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Dining Out with the Footnote Crowd

Nischik, Reingard M. ed. *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact.* Toronto: Anansi, 2000. xii + 344 pp.

In *The Red Shoes*, Rosemary Sullivan recalls that, when she told Margaret Atwood that she wanted to write about her life, Atwood replied: "I'm not dead" (3). Sullivan hastened to explain that she planned to write a "not-biography," a look at the writing life rather than a retrospective of a life lived. Atwood, she writes, "was only a little mollified" by this distinction. All the same, some criticism of Atwood's work has begun to take a retrospective approach. *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, a book created after its editor Reingard M. Nischik learned that Atwood had turned sixty, is truly a celebration of a life's work, the "magnificent homage" in a quotation from *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies* that appears on the back cover. With pieces by twenty-five contributors, including academic essays, statements by colleagues and friends, a dozen or so photographs and cartoons, bibliographies and notes, a reprint of an interview conducted by Gabriele Metzler, as well as brief comments by sixteen fellow writers including Michael Ondaatje, Angela Carter, Marilyn French, and Marie-Claire Blais among others, the collection is an impressive gathering.

Within its pages, the "footnote crowd," as Atwood once described academics, breaks up into smaller conversation groups. There are those who view Atwood's life and work as a unified whole largely unchanged by time and untroubled by alterations in value or meaning. These writers treat her as both genius and celebrity, and one even refers to her as a "dynamic and lively institution" (133). In another group are those who view her as a constructed subject, created as much in the response of readers, academic milieus, and mass media as through her own actions and works. These contributors are sensitive to changes in emphasis and style and propose theories of development. As in any collection, different approaches make room for debate as the essays, statements, and illustrations cover a comprehensive range of topics and genres, presenting Atwood as industry, icon, and artist.

As an industry, Atwood is "booming," according to Nischik's Introduction, with bestselling books translated into thirty languages, two biographies already published, and an active "Margaret Atwood Society" (1-2). Atwood, Nischik remarks, is not only an important Canadian writer, but

"one of the most important literary chroniclers of our time" (1), an opinion that appears to be shared by the various individuals who offer personal reminiscences about working with or for her. These contributors include editors Ellen Seligman, Nan Talese, and Helmut Freilinghaus, publishers Liz Calder and Arnulf Conradi, literary agent Phoebe Larmore, assistant Sarah Cooper, and translator Brigitte Walitzek. Each one expresses admiration and loyalty, as Calder puts it, to one of the few authors who remains "so faithful to [her] editors and agents" (291). Reviewing the book for *Canadian Literature*, Janice Fiamengo concludes that, although these statements add interesting perspective, the book as a whole provides an introductory overview that may benefit the general reader more than the Atwood scholar. I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment, and with the essays she identifies as resisting this generality. The collection, I would add, also raises a number of issues in Atwood studies without addressing them explicitly.

One such issue is suggested by the title of Fiamengo's review, "A Canadian Icon in Europe." To understand Atwood's international success as a writer, one might look to the popular appeal of her novels, her topical subjects, and her style. To understand her position as an icon of Canadian identity outside Canada, however, one must consider her public persona as an explicator of Canadian culture to the world. Assessing the impact of Atwood's works requires an investigation, rather than an assertion, of her position and status. Like the "desire to pay tribute" that, as Fiamengo notes, displaces analysis, the tendency to take for granted Atwood's international reputation and celebrity without a detailed examination of the particular conditions that contribute to this reception is one of the factors that diminishes the book's critical force. This is not to suggest that interpretive authority should rest in national origin or affiliation; indeed, even discussions of "Canadianness" tend to lead to some pretty specious claims about Canadian culture. But critical standpoint, including interests in Canadian Studies abroad, matters when evaluation is exercised, especially when it exhibits a tendency to ignore or to dismiss dissenting views, often by referring to them as "Atwood bashing," or to reproduce the author's interpretations of her own work.

