way. When you're not very well known you might get five invitations to which you have the time to say yes to all, so all those five people love you very much, plus you're cheap! You'll do it for boxes of peanuts, so eager are you to promote your work. Then you get so that you've got, instead of five, one hundred invitations but you've still only got time to do five – then ninety-five people hate you, because you said no to them; saying no is a full time job.

Thus with growing celebrity, there is the risk of growing disappointment, as well as the risk – identified by Faye Hammill in her book *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* – that celebrity could actually overshadow the individual work itself. In her monograph, published in 2007, the same year that Lorraine York's *Literary Celebrity in Canada* was released, Hammill explores the ways in which literary celebrity interacts with forms of public performance, as well as concerns over how fame might compromise femininity or cultural authority, amongst other things. For some authors, Hammill argues, their creations become more famous than themselves (citing L M Montgomery, for example); for others, such as the Americans Mae West and Dorothy Parker, their public personas partially eclipse their writing. Hammill's explicit project is to 'reinscribe these fascinating writers into literary history' (3), a project at which she succeeds admirably. She is also interested in the question of control, refusing (like York) to see authors as victims of celebrity, but rather as co-creators of it. Both Hammill and York indicate a persistent linking of celebrity to masculinity, which given that power attends to celebrity is possibly not surprising.

Perhaps in an effort to balance this link, York explicitly re-evaluated sources which her academic history had instructed her to set aside, including magazine profiles as well as advertisements, publishing figures, and newspaper columns and reports. Hammill similarly notes the requirement to explore other sources—including obituaries—for her in-depth cultural history. Certainly it is the case with Atwood that upon the publication of a new book, Sunday newspapers will often carry profiles of her, and indeed some of her

miscellaneous writings – collected in *Curious Pursuits* – were originally published by newspapers themselves.

York's monograph engages with troubling questions over what constitutes celebrity and how it is maintained (arguing that it is even, in some instances, maintained through denial). For example, Michael Ondaatje's celebrity, she argues, is 'overdetermined by an exoticizing and eroticizing attention to his ethnicity' (124) – to questions, therefore, of being and belonging. Moreover, Ondaatje's determination to reject celebrity has ironically fed into interest in him as an individual as well as a writer (and this idea of consumption is one that deserves extended analysis; for me, it is not surprising that Atwood's work so often revolves around food). In reading Ondaatje's desire for privacy more complexly than others have, York explores how it is overplayed in some instances (in references to his writing habits) and underplayed in others (in relation to his complex, if not contradictory, association with the Anthony Minghella film, *The English Patient*). Importantly, York dismisses the fallacy of the self-effacing Canadian, and shows how literary celebrity – even stardom – is intimately linked to performance – a prime example being the performances of ethnicity undertaken by Pauline Johnson.

This critical background is essential for an exploration of literary celebrity in Canada, underlining the way in which being and belonging resonate uneasily within constructions of literary fame – fame which is both wanted and disavowed. York suggests that, '...the unease that attaches itself to Atwood's fame in Canada is one manifestation of the contradiction between locality and globalism that attends celebrity in general' (*Literary* 116). Thus, Atwood's celebrity status is one that is contested, culturally dependent and read in a variety of ways. In my interview with Atwood, we discussed a range of topics, from books that she reads and reviews to, as noted above, reactions to her hair. York actually quotes a writer from a woman's magazine as saying: "'Writing about Margaret Atwood has become no easy task—all the descriptions for her hair have already been used up'" (*Literary* 101).

In probing Atwood on celebrity, I was most often deflected away from the topic—she does not consider herself a celebrity and explicitly refused the label. Nor would she acknowledge overtly the way in which celebrity colours her creative work, from Joan Foster's unexpected celebrity in *Lady Oracle*, a celebrity that confuses subject and object and which leads eventually to her own faked death; to *Cat's Eye*, in which Elaine Risley's retrospective exhibit re-reads her artwork in a feminist framework simply because it coincides

with a rise in the feminist world view; to Grace Marks' notorious and tricky celebrity, manufactured and recapitulated in *Alias Grace*; or Laura Chase's fake and undeserved celebrity in *The Blind Assassin* (and surely that surname, Chase, is not accidental). In her collection of poetry *Eating Fire*, particularly "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing", and in her critical work *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood explores and re-explores the resonances of celebrity – despite her disavowals of it.

