

"It Is Her Body, Silent/ and Fingerless, Writing this Poem": Margaret Atwood's *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written*

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Abstract

This article considers Margaret Atwood's *Notes Towards A Poem That Can Never Be Written*, poems concerned with torture as a human rights violation. It weighs Atwood's appropriation of the suffering of a colonized subject position, with the ethical imperative not to be silent, and hence complicit with existing regimes of power.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'oeuvre de Margaret Atwood, *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never be Written*, des poèmes au sujet de la torture comme étant une contravention aux droits de la personne, et pèse l'appropriation qu'Atwood fait de la souffrance du sujet colonisé, avec l'éthique impérative de ne pas garder le silence, et de ce fait être complice avec les régimes de pouvoirs existants.

An odd twist of events in 1980 helped spawn some of Margaret Atwood's most unusual and important poems. What should have been a brief encounter between Atwood and the American poet Carolyn Forché at the Portland Festival in Oregon became a harrowing adventure with the second eruption of Mount Saint Helens. With gray ash apocalyptically falling from the sky and members of the audience wearing surgical masks, Atwood and Forché found themselves in quite a predicament in their attempts to leave Oregon after the reading. Planes were grounded, buses and trains filled to capacity, and rental car companies had pulled their cars for fear of engine damage. Banding together, the poets were finally able to arrange a ride to Eugene, where they managed to rent a car, and then headed south to San Francisco hoping to catch a plane (Cooke 1998, 260).

In the ensuing 11-hour road trip, Forché informed Atwood about the terrors perpetrated in El Salvador and shared her frustration that so few people knew about the dire situation in Central America, material that would later become Forché's startling book of poetry, "The Country Between Us." The two poets also discussed the unstable political situation in the Caribbean, which, combined with a six-week trip Atwood and her husband, novelist Graham Gibson, would take to Saint Vincent that November, inspired Atwood's novel *Bodily Harm* (Cooke 1998, 260). But the conversation also captured Atwood's poetic imagination and was the impetus for a surprising group of poems she published first as a limited edition chapbook, *Notes Towards A Poem that Can Never Be Written*, collected later in *True Stories* (1981). These poems are concerned specifically with torture as a human rights violation, as well as other traumas to the female body. And lest we forget to whom Atwood was indebted for the subject matter, Atwood dedicates the title poem to Forché.

The issues Atwood raises in her work of the early eighties are particularly resonant today in the political climate post 9/11, when the very definition of torture under the Geneva Conventions is deemed slippery by the Bush Administration, when horrific events at places like Haditha and Abu Ghraib occupy contemporary consciousness, and terms like "outsourcing of torture" to CIA camps have entered the lexicon. Yet despite the poems' contemporary applications, critics fault the morality of Atwood appropriating others' suffering in the service of art, concerns which point to a greater conceptual problem of aesthetics versus ethics.

The Notes section of the volume seems to take issue with Theodore Adorno's lament that "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz," based not out of a notion of ethics overriding aesthetics, but out of the inability to mediate such torture and physical suffering through language (Adorno 1984, 34). Yet those critics who take issue with the efficacy of Atwood's co-optation of the suffering of third world subjects fail to offer the writer any alternative other than silence. Atwood chooses to move beyond aesthetic considerations to foreground the ethical imperative to write about torture. Like Forché, Atwood's move to give voice to the marginalized gives a currency to her subjects. But such a move raises important questions: what are we to make of Atwood's impulse to put colonized bodies to use for a polemical point? Does she put the entire burden of these narratives on? And if so, why? What does she gain in so doing?

If the alternative to appropriating a colonized subject position is silence, and hence complicity with existing regimes in power and their policies of torture and suppression, writing about such subjects purifies the relationship between self and subject. Rather than a dyadic relationship between first world writer and the colonized subject, Atwood creates a triadic relationship that includes the audience. Atwood articulates this position in *Negotiating with the Dead* when she describes the writer as messenger: "messengers always exist in a triangular situation - the one who sends the message, the message-bearer, whether human or inorganic [read book or poem], and the one who receives the message" (Atwood 2003, 113). Giving currency to the subject while educating the audience about the political situation of totalitarian regimes

implicates the audience, allowing others to act, potentially inciting activism.