Many of the essays in this collection illustrate how difficult it is to treat an author as an icon and at the same time to engage with her ideas and style *critically*. Yet, the selection of essays nicely balances different aspects of Atwood's career and addresses the main topics in Atwood studies: nationalism, feminism, gender, genre, and so on. Paul Goetsch revisits the nationalist ideas expressed in *Survival* in "Margaret Atwood: a Canadian

Nationalist," Sharon R. Wilson catalogues allusions to myth in "Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's Works,"[1] and Charlotte Sturgess describes the revision of Canadian cultural myths in "Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction." Alice M. Palumbo's "On the Border: Margaret Atwood's Novels" develops an understanding of self in Atwood's work from the "violent duality" observed in the early work, indicating the continued emphasis on duality and duplicity, not to mention the diagnosis of national "schizophrenia" made in the "Afterword" to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. As Diana Relke points out, Atwood's decision to reissue the *Journals* without the "Afterword" should have challenged its authority; instead, Relke argues, "Atwood's 'Afterword' to the *Journals*, a largely redundant account of the surface narrative, was for many years a convenient interpretive crutch that encouraged critical laziness with respect to the work" (45).[2] The state of the Atwood industry, and the criticism Relke implicates, seem to confirm that critics continue to dine out on Atwood's success using the rich imagery in her own criticism and journalism to characterize her work. Indeed, many of the contributors to *Works and Impact* use this imagery to analyze both Atwood's writing and her public persona.[3]

While much in the collection seeks to elevate Atwood's status, two essays promise to examine it by delving into the workings of the Atwood industry. Susanne Becker's engaging essay "Celebrity, or a Disneyland of the Soul: Margaret Atwood and the Media" examines Atwood's relationship to her own celebrity, placing the public persona in the context of fictional treatments of representation and truth. Becker is attentive to the media's mystification of Atwood's public persona, and the relationship between the two, she argues, demonstrates the difficulties of "using the media and being used" (30). Despite this acknowledgement, however, the essay leaves the impression that the mass media generates the personal stories, photos, and interviews because the author's part in their manufacture remains unexamined, though Becker ends the essay with an amusing anecdote that illustrates Atwood's trickiness as a subject. As the object of media attention, Atwood has crafted a public persona, just as she has crafted a body of work, and attempts to distinguish the 'real' person behind the mask lead to a dead end. Like Becker, Caroline Rosenthal is concerned with the creation of Atwood's image. In "Canonizing Atwood: Her Impact on Teaching in the US, Canada, and Europe," Rosenthal presents the results of a survey of courses taught in the U.S., Canada, and Germany, with a few brief comments on other European countries, including the U.K. This promising approach yields some interesting results, though it leads the author to speculative conclusions about Canadian culture. Not

surprisingly, she finds that Atwood is the most frequently taught Canadian author in Germany and that, in the U. S., she is rarely presented explicitly as a Canadian. Yet, despite the Canadian government's promotion of Canadian Studies abroad, Rosenthal offers a curious explanation: "In contrast to the United States, Canada has never elevated and revered its cultural heroes within Canada and has never marketed its culture as aggressively abroad. As a consequence, famous Canadians do not become *international* in the US but *American...*" (45-46).