Thus in looking at celebrity, I needed to look beyond Atwood's own stance to the *impact* that she has culturally as a writer and an icon. In a survey I conducted in 2000 for the British Association for Canadian Studies (BACS) Literature Group, published in *CanText* and later used for part of Susan Billingham and Danielle Fuller's essay 'Can Lit(e): Fit for Export?', Atwood was revealed – unsurprisingly – as the most frequently studied Canadian author on UK university syllabi, with over twice as many books featured as her nearest rival, Michael Ondaatje, and with three times the popularity of Ondaatje when non-text specific replies were factored in. No doubt the ready availability of her books as well as the range of her writing contributed to this result, but what was also key to her popularity as a canonical author was the personal preference of the lecturers surveyed, as well as the familiarity with Atwood's work for incoming students, many of whom had read *The Handmaid's Tale* for their A level coursework.

Significantly, in a poll of Canadian academics undertaken by *Quill and Quire* at nearly the same time, which focused on the '50 greatest 20th Century Fictional Texts by Canadians', a book by Atwood didn't make the top ten.⁴ This disparity in results suggests something fundamental about Atwood's reputation. One European scholar, Caroline Rosenthal, was surprised at negative or lukewarm responses to Atwood in Canada, which didn't match the reactions from other parts of the world. Rosenthal's research focused on Canada's 'specific relationship to its most renowned author, who is proudly referred to as a superstar, on the one hand, and who is rejected for being one on the other' (43). York figuratively shrugs her shoulders when she notes that this dual response would not be a surprise to the scholar if she had been Canadian herself, though at the same time, York reminds us, 'essentialized concepts of national character offer a theoretically flawed way of accounting

⁴ See *CanText: The Newsletter of the BACS Literature Group* 2.2 (March 2000): 1-3 for the results of both surveys.

for the contradictions that are typical of the celebrity phenomenon' (*Literary* 118). Although York rather happily has it both ways in this reply, such a phenomenon is not linked only to Canada nor to Canadian reactions to Atwood. Rather, it may be, as Charlotte Templin argues about Anne Tyler, that 'ranking the artistic productions of one's own countrymen and –women and evaluating their visions of one's own culture is fraught with more emotion than making evaluations of writers that represent another national literary tradition' (179). Whilst the current focus on transnationalism as a response to literary endeavour might find fault with such a pronouncement, nonetheless there is a certain measure of truth in Templin's construction: hence the less ambivalent response to Atwood's canon in the UK and elsewhere. Perhaps the argument self-consciously runs thus: If there is only one Canadian author allowed such greatness on the world's literary stage, it would seem unfair always to offer the role to Atwood.

Of course, the different cultural narratives and norms of (and within) Canada and the UK (as well as elsewhere in Europe) necessarily ensure that what Atwood 'says' is variously interpreted. Thus Atwood has been considered an 'American' writer in parts of Europe,⁵ and her work has been placed in 'American Studies' modules in the UK, whereas she is explicitly situated as 'Canadian' in other contexts. The question of being and belonging is surely raised by the surprising failure of critics to situate Atwood as a Canadian. The fact that her most famous book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is set in what was once the US might contribute to this confusion. I have elsewhere explored the fate of Eva Hoffman as a Polish Canadian writer, who is adopted by the US as an American writer and whose original emigration to Canada is hardly remarked upon in critical studies of her first memoir,⁶ so this is not a phenomenon peculiar to Atwood. Moreover, the willingness of Canadian scholars to embrace authors of other origins into a canon of Canadian

⁵ I first came across this assertion at the British Association for Canadian Studies conference in 1998, and two Swedish colleagues, Ingela Aberg and Jonas Stier, later confirmed it. A module on Atwood that I previously taught at the University of Central Lancashire could either be considered part of the English Literature programme or the American Studies programme, depending on a Combined Honours student's needs. Even in the US, Atwood's nationality is rarely marked by teachers or lecturers, and indeed her most frequently taught text is set in Gilead, the former USA, which may account, somewhat, for this failure to acknowledge nationality.

