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## **LIMINAL INTERVENTIONS INTO LIFE AND ART: A STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S OCCASIONAL TEXTS**

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As a writer, the variety of genres used by Margaret Atwood is very extensive. Research studies often focus on her poetry and fiction. Her prose works, especially her *Occasional Writings*, offer interesting insights into life in general and Atwood's art in particular. In this sense, they provide excellent secondary sources for our readings of any text by Atwood. They occupy a liminal space which allows readers to make an interpretive foray into her writings. This is only one aspect of her Occasional pieces. It is my contention that Atwood's Occasional writings – speeches, interviews, reviews and essays – provide self-reflexive and meta-fictional insights through their continual erasure of generic conventions. These texts occupy interstitial positions in relation to other Atwood texts and intervene, negotiate and mediate in the overall process of interpretation. In doing so, they effectively interrogate the Romantic view of the writer as creator and also maintain a constant dialogue with the readers.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood, *Occasional Writing*, liminal space, paratext, meta narratives

There are a lot of things that can be said about what goes on around the edges of writing -- Atwood in "Nine Beginnings"

... the space between what could be said safely and what needed to be withheld from speech .... It's often over such distances, such emptiness and silence, that the poetic voice must travel -- Atwood in "Writing Susanna"

### **1. Introduction**

Margaret Atwood's oeuvre as a writer is extensive and it is well - established that she frequently tests the limits of generic conventions in her works. Witness, her treatment of dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This brings in the question of the author's engagement with the chosen genre. More importantly, it forces the readers to consider the problem of placing her Occasional Writings within the overall poetics of her writing. Atwood's Occasional texts can be categorised as speeches, interviews, reviews and essays, but they do not necessarily conform to commonly held generic conventions. They act as self-reflexive and meta-fictional commentary on the writer

and the writing process. Much like "narcissistic narratives" (Linda Hutcheon's term), they turn on themselves, parody the commonly held generic expectations and maintain a constant dialogue with the readers. In other words, her texts "embrace discourses that attack genres, [given that] a genre can be the site of contrary ideologies" (Perloff 24). In doing so, they create in-between spaces or what Bhabha calls the "interstices," which in turn carry on interrogations, mediations and interventions.

In this study, I wish to examine *ten* Occasional texts of Margaret Atwood as liminal texts performing paratextual functions. "Paratext" is a term coined by Gerard Genette and refers to the impact of features such as foreword, blurb, cover, title, ISBN number on the discourse between the writer and the reader. Genette puts forward a simple algorithm to explain the role and function of a paratext in any given text: PARATEXT = PERITEXT + EPITEXT.

Peritext includes elements inside the confines of a bound volume, that is, everything between and on the covers. Epitext includes elements outside the bound volume -- public and private elements -- such as interviews, reviews, correspondences, diaries etc. (Koenig-Woodyard). By these definitions, Atwood's Occasional texts create a kind of interstice between the peritext and the epitext. On the surface level, the Occasional texts may be termed epitexts, outside the bound volumes of the original texts. However, by self-reflexively focussing on Atwood's poetry, fiction, views as a writer, philosophy of writing and the like, these texts inscribe themselves into our readings of the original texts, and perform the functions of a peritext.

The texts chosen for analysis are from two sources. One is Atwood's collection entitled *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970 - 2005*. Texts chosen from this collection include:

1. "Travels Back"
2. "Nine Beginnings"
3. "When Afghanistan Was at Peace"
4. "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections"

The other is from Atwood's personal home page cited in the web as O.W. Toad Ltd. Texts chosen from the home page include:

1. "Rocky Road to Paper Heaven (The Process that Transfers the Work from the Writer to the Ideal Reader)"
2. "On Writing Poetry"

3. "Transcript of Atwood's talk at the 1995 Toronto Council of Teachers in English"
4. "Writing Susanna"
5. "Ophelia has a Lot to Answer for"
6. "Spotty - Handed Villainesses: Problems of Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature"

The writings in Atwood's new website "The Year of the Flood" and her text *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008) are also good illustrations of Atwood's Occasional texts. However, they have not been included because the present study focusses on a three-pronged function of these Occasional texts.