Many Canadian respondents to Rosenthal's survey seemed frustrated that Atwood's work still stands for Canadian literature internationally, and some disputed its value and quality. In attempting to account for the response of the Canadian scholars surveyed, Rosenthal does not explore all avenues, such as the possibility that these scholars may be concerned with a wider range of literature produced in Canada, including much that has been neglected or marginalized, not just the most prominent or most popular; instead, her "outsider's guess" is that these responses "reveal something about Canadian culture and the making of literary canons" (50). Referring to Brian Fawcett's discussion of Atwood bashing, Rosenthal concludes: "Some critics apparently thought at the time that Atwood had been overexposed and that it was about time to cut her down to normal size" (51). The idea that Canadians have a persistent need to cut successful people down to size, and that critics have decided "to take Atwood down a peg or two" (51) becomes a theme in the collection, but the theme originates with Atwood herself as her biographer Nathalie Cooke affirms by quoting a comment in "Diary Down Under" that: "We," in Canada, "cut tall poppies" (17). Although Atwood is referring not to herself but to Northrop Frye in this context, the image is irresistible to Atwood critics, and Cooke cites it to support her argument that Canadians "are fed and nurtured on the pap of self-consciousness and ironic self-appraisal" (17). The obvious implication is that negative criticism of Atwood's writing is brought on by a cultural pathology that causes a failure to recognize greatness. Critics who take this view, including some featured in this collection, have tended to dismiss as trivial the very debates that have constituted the field of Canadian Studies and to represent critical opposition to Atwood's nationalist vision as petty or envious. For example, Barbara Hill Rigney characterizes the critical discussions of inclusion and exclusion in *Survival* as "uninteresting quibbles" (*Margaret Atwood* 124). As the move to designate any negative response as "cutting down to size" threatens to close off routes to potentially productive analysis, slippage between "criticism"

as in the work of critics and "criticism" as censure accentuates the problem.

In "A Certain Frivolity: Margaret Atwood's Literary Criticism" the late Walter Pache slips this way when he dismisses scholars who have been "critical" of Atwood's ideas. Although he begins with a useful analysis of how *Survival* "instrumentalizes" Frye's ideas, his defense of the book's impact on Canadian literary criticism leads him to discredit appraisals of the work that reveal the limits of Atwood's national vision and to the rather unworthy remark: "It is perhaps not entirely by accident that a good deal of such polemics originated from critics whose productions have so far failed to reach a broader readership" (131). Among these, he counts two thoughtful and respected scholars in Canada, Frank Davey and W. H. New.[4] Calling Frank Davey's characterization of *Survival* a "censorious verdict," he does not even mention Davey's influential thesis in *Surviving the Paraphrase*. W. H. New's concerns about the limits of 'survival' as a concept "clearly rooted in the nineteenth-century Establishment Anglo-Protestant sensibility that was epitomized by Moodie and Traill" (*Land Sliding* 80), which Pache summarizes as the revelation that Atwood's criticism constructs "conservative ideology that pretends to be universal common sense" (131), are rejected even though they are well-founded and provide an accurate account of Atwood's preoccupations at the time. Pache goes on to suggest that these critics' objections are a sign that Atwood continues to resist "totalizing theories" (and *Survival* was not such a theory) and to bravely defend liberal humanist values that have gone out of fashion. After chiding New and others for tending to "underrate the historical factor," Pache refuses to place *Survival* in historical context—which is surely the way to appreciate it—or to compare it to Atwood's other critical works. Although Atwood is known for thematic criticism, which she returns to recently in the Clarendon lectures, she has written other kinds of criticism over the years, and a consideration of her changing critical methods would be welcome. Even "MacEwen's Muse," which Pache quotes in his conclusion, ranges beyond the approach taken in *Survival*. First published in 1970 and reprinted in *Second Words*, it explores MacEwen's male muse figure as a corrective to the white goddess. Atwood's reading of the poems is close and careful, attentive to influence and context, yet she refuses to make a verbal icon of the poem, adding the telling remark that "it is occasionally instructive to give at least passing attention to what poets themselves say about their work" (*Second Words* 67).

The extent to which Atwood's remarks concerning Canadian literature, especially those found in *Survival*, remain authoritative among her critics is illustrated in how often certain passages are quoted from it, passages such as "Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map. A geography of the mind..." (18-19). *Survival* announces a series of thematic studies in which the themes and images found in the work become the critical criteria used to assess them, and the persistence of its themes in the contemporary criticism evidences the tendency to reproduce the images the author has fashioned and to read through the critical lens she has provided. This approach, like the continued prominence of *Survival* in discussions of Atwood's criticism, indicates a resistance to the kind of historical analysis and arguments that would, in fact, affirm her work's lasting impact.