⁶ See "'There is No World Outside the Text': Transatlantic Slippage in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 37.1 (2006): 61-79.

literature is a well-rehearsed topic in itself, but the malleability of Atwood's reputation abroad is, I would argue, highly unusual. It also suggests that whatever David Staines felt, perhaps Canada's 'literary landscape' is not as linked to Atwood's work as might have been supposed (Staines 19).

If celebrity is not, therefore, automatically linked to place, it is intimately linked to biography (and autobiography). It is no wonder, then, that readers wish to hear Atwood's 'real' voice and are willing to purchase a collection of her writing on reading; the reader knows that Atwood has indeed read the books she is commenting on. In this way, they perhaps feel they know her a bit more, too.

Atwood claims she is an 'addicted' reader, but also admits that she only reviews books she likes:

As soon as I'm doing a book review...I'm reading with the little stickies that you place on to reference a page, so that you can find it again when you're doing your review. What I like to do before I say I'm going to do a review is to read the book to see whether I enjoy it enough to want to read it again, and possibly again. If the answer is no then...I can't do this. It may be a good book but I have, personally, nothing to say about it.

Thus by reading what Atwood *does* like, it is as if the reader can ascertain what she *is* like, though in true Atwoodian form, the author resists any reading of herself at all. Indeed, during interviews, Atwood seeks to wrest control of the narrative, often in a charming, self-deprecating way. In seeking to expand on readings of her work during the interview I undertook with her, I acknowledged my own role as a reader of her work, an acknowledgement that she sought to take further. Calling me an 'instigated reader', Atwood suggested:

Well a reader-reader is just reading and they want all the things that one does when one reads a book, including the incentive for reading the next page. You, poor creature, are shackled to the Margaret Atwood desk; you've got to turn the next page whether you want to or not.

In turning the focus on the interviewer, Atwood retained control of the dynamic; in setting the desk as a proxy for herself, she retained distance.

The desk imagery is important for more than one reason, particularly as her original homepage at O W Toad featured the 'desk of Margaret Atwood', an icon that allowed for navigation – to a certain extent. In a clever reading of Atwood's first website, York observes that the site offered a sense of intimacy but managed to control access at the same time: 'As with her Web site desk graphic, Atwood's persona takes control of her desk, agreeing to open some personal spaces in a controlled atmosphere while resolutely declaring her right to keep other drawers closed' (*Literary* 114). The fact that Atwood's original website was called the 'Margaret Atwood Reference Site' rather than her homepage also indicated a certain distance here, and even the biographical details section was incomplete, with Atwood's awards, jobs and places of residence taking precedence over more intimate details.⁷ In an article in Coral Ann Howell's *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, York suggests that Atwood has 'intervened as an active, canny agent to shape the discourses surrounding her celebrity' (York, "Biography/Autobiography" 28). Indeed, one desk drawer revealed comics of Atwood (with wild hair) as if in an interview situation. Discussing *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood's character makes fun of her interviewer, who thinks she has written a how-to book for writers:

And this is how you write all your books?

Absolutely! Follow these simple instructions and you too can be on talk shows! As a guest, that is.⁸

The idea of Atwood-as-guest both feeds into an awareness of celebrity and makes fun of the suggestion that such celebrity is easy to attain. Atwood's alertness to celebrity – and her refusal of it – is revealed in many of the interviews that she has undertaken, including the one with me:

Well, let's be very frank about celebrity. I'm not a football star. I'm not a film star. I'm not a TV star. I haven't murdered anyone. I'm not a top model. I am a writer of literary fiction. And the level of fame and celebrity that you get doing that is quite manageable. You'll notice I have no bodyguards around me, no screaming fans are clambering over my shoelaces. So it's not the same kind of thing as it would be if you were Jackie

⁷ Atwood has launched a new website, which is now called 'Margaret Atwood's Website', but it is similarly silent on biographical details. See <http://margaretatwood.ca/>.