The interstices created and sustained by these texts perform *three* different functions in the communication between Atwood the writer and us, the readers: (i) *Self-Directed Meta Narratives* -- whereby these texts discredit the Romantic notion of the creative muse/inspiration and consistently strive to project the view of the writer as an ordinary individual. (ii) *Anthropological Meta Narratives* -- whereby these texts undertake an anthropological search for origins of Atwood's works, once again debunking any overreading of the images and any attempt to force symbolism on the works. (iii) *Meta Review of Other Literary Narratives* -- whereby these texts foreground recurrent stereotypes in literature, especially the attributes assigned to the insane and villainesses.

## **2. Self - Directed Meta Narratives**

One theme to which Atwood constantly refers back is the idea of writing about writing. She sees it more as a social obligation than an obligation to the writing itself. The underlying belief is that "[w]riting about writing requires self-consciousness; writing itself requires the abdication of it." ("Nine Beginnings" 144) Thus, elements of meta fiction are woven into these Occasional texts. Atwood effects this through the use of parody. A text like "Nine Beginnings" may be read as an allusion to the nine lives of a cat or to the multiple beginnings of a woman writer's text as opposed to the linearity and monolithic nature of the Biblical Genesis and in general, any patriarchal text. In this essay, she asks and answers the question, "Why do you write?" nine times. She answers it differently each time. The answers range from a simple assertive statement like "I hate writing about my writing. .... They seemed beside the point. Too assertive, too pedagogical, too frivolous or belligerent,

too falsely wise." She also discredits the notion of inspired writing by stating that she has no "special self-revelation" or "special knowledge" to impart to others. This emphatically discards Classical and Romantic notions of the Muse and inspired writing. In a reversal of values, the only Muse that she acknowledges is the Muse Oblivion, "to whom you sacrifice your botched first drafts, the tokens of human imperfection" ("Nine Beginnings" 145). Here, the focus is not on a superhuman writer/creator in absolute control of things but one who is struggling to make life as a writer.

There are words and their inertias, their biases, their insufficiencies, their glories. There are the risks you take and your loss of nerve, ... There's the laborious revision, the scrawled- over, crumpled-up pages that drift across the floor like spilled litter ("Nine Beginnings" 149).

In a similar vein, the flip side of the creative process is laid bare for the readers in a humorous parody of the Ten Commandments in "Rocky Road to Paper Heaven." The text describes how the communication between the writer and the reader is mediated and interjected by friends, agents, editors and publishers. The intervention between writing and reading is effected through descriptions and options rather than prescriptions. Humour and irony punctuate the whole effort. Thus, "[b]eing edited is like falling face down into a threshing machine. Every page gets fought over, back & forth like WW1." ("Rocky Road to Paper Heaven") In this scheme of things, "spinach on your teeth" refers to errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, "Your socks don't match" refers to internal consistency, "You look better in blue than in green" indicates matters of taste, "You just pulled a turnip out of your hat, when it's supposed to be a rabbit" suggests bathos and failed effects, "You have jumped the gun" indicates matters of structure and timing, "Where is the voice coming from?" matters of tone and "In India they drive on the left" refers to fact checking. These elaborate details stress the important role played by the editor in the success of a work. Similarly, getting reviewed may be a nightmarish, surrealistic experience akin to Kafka's *The Trial*. However, the option of not getting reviewed is worse and therefore the need for agents and publicity managers. After this great ordeal, if one letter of appreciation comes from the reader, it reminds you "why you are putting yourself through this meat-grinder in the first place" ("Rocky Road to Paper Heaven").

By elaborately debunking the Romantic notions of the process of creative writing, Atwood draws the portrait of an artist as an ordinary individual with some

capabilities. For instance, in the text entitled "On Writing Poetry," Atwood presents a very mundane picture of her beginnings as a writer:

The day I became a poet was a sunny day of no particular ominousness. I was walking across the football field, ..., because it was my normal way home from school. I was scuttling along in my usual furtive way, ... , when a poem formed .... I suspect this is the way all poets begin writing poetry, only they don't want to admit it, so they make up rational explanations (2).