By treating Atwood's writing either in an ahistorical fashion as articulating an unchanging vision or in a transhistorical fashion as having an unchanging meaning, critics deny the work its value at specific moments and present as coherent views that do change over time. Atwood's feminism is a case in point. With the appearance of characters like Zenia and Cordelia, Atwood's feminist poetics seemed to clearly take a new turn, but Barbara Hill Rigney observes female characters engaging in unsavoury behaviour throughout Atwood's fiction, a fact that troubles her feminist vision. In "Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics," she asks "How, then, given such negative portrayals of women, can we construct a feminist ethic for Atwood, how infer a woman-centered poetic?" (161) and thus confronts apparent conflicts in Atwood's representation of women. As in her 1978 study, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, Rigney aligns women with primitive nature and describes magic as an element of the "female principle," an idea she continues to explore in her 1987 study *Margaret Atwood*. From this perspective, Woman represents the uncanny, the mysterious, the not quite and more than human. In the present volume, Rigney reconciles the presence of evil women in the fiction by arguing that, for Atwood, "writing itself is at least figuratively demonic, a function of possession, a practice akin to witchcraft, which women have traditionally practiced with greater success than men" (162).[5]

Despite Rigney's claim that "Atwood's gender politics have not changed essentially during her writing career" (163), feminist approaches to Atwood have reflected changes in feminist literary studies, and a historical analysis of Atwood's feminism helps to clarify its most recent articulations. Early feminist criticism on Atwood responded to her interest in dualism and binary opposition. The value given to representing positive images of women inspired thematic readings that seemed appropriate to

the early novels in which, as Davey has shown, Atwood tends to externalize gender politics, making individual characters agents in the power struggle between the sexes. More recent fiction challenges feminists to take into account the changes in society that second-wave feminism brought about and not to reproduce the inequality it sought to eradicate. Arguments from gender essentialism and strategies once hailed as subversive appear severely limited in a post-feminist context, and feminist readings have had to find new analytical tools.

In her excellent essay, "Recycling Culture: Kitsch, Camp, and Trash in Margaret Atwood's Fiction," Lorna Irvine succeeds in giving feminist issues such a contemporary reading. For example, Irvine interprets Zenia, with her monstrous Frankenstein body and vampiric ways, as the return of the repressed, not as a representation of Woman or a reflection of actual women,[6] and she reads the use of the past in ways that have implications for studying recent novels such as *Alias Grace*. Irvine argues convincingly that, in the early work and in the more recent *The Robber Bride*, *Cat's Eye*, and *Wilderness Tips*, the presence of kitsch draws attention to the circulation of objects and their commodification on one level, but that used objects also connect past and future symbolically (203). Turning to Jon Goss for the argument that consuming kitsch means remembering an idealized past that makes imagining a better world possible, Irvine illustrates her argument by showing how the underground world's celebration of kitsch in *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the freedom of choice Gilead suppresses. Thus, according to Irvine, Atwood's fascination with the material culture of the past has both aesthetic and political appeal: "Atwood is particularly drawn to the playfulness of camp, the melancholy and exoticism of kitsch, and the class and economic issues apparent in trash" (212). Rather than search for a seamless connection of life and persona, Irvine's approach places the work in the author's time.