⁸ See www.owtoad.com, accessed 20 February 2008.

Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Mick Jagger, that person who plays football... David Beckham, a Spice Girl. Any of those kinds of things are at a very much higher level of that phenomenon than a person who writes books ever will be.

Atwood's list of 'real' celebrities is instructive. The fact that she includes murderers in her hierarchy of fame (and has written about the celebrity attached to crime in *Alias Grace*) shows that her sense of celebrity is not one that is confined to those whose *artistic* exploits are exploited by the media. However, the preponderance of such people in her list—football stars (and their wives), pop stars, and tv and film stars – reveals the commonplace assumption that the majority of people whose lives are potentially turned upside down by fame are ones whose fame rests at least in part on their visual appeal. Atwood has also struggled with the focus on her looks, and has commented in several essays about the difficulties of being a woman writer, noting back in 1980 that, 'A man's work is reviewed for its style and ideas, but all too often a woman's is reviewed for the supposed personality of the author as based on the jacket photograph' ("Witches" 331). Although it would be comforting to think that this has changed dramatically in the nearly thirty years since she wrote these words, the subject of visual impact is still very much on her mind.

Such replies suggest that despite her disavowal, Atwood recognizes her celebrity status. At the same time, though, she continues to insist on the distance between herself and other celebrities:

People who read books identify with the book, not so much with you. They only identify with you if someone else writes a book in which you figure as a character like Virginia Woolf and *The Hours*; then you get to be a character in a work of fiction...So, when you're dead and you get to be a character in somebody else's book, then you can have that kind of identification with yourself, but other than that you're just the medium. People don't go to a séance to talk to the medium; they go to talk to Aunt Bessie!

Atwood's sense of herself as the medium and not the message is at odds with the still pervasive desire for autobiographical resonances that some readers attach to the author, despite the focus of literary critics away from autobiography as a legitimating force.

Indeed, such is the critical swing away from autobiography, that perusal of the Atwood archives in the summer of 2007 led to my own critical unease. The Atwood Archives in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto offers one measure of her influence and success; they number some 369 boxes (and a description of the contents runs to 220 pages). The materials included range from juvenilia and unpublished manuscripts to early rejection letters and discussions of filmic projects based on her work.

Occasionally I would uncover childhood correspondence, touchingly preserved, and it was in those moments that as a literary scholar I felt some disquiet, examining homemade 'books' and letters to and from grandparents. If everything is material to writers, is it appropriate that everything is material to scholars, too? Yet Atwood placed these items in the archive, and therefore must be assumed to be happy that they are there. Of these personal effects there are actually only a few, and the correspondence that is in the archives is primarily related to specific working projects. Ironically, this also became a disappointment, even though the archive notes quite specifically state that this will be the case in the opening description of the materials: 'Most of the correspondence in the collection relates to the editing and publication of literary works. Some personal letters are included in the earlier correspondence. Personal correspondence after 1967 is restricted. There is very little memorabilia or printed material documenting Atwood's career. The focus of the collection is almost completely on Atwood's literary work. Biographical material exists only for the pre 1967 years.'

The fact that the archive explicitly addresses this question proves, in a sense, that critics do not disregard autobiography in its entirety (that desire may still be there), and in fact, a number of Atwoodian critics have traced autobiographical resonances in her work (particularly in her 1988 novel *Cat's Eye*). At the same time, however, Atwood herself has a history of explicitly insisting on the distance between herself and her creations. In particular, she notes how the media has created Atwood-as-writer (citing 'Margaret the Magician, Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater' stereotypes amongst others), who may or may not have anything to do with the 'real' Margaret Eleanor Atwood ("The Curse of Eve" 227). As if to feed into this, a documentary which sought to uncover more about Atwood, Michael Rubbo's *Once in August* (National Film Board of Canada, 1984), shows her and her family playfully subverting that project: Atwood donned a paper bag and the amassed people asked, 'Who is this woman?'

