THE PROSE POEM:
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 4 | 1995

Margaret Atwood's *Good Bones* and *Good Bones and Simple Murders*

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Margaret Atwood. *Good Bones.* London: Virago Press. 1993. 153 pp.
------ *Good Bones and Simple Murders.* New York: Doubleday, 1995. 164 pp.

Like its 1984 precedent, *Murder in the Dark* (Margaret Atwood's first published collection of "Short Fictions and Prose Poems"), *Good Bones* contains playfully perverted or inverted revisions of familiar narratives, ranging from fairy tales and adventure stories to *Dracula* and *Hamlet.* Characteristically, Atwood's narrative revisionism—for all its apparent formal and thematic heterogeneousness—goes hand in hand with a more specifically feminist concern with the complex and painful interiorization by the feminine self of the different textual constraints she is compelled to live by.

The recent renewal of interest in genre studies as a tool for a critical investigation of the conventions of popular fiction, as well as their interaction with dominant socio-cultural codes and practices, offers an interesting counterpoint to Atwood's creative exercises in sexual and textual politics. In addition to ancient myth and modern classics ("Four Small Paragraphs" is an irreverent meditation on the life and works of Albert Camus), children's literature and other popular genres and narratives in the strict and the broad sense of the word—including fantasy literature, women's magazines, instruction books, dumb blonde jokes, music-hall and even choreography—are given special importance because of their ideological impact on large audiences. In "The Little Hen Tells All," a well-known children's story is struggling its way out of capitalistic ideology ("You know my story. Probably you had it told to you as a shining example of how you yourself ought to behave. Sobriety and elbow-grease. Do it yourself. Then invest your capital. Then collect. I'm supposed to be an illustration of *that?* Don't make me laugh.") While "My Life as a Bat" attempts to rehabilitate the bat-race and deliver it from an evil which is "hair-headed and walks in the night with a single white unseeing eye, and stinks of half-digested meat, and has two legs," "Making a Man" parodies the demagogic how-to rhetoric of popular magazines from the point of view of domestic gender issues. Another, perhaps even more representative poem is "Let Us Praise Stupid Women," where modern icons and stereotypes

("the airheads, the bubblebrains, the ditzy blondes: the headstrong teenagers too dumb to listen to their mothers: all those with mattress stuffing between the ears, all the lush hostesses who tell us to have a good day, and give us the wrong change, while checking their Big Hair in the mirror, all those who dry their freshly-shampooed poodles in the microwave, and those whose boyfriends tell them chlorophyll chewing gum is a contraceptive, and who believe it") are traced back to biblical or mythological ancestors ("How we enjoy hearing about her: as she listens to the con-artist's yarns of the plausible snake, and ends up eating the free sample of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, thus giving birth to Theology; or as she opens the tricky gift box containing all human evils, but is stupid enough to believe that Hope will be some kind of solace").

But Atwood's anti-didactic parables do not merely undermine the oppressiveness of popular iconography; they also illustrate the complicity of women in the propagation of stereotypes signifying their own (self-)confinement into positions of passivity and self-effacement, both on a private and public level (a recurring theme in Atwood's poetry and fiction, from the early inner landscapes of *Double Persephone* to the dystopian investigations of the *Handmaid's Tale).* In order to confine Atwood's personae to supporting parts, the various patriarchal narratives permeating everyday life and language must first win their readership's consent—as the speaker in "Let Us Praise" remarks, "such women are fictions: composed by others, but just as frequently by themselves." In most cases, however, Atwood's acerbic talents set out to diagnose and subsequently deconstruct the different fictions in which her personae are trapped. Indeed, one of the most valuable side-effects of Atwood's radical critique of patriarchal master-narratives is that it often succeeds in rewriting the self into a new textual identity that does justice to its real—as opposed to imaginary—relationship to a particular social and political context.