She presents an equally innocuous picture of the first criticism of her work. "... the word of encouragement I received from my wonderful Grade 2 English teacher, Miss Bessie Billings - "I can't understand a word of this, my dear, so it must be good" ." (4)

Even though, Atwood rejects the halo that is created and sustained around the image of the writer, she insists on her identity in the community of writers -- of Canadian writers. In a "Question and Answer Session," she traces the origins of Canadian literature and her own position within it. Citing the 1960s as watershed years, she views the formation of publishing houses like The House of Anansi Press and Coach House Press as starting the tradition of Canadian writers writing for Canadian audience. She views it as a matter of lucky providence that she grew up to be a writer in this context. Thus, her literary influences are her own contemporaries including P.K. Page, Margaret Avison, Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, D.G. Jones, Eli Mandel, John Newlove, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Michael Ondaatje, Pat Lane, George Bowering, Milton Acorn, A.M. Klein, Alden Nowlan, Elizabeth Brewster, Anne Wilkinson - ("On Writing Poetry" 5).

These are the writers who, according to Atwood, took writing seriously and removed the tag that Canadian writing is an oxymoron. Through all this, Atwood emphasises the view that there is a kind of coming together of the writer and the reader which is the deciding factor in the creation of a national literature. When every writer views him/herself as part of a larger context, then automatically writing becomes yet another profession with no value attachments. As a result of this view, Atwood defines terms like 'success' and 'professional' differently. To the question "How does the successful writer resist the temptation to be a literary snob?" Atwood replies:

The question is, what kind of successful writer: successful financially, or successful artistically? If we're talking successful artistically, I would say that unless

you were somewhat of a literary snob to begin with, then you wouldnot have developed your own taste and .... style.... I can say it certainly helps to be Canadian; we don't put up with people who get high and mighty .... I think it's always a mistake to believe your own billboards ("Question and Answer Session" 2). To the question, "What are the disadvantages of being a professional novelist or poet?" Atwood replies:One thing I mean by professional is that you make your living from it; another is that you take a more or less professional view of what you are doing. And this to me means, among other things, that I do not phone up my publishers at four in the morning and scream at them. I do that at four in the afternoon when they are in the office,... (Question and Answer Session 3).

This is a kind of situation, many professionals face many times in their careers -- once again an indicator that writers do not have ivory tower existences any more.

### **3. Anthropological Meta Narratives**

When writing is viewed as a profession, then there are also strategies that are evolved to succeed. The first step in the process is to pause and take stock of one's own writing over a period of time. Atwood does this in these Occasional texts by reviewing her other works, interrogating whether her previous decisions editorially and otherwise are still valid. She also methodically clears the air of overreadings of her works. To accomplish this, she undertakes a search for the origins of her works, in the same vein as her unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*. For instance, in the "Question and Answer Session," she acknowledges the importance of writing conventions, even when she justifies her variant form of punctuation in *Surfacing*. As she puts it, "In *Surfacing*, the punctuation is obviously used to indicate a state of mind; thoughts run into other thoughts" (4). Similarly, she tackles complex issues such as plausibility, accuracy and fact-fiction divide by stating that "It's the business of the fiction writer to be plausible. That's another way of saying it's the business of the fiction writer to tell you lies you will believe!"(5). She terms labels such as fact and fiction as disclaimers.

This is fiction. It's like a cigarette package warning. But then everyone immediately disbelieves that and starts identifying all the characters. Whereas if you write an autobiography the first thing they do is to say, "Of course she distorted the truth, and she's lying ... and she's left things out ..." (6).

This overreading extends to the reaction of readers to descriptions of physical places in the works. Atwood quotes the instance of how readers were insistent on viewing the gymnasium in *The Handmaid's Tale* as "Leaside High's gymnasium"(6).

The genesis story of every work is only an indication of originating points but not THE ONLY originating point. Here again, Atwood discredits the notion that the biographical note by the author determines the response of the readers. To explain this idea, Atwood cites the example of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The work can be placed in the tradition of dystopia, especially negative dystopia, deriving from the tradition of utopia.

This tradition goes back to Plato and the Book of Revelations and follows up through people like Jonathan Swift and Anatole France and William Morris and many, many other works, ... , such as W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* ("Question and Answer Session" 6-7). In particular, she acknowledges the direct impact of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* in terms of their deft weaving of ideology and morality in works of art. However, her own contribution cannot be diminished either: The majority of dystopias -- Orwell's included -- have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime. They've acted as temptresses of the male protagonists,... I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view.... ("George Orwell: Some Personal Connections" 339).