Such self-conscious recognition of her role(s)—and the critic's desire for her exposure—is also played out in Atwood's critical and creative work. In her collection *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), which came out of the Empson Lectures she gave at Cambridge in 2000, Atwood fleetingly refers to her own life, but more often, deflects attention away from herself and onto other writers, or to a mythical Writer who is somehow different from the person who writes. Atwood suggests, 'The author is the name on the book. I'm the other one' (37), and the collection works hard to ensure this kind of doubling is highlighted (with, amongst other things, its references to Jekyll and Hyde, as well as its focus on twins and doppelgängers). Atwood explores her own early biography more to dispel notions of the special writer than to reaffirm them, and she even claims:

If I had suspected anything about the role I would be expected to fulfill, not just as a writer, but as a *female* writer – how irrevocably doomed! – I would have flung my leaky blue blob-making ballpoint pen across the room...I would never have done any interviews, nor allowed my photo to appear on book jackets; but I was too young then to know about such ruses, and by now it is far too late. (*Negotiating* 15, italics in original)

Negotiating with the Dead is subtitled 'A Writer on Writing', and the very use of the indefinite article is suggestive of Atwood's simultaneous implied exposure and critical distancing. The *A* does not fix the writer's identity, but allows a non-specific reading, whilst at the same time, her name across the top of the book – in much larger letters than the title – dispels the non-specificity implied.

In another example, an interview on *The South Bank Show* in 1993, which dramatized aspects of *The Robber Bride*, shows Atwood offering tips about which muffins are the most edible as often as it speaks about her writing. Furthermore, revelations about her private life are strictly rationed, and focus on flippant remarks about previous jobs rather than emotional outpourings of her biographical secrets ('I've been a waitress and a critic, and believe me, it's harder being a waitress,' she quips at one point, thus potentially unsettling the project of exploring her work and her life).

This distancing from the autobiographical aspects of writing (apart from the carefully apportioned aspects mentioned above) was somewhat overturned in

2006, when Atwood published *Moral Disorder*, a collection of linked short stories that, on the face of it at least, draws on autobiographical resonances to a larger extent than previously. Thirty years before, in an interview with Linda Sandler, Atwood noted that, '...if you write a "serious" book, everybody wants it to be autobiographical' (26), and offered up the quip that Shakespeare was lucky because, since no one knew anything about him, all they had to deal with was his output (26). Thus the creative decision to incorporate autobiography within a series of short stories is one that I probed in interview. Atwood suggested that she didn't always refuse the autobiographical tag, only those places where it didn't apply.

...how much is real, how much is not real; the fact is that, sure, you always use stuff that has gone through your head, so in that sense everything's autobiographical. On the other hand, you always alter everything that goes through your head; in that sense, nothing is autobiographical because it's all been made into something else, and we do live in an age in which when you write something called an autobiography people are bound to think you're lying, and if you write something called fiction they're bound to think you're secretly telling the truth, but they're not sure just in what area you're telling the truth. But I, essentially, feel that I don't care which daffodils Wordsworth saw; I'm sure he saw some daffodils. I don't need to know exactly which ones. It's not of interest to me, although it might be of interest to a daffodil fancier or somebody who's really wanting to get so thoroughly into the life of William Wordsworth. So I could go through and annotate the whole thing: this is real; this is not real; this happened but not in this order; yes, we had all of these animals, but we had more animals than these, just didn't put them all in; I didn't put in all the vegetables. Any fiction is edited; you can't put everything in, and any fiction is rearranged. As people have often said, you can tell the same story about the same people from a different point of view and it would be quite different.

Thus even in her reply, Atwood is selective, her 'this is real' is not specified; instead, Atwood suggests that life material is just that: material, to be reworked in fictional ways, and ways that she does not need to reveal. Thus even in her most explicitly autobiographical mode, Atwood retains control.

She does this in part by refusing to engage with or worry about what her readers think:

I can't control what they think, so why would I concern myself with it?...You as a critic can suggest to them what they might think or you can suggest different ways of looking at things, and I as a novelist can do that with my characters, but you cannot tell them; you cannot reach into their little minds and twist a few knobs and have it come out the way you want.