Given Atwood's interest in self-fashioning and subjectivity, symbolic over representational language, repression and recovery, some of the most productive analysis of her writing draws on psychoanalysis, and Irvine is certainly aware of this work. Frank Davey was among the first to identify Freudian patterns in Atwood's novels—which makes the exclusion of his criticism by some an even greater concern—and since then, studies such as Shannon Hengen's *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections, and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* have taken the insight further. In *Margaret Atwood: a Feminist Poetics*, Davey observes a comic pattern in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man*, and *Bodily Harm* whereby characters search the unconscious for what has been repressed,

and notes a pattern of neurotic action followed by transformation and growth. Yet, according to Davey, this structure departs from Frye's definition of the comic mode in that its purpose is "not to change society but to change the individual woman—often minimally—to survive with some integrity in that society" (59). This resistance to society deepens in later works, extending beyond social constructions of gender, to social relations generally; as Davey notes in *Post-National Arguments*, the novel *Cat's Eye* treats characters who undertake political or social action as targets of parody, though he stops short of calling Atwood's feminism "anti-social."

As Ronald B. Hatch notes in "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology," Atwood's early career was "still very much involved with the narrative of personal liberation, and it becomes apparent that she is loathe to give it up" (192).[7] This perceptive observation speaks to her recent work as well as her own remarks on "human equality and freedom of choice" (Ingersoll 142; qtd in Müller 232). She remains committed to a feminism shaped by liberal individualism that seeks access to the autonomous, coherent subject and claims this subjectivity for fictional and reconstructed historical others, as in *Alias Grace*.[8] "Re-Constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood's Literature: a Constructionist Approach" by Klaus Peter Müller extends the analysis of individualism by arguing that all of Atwood's main characters learn that they must choose who they want to be and not attempt to be what others tell them to be (235). The shadow of the liberated woman is the mother, sister, friend, whose choices are all wrong, women who have not achieved personal freedom and who would limit the freedom of others. If personal liberation is the main goal of feminist art, then social relations must become suspect, and as the characters in many of Atwood's novels discover, being free means choosing right.

Despite the abundance of criticism on Atwood's writing, work remains to be done on its craft.[9] In "Margaret Atwood's Poetry 1966-1995," Lothar Hönnighausen focuses on this aspect of the poetry, stating that poetry is art, not personal feelings, and arguing that Atwood is not "carried away by her thematic concerns, remaining the conscientiously crafting artist even when taking up far-reaching political and sociocultural issues" (101). While he argues that the poetic techniques she uses have not changed substantially since her early work, he nevertheless discusses the modulations in her poetic voice and stresses changes without imposing a theory of development or evolution: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* reveals an early interest in archetypal language; *You Are Happy* is a transitional collection; and *Two-Headed Poems* shows a greater poetic range. Hönnighausen rejects the description of her work as *autobiographical* and

mythopoeic, remarking that it is "probably neither or both, resulting, as with other writers, from the stylization, in changing forms, of a changing stream of experience" (97).

Helmut Reichenbächer's "Challenging the Reader: an Analysis of Margaret Atwood's Creative Technique in her First Published Novel" takes the concern with craft in an analytical direction with a detailed discussion of revisions to *The Edible Woman*. As Atwood scholars know, the manuscript for the novel, submitted to McClelland and Stewart in 1965, generated real interest only after Atwood won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1967. First, Reichenbächer identifies five stages in the novel's composition and revision: the first three stages working fragments into a manuscript form ready for consideration, and the final stages reworking the novel in response to the publisher's renewed interest. By comparing the versions in the Atwood papers held at the Thomas Fisher Library, he determines that Atwood consciously creates gaps in the narrative by removing explicit markers in the text with each revision, and he demonstrates this with specific examples. This "genetic" approach leads to an interpretation of the clear text in which he argues convincingly that the creation of gaps develops the characterization of the protagonist: Marian's feelings are left unexplained in order to convey her alienation effectively. Coral Ann Howells' discussion of *Cat's Eye* in "Transgressing Genre: a Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood's Novels," which draws similar conclusions about "multilayered and inferred" characterization, gains support from Reichenbacher's rigourous reading of *The Edible Woman*. Indeed, Reichenbacher's essay shows that serious engagement with stylistic matters need not become "critical" in the pejorative sense; rather, such criticism can produce a more convincing appreciation of the works under study.