From a formal and modal point of view, Atwood's prose poems are more often than not characterized by a subtle mixture of imagistic presence and narrative continuity tinged with an imaginative insolence which makes them more akin to Russell Edson's whimsical fables than to the more solemn tonalities of, say, W.S. Merwin's *The Miner's Pale Children.* In this respect, traditional generic categories and labels pertaining to "fictional" as opposed

to "poetic" works—including the elusive distinction between newcomers like the "short short story" or "sudden fiction" and a certain kind of prose poem with a strong narrative line—appear as just another familiar narrative that the collection as a whole tends to subvert and deconstruct by virtue of its own shamelessly hybrid modalities, as is already suggested by Atwood's harpy-like collage featured on the cover of the paperback edition.

Similarly, the recurrence of imagistic disruptions in the overwhelmingly factual tone of the collection conveys the double-edgedness of Atwood's vignettes of everyday life conflicts. By combining the homely and the uncanny, the factual and the metaphorical, Atwood's prose poems, like her opening description of a petrified gorgon, constantly remind us that ordinary life and people are such stuff myths are made on:

> The red geraniums fluorescing on the terrace, the wind swaying the daisies, the baby's milk-fed eyes focusing for the first time on a double row of beloved teeth—what is there to report? Bloodlessness puts her to sleep. She perches on a rooftop, her brass wings folded, her head with its coiffure of literate serpents tucked beneath the left one, snoozing like a noon pigeon. There's nothing to do but her toenails. The sun oozes across the sky, the breezes undulate over her skin like warm stockings, her heart beats with systole and diastole of waves on the breakwater, boredom creeps over her like vines.

Moments of metaphorical verticality emerge as so many epiphanic interruptions in the one-dimensional lives of Atwood's prosaic personae, whose linguistic and concrete surroundings are depicted with an anthropologist's eye for socially and culturally meaningful details. Atwood's choice of a form which, from Aloysius Bertrand's *fantaisies* to Charles Simic's recent tribute to Joseph Cornell's boxes, has often lent itself to miniaturistic descriptions, and indeed recalls Max Jacob's exhortatory maxim "the tiny is the enormous!" "In Love with Raymond Chandler" is typical of the specificity of focus in Atwood's prose poems and of her attempts to defamiliarize contemporary reality into a democracy of emotionally and ideologically charged objects:

> An affair with Raymond Chandler, what a joy! Not because of the mangled bodies and the marinated cops and hints of eccentric sex, but because of his interest in furniture. He knew that furniture could breathe, could feel, not as we do but in a way more muffled, like the word *upholstery,* with its overtones of mustiness and dust, its bouquet of sunlight on ageing cloth or scuffed leather on the backs and seat of sleazy office chairs. I think his sofas, stuffed to roundness, satin-covered, pale-blue like the eyes of his cold blonde unbodied murderous women, beating very slowly, like the hearts of hibernating crocodiles; of his chaises longues, with their malicious pillows. He knew about front lawns too, and greenhouses, and the interior of cars.

Good Bones contains many such real gems of distilled precision and sardonic inventiveness. Hilarious masterpieces like "Gertrude Talks Back" (in which we learn what *really* happens in *Hamlet)* and "There Was Once" (an illustration of the practical inconveniences of a systematic application of Political Correctness to the art of story-telling), remind us that Atwood, since *The Edible Woman,* is often at her best as a comic writer. Unfortunately, there is another, less convincing side to Atwood's insatiable interest in narrative and iconographic perspective—shifting, which occasionally turns into an embarrassingly repetitive and predictable ploy. "Cold-Blooded," in which an insect-like ethnologist from outer space reports on the strange customs of the "blood-creatures" inhabiting the earth, is an example of how the initial parodic impulse of the collection can wear out into a weak pastiche of one of the most rehashed plots in the history of mainstream science-fiction.

To conclude, and if there is still room for doubt in the reader's mind as to how one should approach Atwood's protean *Mischformen,* the title story of *Murder in the Dark* contains its own directions for use: "If you like, you can play games with this game. You can say: the murderer is the writer, the detective is the reader, the victim is the book. Or perhaps, the murderer is the writer, the detective is the critic and the victim is the reader." One thing can not be doubted, however: for all the apparent nonchalance of the textual role-playing games of *Good Bones,* Atwood's

semiologic hide-and-seek never leaves anything to chance—which is probably why some of her stories fail to be truly entertaining, while others sometimes come as close as anything to the perfect crime.

Michel Delville