Moreover, the delay between the point where the writing is finished and publishing the work suggests to Atwood that what the readers are reading is different from what she is currently working on. She also lends yet another layer of distance by noting that she doesn't herself read current reviews, only older ones (and then, not always), to avoid getting involved in discussions with others over what other reviewers think: 'So it's nice to have wonderful reviews. It's interesting to have nasty, personal attacks. They're always peculiar and weird and you don't know where they come from, but there's nothing you can do about it; you can't control it.'

If Atwood herself suggests that celebrity is something apart from herself, her creative work engages with celebrity at several levels. In the poem "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing", for example, the infamous Helen battles against feminist critics who think she is selling out; against men's beery visions of her as provoking either hatred or 'bleary / hopeless love' (line 32-33); and she singles out one spectator as different, as special:

Not that anyone here
but you would understand.
The rest of them would like to watch me
and feel nothing. Reduce me to components
as in a clock factory or abattoir.
Crush out the misery.
Wall me up alive
in my own body.
They'd like to see through me,
but nothing is more opaque
than absolute transparency. (lines 65-75)

Here, celebrity is a plaything reformed in different images, and none of them contains Helen; all of them are false. She offers up an image of transparency precisely to withhold that which appears to be offered: herself. Atwood's clever conflation of historical infamy with modern celebrity culture and critical responses (along with the performer's manipulation of her audience) reveals a sort of historical continuity—as does her book-length reworking of the myth of Penelope and Odysseus, *The Penelopiad*, which Atwood has done a staged reading of with Phyllida Lloyd, who directed the opera of *The Handmaid's Tale*. In discussing the way in which the performance would be staged, Lloyd suggested that the three professional actresses playing the maids were 'very big Margaret Atwood fans...I had to keep reminding them that they looked at this empty chair [where Atwood, as Penelope, would be sitting] with reverence and awe, and that they've got to think differently. "She's Penelope, she's enslaved you. You've got to find more rage and menace here."'⁹ That Atwood's own celebrity informs her performance on stage as Penelope suggests the circularity of the phenomenon.

As early as her third novel, Atwood was exploring celebrity. *Lady Oracle* (1976) focuses on Joan Foster as a reluctant celebrity poet who feels compelled to fake her own death; she is hounded by a stalker and performs badly on talk shows. After a performance that she regrets, Joan bemoans, 'What was the use of being Princess-for-a-day if you still felt like a toad? Acted like one, too' (238), and she is accosted by a fatuous artist who asks, "'Are you Lady Oracle?'" to which she replies, "'It's the name of my book'". That Atwood has her character so enmeshed with her book that the audience inadvertently ties them into the same title underscores the way in which celebrity is linked to products as much as productions.

In her Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), celebrity is wrongly attributed to Laura Chase rather than her sister Iris, the real author of the celebrated text of the same name. In this case, Iris takes perverse pleasure in explicitly manufacturing her dead sister's celebrity and hiding behind it:

As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it. But you must have known that for some time. I wrote it myself, during my long evenings alone, when I was waiting for Alex to come back, and then afterwards, once I knew he wouldn't. I didn't think of what I was doing as writing—just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth.

⁹ See www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/oct/26/theatre.classics accessed 15 March 2009.

I thought of myself as recording. A bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall.

I wanted a memorial. That was how it began. For Alex, but also for myself. (512)

Iris contemplates what will happen to the steamer trunk in which she hoards things to do with the manuscript that made her dead sister famous, and concocts snide letters to the scholars who wish to know more about her sister:

Dear Professor Z: I have noted your opinion that a biography of Laura Chase is long overdue. She may well be, as you say, 'amongst our most important female mid-century writers.' I wouldn't know. But my co-operation in what you call 'your project' is out of the question. I have no wish to satisfy your lust for phials of dried blood and severed fingers of saints.