Situating Atwood's Post Colonial Project

Atwood published *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written* in the early eighties, predating much important work in post-colonial theory to come. Indeed, the term wasn't even adopted to describe an academic field until the late 1970s. Hitherto, the critics employed it as a periodizing term rather than an ideological project. Early framers of the debate, such as Aimé Césaire's 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism*, and more importantly, Franz Fanon's 1961 publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* served to catapult postcolonial issues to the attention of the academy, but it wasn't until the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* that the field started to coalesce. Yet much defining work in the field didn't appear until the late eighties. Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Words* (1987), *The Empire Writes Back* (Bill Ashcroft et al., 1989) and Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990), are perhaps the most significant works. Lacking a conceptual theoretical framework that would grapple with the fraught issues she felt compelled by conscience to address, Atwood persevered anyway, not allowing the considerable ethical quandary into which she was throwing herself to render her silent. Indeed, this consciousness may account for Atwood's incredibly desperate yet ambivalent tone in the poems.

That Atwood is working here in, in many ways, uncharted, or at the very least at this historical moment, under-theorized territory, seems to me an act of bravery, even if those efforts achieve varying degrees of success. Indeed, what I find so interesting about the provisional nature of the poems are the ways in which they attempt to grapple with the hitherto mostly unarticulated (or perhaps, unarticulable?) problems inherent in articulating a colonial subject position for a first-world writer. Even if she isn't a person of color, in some ways Atwood is vulnerable to those allegations lodged against later postcolonial writers and critics, in that she is writing from a relatively elite social position - the educated upper class - trying to articulate the experiences of people from a wide variety of socio-economic strata. And, of course,

as a Canadian writer, she is simultaneously occupying a first world subject position as well as a postcolonial one. What I find compelling is that Atwood's work of this period anticipates, in nuanced and sophisticated ways, the later concerns of postcolonial studies, whether it be the problem of language, or Bhabha's contention that postcolonial analysis "attempts to revise those nationalist or 'natavist' pedagogies that set up the relation of the Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition" (Bhabha 1990, 173).

Writing Wrong

While written in a different context (to describe the "Catch-22" problem of trying to memorialize grief), I have found Sandra Gilbert's term, coined in her stunning new book *Death's Door* (2006), a particularly helpful mechanism to explain Atwood's dilemma in these poems, as well as to account for their particular tone of ambivalence and ultimate futility. Indeed, the very provisional nature of the title of the section, *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never be Written*, echoes what Gilbert identifies as her "first and perhaps most draconian proposition," that

Writing Wrong is, or ultimately becomes, wrong - or at the least problematic - because it's a hopeless effort at a performative act that can never in fact be truly performed. You can't, in other words, right wrong by writing wrong, even though you are engaged in the writing because consciously or unconsciously you believe that your testimony will reverse, repair, or undo the wrong you're reporting...you may [mistakenly] think your act of witness will change the story itself! (Gilbert 2006, 88)

Gilbert goes on to identify her own "unrealistic beliefs about the powers of righting implicit in any act of writing wrong" and continues to lay out a conceptual framework in her remaining four propositions that articulates the quandary that Atwood finds herself in:

My second proposition: writing wrong is wrong, or

at least problematic, because it's not only painful but writing pain - pain that as I've just claimed, can't really be righted or sedated (92)...[P]roposition three about writing wrong: writing wrong may be wrong or at least problematic because you, the writer, may actually be the one who is wrong, either in your perception of events or in your response to them (94)...Proposition four: writing wrong is wrong or anyway problematic because, after all, as contemporary theory would tell us, if you can write it, you've written it wrong (95)...Here, then, is my fifth and final proposition. Isn't that 'other' story, the story of storylessness, the story of death, loss, grief - the story we don't want to tell because we can't tell it? Writing wrong is wrong - problematical, painful, guilt-inducing, or all of these - because it is writing death, writing the absence that can't be written. (Gilbert 2006, 97)

In the face of such a futile enterprise, one wonders why Atwood and others would bother at all, since they are, in essence, destined to fail at best, and, at worst, lay themselves open to allegations of appropriation from various camps. Gilbert's answer echoes Atwood's own proclamation ending Section V of "Notes...":

Witness is what you must bear: Yet the protest against death is what must be "told" and what must be written, even if it is written wrong (98)...[T]he only thing I am sure about writing wrong is...Is writing wrong is what there is to do. Perhaps, for some of us, all there is to do. (Gilbert 2006, 99)

Atwood ends the title poem "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written" with the same sentiment:

Elsewhere, this poem must be written because the poets are already dead.