In presenting Atwood as artist, icon, and industry, *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* provides a range of perspectives on the writer, but perhaps the most persuasive footnote from the crowd is the cartoon by Charles Altman, which is, appropriately, one of the final images in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*. In it, Atwood smiles at the viewer, cradling what appears to be a manuscript in her right arm, and holding a mask in her left hand. The image recalls an anecdote told by Sam Solecki to Rosemary Sullivan and repeated in *The Red Shoes*. Solecki remembers with pleasure how Atwood handled the "troglodytes" attending a talk she gave in the fall of 1972 when she was writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto. During the question period, as Solecki remembers, Marshall McLuhan asked "would you say that you put us on, not only that you have a mask, but that you have a variety of selves? (295)" Atwood's answer, something

about writers and masks, did not satisfy McLuhan, but when pressed, she said she had nothing more to add. Besides displaying the confidence Solecki admired, she may well have been warning McLuhan not to get personal, to remember that a writer is an artist, and that the artist always has a mask at hand.

Notes

Thank you to Michael E. Vance and Shelley Hulan for comments on an early version of this review.

1 Perhaps due to restrictions regarding length, this essay provides a survey but does not do justice to Sharon Wilson's analysis of the intertextuality of Atwood's work which is best represented in her insightful study *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*.

2 Although this passage in Relke's text refers to Sherrill E. Grace's *Violent Dualities* explicitly, many other critics, including Coral Ann Howells, Barbara Hill Rigney, and Joel Rosenberg, among others including Paul Goetsch and Alice Palumbo in the present volume, have read the "Afterword" in similar ways while some studies, such as J. Brooks Bouson's *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, revisit Grace's model.

3 There are many tacit references to Atwood's own commentary throughout the criticism on her work; one benign example is Sharon R. Wilson's assertion that "the gaps are at least as important as the events" in *Alias Grace* (225). In her published lecture, "In Search of *Alias Grace*," Atwood signals the importance of filling in the gaps in the historical record when describing her historical fiction.

4 References to W. H. New and Frank Davey are indicative of the contributor's general tendency to exclude any commentary that is less than laudatory, and both are mentioned a scant three times in the collection.

5 The comparison of the feminist writer's art to witchcraft, like so many ideas used to interpret her work, also originates in Atwood's commentary. In *Margaret Atwood*, Rigney refers to Atwood's comments in "Witches" and in the interview with Karla Hammond (see Ingersoll), as well Janice Fiamengo cites a Writers' Course speech which also refers to witchcraft.

6 See Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis "Atwood's *The Robber Bride*: the Vampire as Ontersubjective Catalyst." For readings of the novel that draw on psychoanalytical theory, see also Zimmerman and Wyatt.

7 Philip Stratford makes a similar point in his essay on *Surfacing* when he argues that ambiguity "applied dramatically to her narrator, leads into the novel but is progressively dissipated as the heroine moves towards a solution of her problems" (Grace and Weir 124).

8 *Alias Grace* has inspired some rather grand claims, such as Rigney's that the account of Grace's emigration is "as horrific as any historical or fictional recounting of the Middle Passage"(164). Becker offers a far more convincing, though brief, analysis of *Alias Grace* in which she argues that Grace's summary of sensational accounts of her deed and character exposes the contradictions and exaggerations in the fabrication of celebrity, which, according to Becker, is Atwood's comment on her own celebrity.

9 In the article cited above, Janice Fiamengo also reviews Christina Ljungberg's *To Join, to Fit, and to Make: the Creative Craft of Margaret Atwood's Fiction*, a study which undertakes to address this gap. Atwood's writing has been appropriated within theoret-

ical discussions in literary studies from deconstruction to postmodernism. Atwood's writing has been held up as an example of postmodernist techniques (see Rao, Hutcheon in Grace and Weir); it has been submitted to comparative study within postcolonial literature (see Singh).

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