Quite interestingly, influences on *The Handmaid's Tale* also include seemingly unrelated incidents. For instance, Atwood refers to the mixed feelings she had about the chador she bought in Afghanistan, which very definitely played a role in designing the costume of the handmaids. Even though, she understands it as a "cultural custom ... [much like the belief] that you weren't decently dressed without a girdle and white gloves" ("*When Afghanistan Was at Peace*" 246), she realises that clothing is a symbol, that all symbols are ambiguous and that this one might signify a fear of women or a desire to protect them from the gaze of strangers. But it could also mean more negative things, ...(247).

This leads to the issue of the distinction between "freedom to and freedom from" (247). This is the point of origin for all forms of oppression. Thus, every writer at every point in the conception of a work has to take certain conscious decisions. As Atwood explains:

Every writer wants the Cloak of Invisibility -- the power to see without being seen -- or so I was thinking as I donned the chador. But once I put it on, I had an

odd sense of having been turned into negative space, a blank in the visual field, a sort of anti-matter -- both there and not there. Such a space has power of a sort, but it is a passive power, the power of taboo (247).

This ambivalence is clearly reflected in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

There are other instances where works and responses converge in an effortless manner. One such instance is the publication of Atwood's collection of poems, *The Circle Game*. Charles Pachter and Atwood, both in their teens, decide "to hand-print a group of poems in the *livre d'artiste* tradition" ("Writing Susanna" 1). As Atwood puts it candidly, "this -- both poems and book -- later became thought of as Art, but at the time it was just a couple of kids experimenting" (1). Similarly, Atwood terms the publication of *The Edible Woman* as an accident. I actually wrote it in '65- '65 and Jack McClelland lost the manuscript, ... So it actually came out in '69 -- and it was strange timing. It was right on the edge, so much so that there were basically two kinds of reviews [from the ones who didn't know feminism has arrived and the ones who did know about feminism] ("Question and Answer Session" 8).

In contrast, the case of Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie* is one of calculated reaction to popular views. Atwood mentions how her experience of studying "third rate Puritan doggerel" at Harvard made her realise "that we in Canada had been short-changed. We'd always been told- well, everyone knew -- that Canadian literature, if any, was second-rate, and we must confine ourselves to the good-for-us English variety" ("Writing Susanna" 2). In a rather post-colonial response to this, she checked out on the existing works on Moodie -- which she found disappointing and dumpy. Her version of the Moodie story is a revision because "it was the unsaid in her work that [was] compelling" (2). Hence, work on Moodie becomes a kind of Jekyll and Hyde encounter for Atwood:

As for Susanna herself, I suppose she was my youthful Ms. Hyde, and I was the Miss Jekyll through which she manifested herself--made of my anti-matter, a negative to my positive, or vice versa. She was appalled by the wilderness, I by the city, once upon a time. Both of us were uprooted. Both of us were far from home, both anxious, both scrabbling for cash, both under pressure. Both knew the space between what could be said safely and what needed to be withheld from speech. I said for her what she couldn't say, and she for me, It's often over such distances, such emptiness and silence, that the poetic voice must travel (3).

However personal such an encounter is, it is not unique but underlies the creative process itself. Therefore, a study of how literature has treated these

encounters becomes a pointer to one's own development – in this case, Atwood's development as a writer.

#### **4. Meta Review of Other Literary Narratives**

Atwood's Occasional texts also perform the function of reviewing literature down the ages. By itself, it is not unique or uncommon. However, in Atwood such a task becomes an occasion to review her own works as also survey the contexts available to every writer -- thus, a Meta Review. In her lecture, "Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For," Atwood outlines the different trends in the representation of madness in literature from the Bible through Renaissance and Shakespeare on to the Romantics and Victorians to the treatment of Grace Marks by Susanna Moodie. Through this long journey, Atwood finds frequent recurrences of stereotypical representations of madness. She uses Janet Frame's term, "Opheliana" -- which points to certain recurrent elements in the representation namely, singing, letting the hair down, loose and dishevelled clothing, confused and nonsensical speech and the manner of death. Atwood proceeds to show how Susanna Moodie's representation of Grace Marks in *Life in the Clearings* is faithful to the stereotypes of madness (the Ophelia type) and villainy (the Lady Macbeth type, because Grace was involved in a murder). Soon after Moodie published her work, Grace "was sent back to the Penitentiary, with a letter from the Superintendent that described her as a kind and helpful inmate, who was certainly too sane to stay at the Asylum any longer" (6). Atwood points out how Moodie "was looking at [Grace] through tinted glasses" (4). She also alerts us to the danger of criticising such representations because "many of our theories will look silly when those who follow us have come up with something better" (7).