Elsewhere this poem must be written

as if you are already dead,
as if nothing more can be done
or said to save you.

Elsewhere you must write this poem
Because there is nothing more to do.
(Atwood 1981)

Writer as Activist

The poems in *Notes Towards A Poem That Can Never Be Written*, while unusual, are not without precedent. Atwood embraced this subject matter to the point that she contributed an essay, "A Disneyland of the Soul," to *The Writer and Human Rights* (1983), a book whose sales benefit Amnesty International, of which Atwood is a longtime member. Indeed, in a 1979 interview with Alan Twigg, Atwood reveals that some of her source material for the torture poems came straight from Amnesty International. Invoking Dante, Atwood reveals, "You look at mankind and you see something like...The Divine Comedy...the Inferno...with everyone pulling out each other's fingernails, as in the Amnesty International bulletins" (Twigg 1992, 122). This detail makes an appearance twice in the *Notes* section: in the first poem, "A Conversation," in the man strolling on the beach who is "a maker of machines/for pulling out toenails" and then in "The Arrest of the Stockbroker," in which the speaker admits, "Reading the papers, you've seen it all:/ the device for tearing out fingernails."

Early in her career, Atwood was loathe to describe herself as a political writer - in a 1972 interview she responds to the question whether the writer has "any responsibility to society," by quipping, "Does society have any responsibility to the writer? Once society decides it has responsibility to me as a writer, I'll start thinking about my responsibility to it" (Gibson 1992, 5). Yet less than a decade later, Atwood began to define herself as a self-consciously political writer (Fitzgerald and Crabbe 1992, 135), and in her 1981 (the same year *True Stories* came out) Address to Amnesty International, she asks, "What is the writer's responsibility, if any, to the society in which he or she lives?" Atwood's answer, characteristically, is inflected through bodily

trauma, as she argues, "more and more the answers of the world's governments have taken the form of amputation: of the tongue, of the soul, of the head" (Atwood 1982a, 393).

In her address to Amnesty International, Atwood goes on to define what she means by politics, and by extension, power: "By politics I do not mean how you voted in the last election...I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it" (Atwood 1982a, 394). In an interview, Atwood reiterates this point and elaborates:

Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom. That's politics. It's not just elections and what people say they are - little labels they put on themselves. And it certainly isn't self-righteous puritanism of the left, which you get a lot of, or self-righteous puritanism on the right, I hasten to add. Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because we think they have power, and that's all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say. Whether you feel free during a staff meeting to get up and challenge what the chairman has just said. All of those things." (Brans 1992, 149)

In a direct reversal of her apolitical position early in her career, Atwood explains, "Such material enters a writer's work not because the writer is or is not consciously political but because the writer is an observer, a witness Placing politics and poetics in two watertight compartments is a luxury... Most countries in the world cannot afford such luxuries" (Atwood 1982a, 394).

Postmodern Poetry?

Even more specifically literary responses cannot sidestep the political implications of Atwood's project. As Linda

Wagner-Martin suggests, the title of the collection *True Stories* "signals impatience with genre, and tests the nebulous line between poem and story" (Wagner-Martin 1995, 75). Hilda Hollis argues that, in many ways, the collection is Atwood's answer to Derrida and the Deconstructionists. Another critic calls it "postmodern poetry" (Walker 1987, 169). Hollis suggests Atwood circumvents some of the pitfalls of the postmodern when she "extricates herself from the problem of utter indeterminacy by observing a physical reality that places limits. She questions the idea of a single true story but finds political power in the presence of true stories" (Hollis 1995, 120). As the title poem attests, "the true story is vicious/ and multiple and untrue." Hollis contends that Atwood "undermines deconstruction's imperative in a truly deconstructive or subversive gesture...Atwood shows that while a single, all-determining truth may not be found, this does not preclude the existence of true stories that testify to the inhumanity of humanity...A single true story is constantly subverted by other true stories" (Hollis 1995, 121).

In an interview, Atwood elaborates: "Reality simply consists of different points of view. When I was young, I believed that 'non-fiction' meant 'true.' But you read a history written in, say, 1920, and a history of the same events written in 1995, and they are very different. There may not be one Truth - there may be several truths - but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist" (Snell 1998, 21).

Or, as Hollis adroitly observes, "Language and scruples can hide violence and truth, but violence does not need to be reported for it to have taken place" (1995, 126).