Laura Chase is not your 'project.' She was my sister. She would not have wished to be pawed over after her death, whatever that pawing over might euphemistically be termed. Things written down can cause a great deal of harm. All too often, people don't consider that. (287)

Finally, too, she acknowledges Laura as a ghostly collaborator: 'The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers' (513). In these novels, as in *Cat's Eye*, which focuses on the artist Elaine Risley's work, celebrity is linked figuratively to death; Elaine notes that she has 'a public face, a face worth defacing' (20), but she also worries that a retrospective exhibition suggests death, or something like it. York marks the frequency with which Atwood links celebrity and death, and this is something that also came out of the interview I undertook. When I noted to Atwood that I thought most students would think of her primarily as a novelist (and thus sadly missing out her critical work as well as her poetry), Atwood's response was wry: 'I would think most students think of me, primarily, as a dead person....all the people I read about in high school were dead. Why would they be different? It's rather shocking to discover some of them are still alive.'

Although it is doubtful that students are indeed shocked by Atwood's continued presence, Atwood herself appears to be surprised by the recycling of interviews conducted years before, noting that this phenomenon is:

Very peculiar because you thought at the time they were one-offs and everything at the time was a one-off then. When you did an interview that was the end of it, but now they are all podcasting, web streaming, downloading...you do have a virtual presence that's circulating endlessly whether you like it or not, and there's not just one alter ego out there, there's a whole pack of them.

Atwood's alter egos may follow her around, resurfacing even when the original didn't air (as in the archived Hana Gartner interview, posted under the title 'Atwood Brandishes her Caustic Tongue', that was never shown, but is now streamable from the CBC website),¹⁰ but even this is not enough to convince Atwood of her own celebrity, as the following exchange makes clear:

Macpherson: But I wonder if you're not underestimating your own, to use the word again, celebrity, and your own influence—

Atwood: Everything's relative; with six billion people in the world, of those six billion people, how many do you think have heard of me?

Macpherson: I don't know. I guess that puts it into perspective.

Atwood: Millions, but not in the six billions; in fact, there's probably no person on the face of the planet who has been heard of by all six billion.

Macpherson: But your readings are very popular; people flock to them.

Atwood: Oh sure, as *readings*. As football games they would be considered horrible failures because only 500 people were there.

Macpherson: But if that's as big as the theatre is...

Atwood: Even if there were 3000 people you couldn't fill it; I could not fill a 3000 people stadium, sorry.

Macpherson: Don't be sorry, but I wonder again if you're not underestimating—

Atwood: No, I know pretty much how things are. I could do 1500.

Macpherson: We should negotiate then. Do you think you could do 2200?

Atwood: I've done 2000, but it depends where and when,

¹⁰ See http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-68-1494-10058/arts_entertainment/margaret_atwood/clip5, last accessed 24 February 2008.

and you don't want them actually to be really that big, because it's a much more intimate thing; you're not playing a game watched by millions. You're participating in an experience shared by hundreds at a time, that's how it is.

Atwood's humour is clearly much in evidence here, and there is a certain sense, as York suggests, that Atwood herself is participating in her own celebrity even as she refuses it; she allowed herself to be negotiated 'up' to an audience figure of 2000, though she also suggests in the interview that she is very 'Canadian' in wanting to deny her place in the hierarchy of cultural exports. In 2006, Atwood invented the LongPen™, a device that allows her to sign autographs remotely, fully fitting in with her green credentials and her preference to reduce her carbon footprint. Though some have worried that this might signal the demise of the book tour (and these fears speak to the desire of fans to have a relationship of sorts, if only briefly with the author), these fears, so far, have been unfounded, and video-conferencing allows autograph-seekers to see and converse with the writer even when she is signing remotely. She can, therefore, be present and not at the same time (or, effectively present in more than one location simultaneously), thus adding to the idea of the author as a doppelgänger, or 'the other one'.

Lady Oracle's Joan Foster notes, 'It's no good thinking you're invisible if you aren't...' (12), and this reminder may well be as appropriate for Atwood as it is for her creations. The very visibility of her protagonists and their complicated relationships to fame suggest that this powerful metaphor is one that will continue to resonate for Atwood, and her readers.

It is clear that links between Atwood, celebrity, and auto/biography are contestable, culturally informed and likely to be denied by the author herself. If Atwood is the self-confessed 'other one', the doppelgänger of the author, she is nevertheless a recurrent subject of critical debate and conjecture, her writing offering up a narrative of Atwood as writer, cultural export and cultural commentator.

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