Another aspect of literature where stereotypes rule the roost is in the representation of women as villains. Atwood is of the view that the stereotypes are generated in the binary of the "Angel/Whore split" ("Spotty - Handed Villainesses" 1). Also, "the most famous of spots, the invisible but indelible one on the hand of wicked Lady Macbeth" (1). Yet, stereotypes, even negative ones, are useful in bringing out the essence of literature and distinguish it from life. It is the chimeric nature of art, from fairy tales to works of fiction down the ages, that allows for a kaleidoscopic perception of life.

Whole areas of human life that were once considered non-literary or sub-literary -- such as the problematical nature of homemaking, the hidden depths of

motherhood, and of daughterhood as well, the once-forbidden realms of incest and child abuse -- have been brought inside the circle that demarcates the writeable from the non-writeable (4-5).

Cinderella's wicked step sisters, Lear's daughters, Medea, Delilah and Becky Sharpe -- all bring the unsaid into the sphere of articulation.

To this extent, "female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom... Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences" (7).

To Atwood, the extent to which the Women's Movement reinforced this view in their analyses, is their major contribution. However, this is not to say that social activism has been injected into literature.

The reason for the existence of literature is that it is a species of human experience, which draws upon but is not restricted by the other spheres of experience. Thus, literary forms like novels draw heavily on the social structures of experience but ARE NOT 'sociological textbooks,' 'political tracts,' 'how to books,' 'moral tracts,' or 'political tracts.' (2-3). Identifying these aspects in a literary work is the job of the critic. As Atwood explains:

God started with chaos -- dark, without form and void -- and so does the novelist. Then God made one detail at a time. So does the novelist. On the seventh day, God took a break to consider what he'd done. So does the novelist. But the critic starts on Day 7....The novelist,..., says, 'How can I pull this off?' -- as if the novel itself was a kind of bank robbery. Whereas the critic is liable to exclaim, in the mode of the policeman making the arrest, 'Aha! You can't get away with that!' (3).

The writer and critic are both necessary to the creative process, in the same way that we need our sense of space, place, history, nation and the like. This is not to be mistaken for narrow parochialism but as pride in one's own heritage.

By discovering your place you discover yourself... [A literary work's] a space composed of images, experiences, the weather, your own past and your ancestors, .... The images come from outside... and the connections ... have to be made inside your head... writing is: an exploration of where in reality I live ("Travels Back" 11-12).

Here again, Atwood emphasises the need to distinguish between exploiting resources and developing potential. They are two different things: "one is done from

without by money, the other from within, by something I hesitate only for a moment to call love" (13). This notion of culture capital is what links Atwood's forays into life and art.

## 6. Conclusion

Atwood's Occasional texts may be read as her own statements of her poetics. These texts are used by Atwood to foreground the image of an artist as an accessible human being and to highlight the constant mingling of life and art. Clearly, there is a movement from being self-conscious as a writer to being a self-aware writer.

However, these explorations also raise some crucial issues.

- Is Atwood's overt rejection of the Romantic notion of the supremacy of the writer a ploy to inscribe herself more firmly into her texts?
- By creating plural contexts for her works in these Occasional texts, is she occupying the liminal spaces with that little extra hold on the readers?
- Is Atwood projecting the dictum that she puts forward in the text "On Writing Poetry": "A lot of being a poet consists of willed ignorance" (3), as her version of the portrait of the artist?

Yes, there are these constantly present in-between spaces. Yes, we are more aware of Atwood in these texts. Yes, the ever-present humour and irony may be read as "willed ignorance." Yet, we, as readers, have the option to link these texts with the others or dissociate them and again we, as readers, have the option to correlate Atwood's views on life and literature. To this extent, Atwood opens these Occasional texts as liminal spaces where the readers and critics can co-exist with the writer. This enables a two-way communication, intervention, interrogation and mediation -- all of which highlight the writer-readerly and reader-writerly approaches to life and art.

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