Yet whatever authorial legitimacy Atwood's speaker achieves in the poem "True Stories" evaporates in the title of the section *Notes Towards A Poem that Can Never Be Written*. As Frank Davey notes, the title "denies the possibility of a written text" (1992, 49). He asks, is "'a poem that can never be written' unwritten because poetry itself is incapable of representing the horror of political torture?" (50). Davey notes how the poems in the section foreground the "limitations of language and poetry," revealing that "poetry is merely ineffectual, unequal to the task of speaking of the horrors of ongoing reality" (48). The speaker in "Notes..." explores the failure of such gestures: "There is no poem you can write/

about it," faulting the efficacy of the impulse to invoke laurel and rosaries:

We make wreaths of adjectives for them,
we count them like beads,
we turn them into statistics and litanies
and into poems like this one.
(Atwood 1981)

As Davey notes, "The result is paradoxically a poem about no poem, with a 'wordless' speaker giving us words" (Davey 1984, 48). He goes on further to identify a double paradox, arguing that "what we have read is both one of 'poems like this one' and of 'Notes towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written'" (Davey 1984, 49).

"A Word after a Word/ after a Word Is Power"

Yet despite such acceptance of futility, the speaker persists, as the alternative is silence and complicity. In "The Arrest of the Stockbroker," the speaker admits, "innocence is merely/not to act." The title poem closes with an injunction amidst the futility of the gesture:

... in this country you can try to write
the poem that can never be written ...

Elsewhere this poem must be written
because the poets are already dead...

Elsewhere you must write this poem
because there is nothing more to do.
(Atwood 1981)

In her 1980 essay called "Witches," Atwood argues:

Political witch-hunting is now a worldwide epidemic. Torture for the purposes of extracting a confession, which will in turn justify the torture, is not a thing of the past. It did not end with racks, stakes, and Grand Inquisitors, or with Cotton Mather. It is here with us now, and growing. One of the few remedies

for it is free human speech, which is why writers are always among the first to be lined up against the wall by any totalitarian regime, left or right. How many poets are there in El Salvador? The answer is none. They have all been shot or exiled. (Atwood 1982c, 332)

In "An End to Audience," Atwood elaborates, "Such stories are being silenced all over the world. The countries with the most writers in jail are Russia and Argentina. That doesn't mean that these countries treat writers the worst. At least the writers are in jail. In some other countries they are merely dead" (Atwood 1982b, 350). In section three of Notes Atwood writes:

The woman lies on the wet cement floor
under the unending light,
needle marks on her arms put there
to kill the brain
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.
She is dying for the sake of the word.
It is her body, silent
and fingerless, writing this poem.
(Atwood 1981)

Yet Atwood is steadfast in her belief in the impulse to write under such conditions, and in the power of the word:

People still write in Russia; many of them write the forbidden. It has always been one function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out, especially in times of political repression. People risk imprisonment and torture because they know there are other people who are hungry for what they have to say. Inhabitants of concentration camps...jeopardized their already slim chances of survival by keeping diaries; why? Because there was a story that they felt compelled to tell that they felt the rest of us had to know. Amnesty International

works the same way: all it does is tell stories. It makes the story known. Such stories have a moral force, a moral authority which is undeniable. (Atwood 1982b, 350)

She goes on to argue, "The power of such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that's why so much trouble is taken to silence it" (Atwood 1982b, 350). Or, as Atwood puts it in "Spelling":

Ancestress: the burning witch,
her mouth covered by leather
to strangle words.

A word after a word
after a word is power.
(Atwood 1981)

"Power/ like this Is Not Abstract"

Atwood is aware that she is negotiating issues of appropriation, a colonizing gesture. In poems like "A Women's Issue" she lays herself open to allegations of ethnocentrism in her evocation of complex cultural issues like female genital mutilation in Africa (ironically proliferating as a rebellion to Western cultural imperialism), equating it, in her courtroom-like evidence collecting, to other gendered violations, such as gang rape and being forced to wear a chastity belt or burqa:

Exhibit C is the young girl
dragged into the bush by the midwives
and made to sing while they scrape the flesh
from between her legs, then tie her thighs
till she scabs over and is called healed.

for each childbirth they'll cut her
open, then sew her up.
(Atwood 1981)

Davey argues that the gendered mutilations of "A Women's Issue" "lead...Atwood to envision the female genitals as an invaded and desecrated landscape" (Davey 1984, 32):

...in between the legs,

Enemy territory, no man's
land, to be entered furtively
fenced, owned but never surely.
(Atwood 1981)

Barbara Blakely agrees: "touch...is...dominated by imperialist intentions" (Blakely 1983, 39). Of course, the irony is that while Atwood identifies the woman's body as "no-man's/ land," literally meaning not owned by man, the term implies the woman's genitals are owned by the woman herself. Yet the poem denies the woman's sovereignty over her own body by qualifying such ownership. Davey is right to equate the woman's body with an apocalyptic landscape; "no-man's land" historically refers to the contested area between enemy fronts in World War I, suggesting the woman's body is the war field. Blakely suggests, "the central purpose of this colonization and dismemberment is sexual control" (Blakely 1983, 40). She goes on to argue that the woman's body will "be seized as the instrument of control, until the very tissues of the flesh are transcribed as documents of patriarchal consciousness...Man colonizes and consumes the flesh of woman and world...He exists for his assertion of the truth of his own order, requiring her to be mapped" (Blakely 1983, 43).

Of course, not all the tortured bodies are female, though the majority are (the union leader whose penis is wired and electrocuted in "The Arrest of the Stockbroker" is a notable exception). But if the majority of the bodies Atwood focuses on are female, perhaps it is because, as Blakely argues, "Atwood suggests that man's refusal of woman's being provides the paradigm for other oppressions, other violence, and that the destructive use of power is most often sexual at its core" (Blakely 1983, 37). As Atwood's speaker attests in the poem "Torture": "Power/like this is not abstract,"

arguing that
a flayed body untangled
string by string and hung
to the wall, an agonized banner
displayed for the same reason
flags are.
(Atwood 1981)

When "The Body/ Itself Becomes a Mouth"

Atwood certainly foregrounds issues of appropriation in Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written. Of course, for Frank Davey, such appropriation is problematic at best. He notes that "the strategy the note-writing subject adopts involves appropriation, disguise, and ambiguity, in which the boundaries between notes and poem, writer and victim, and reader, victim and writer, are rhetorically obscured" (Davey 1992, 52). He objects to the elision he sees between first world writer and the tortured woman's "body, silent/ and fingerless, writing this poem" (Atwood 1981). Davey is concerned with what he identifies as a "rhetorical envy":

If the writing-subject can blur the difference between its own words and those of the victim, perhaps it can even become the victim, appropriate its subject position, and relatively painlessly take for itself the victim's painfully acquired clarity of vision...The "notes" both foreground the modesty of the writer who would not claim priority over the suffering-earned poetic standing of the victim...[while] the writing subject envies the torture that qualifies the dying woman to write a poem that, untortured, the writer will "never" be qualified to write. (Davey 1992, 52)

In "An End to Audience," Atwood anticipates accusations of appropriation, such as Davey's, when she describes writing's function as

Bringing the dead to life and giving voice to those who lack them [voices] so that they may speak for

themselves...Writing is...a kind of sooth-saying, a truth telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It is also a witnessing...The writer is both an eye-witness and an I witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer bears witness.

(Atwood 1982b, 247-48, italics in original)

She goes on to define another of writing's functions: "I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can be other than they are" (Atwood 1982b, 249). And while simultaneously evoking hope, Atwood does not back away from the writer's responsibility to report the brutal realities: "It takes a lot to see what's there, both without flinching or turning away and without bitterness. The world exists; the writer testifies. She cannot deny anything human" (Atwood 1982b, 249). In using a word such as "testify," Atwood is simultaneously evoking the function of the courtroom witness, as well as the religious underpinnings of the word, suggesting the writer's purpose as a higher calling. The word choice also recalls Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's important work on Holocaust trauma, *Testimony*, which makes a strong case for the importance of the role of the witness in healing trauma. In her address to Amnesty International, Atwood argues, "We in this country should use our privileged position not as a shelter from the world's realities but as a platform from which to speak. Many are denied their voices; we are not. A voice is a gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech if possible. Powerlessness and silence go together" (Atwood 1982a, 396).

While perhaps not Atwood's best poems, *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written* contains some of her most important poetry. Linda Wagner-Martin, while sympathetic to Atwood's project in *Notes...*, doesn't find the poems terribly successful (Wagner-Martin 1995, 77). If, as she contends, these poems fail, perhaps it is because Atwood could not reconcile the imperative to tell these "true stories" with her own awareness of and ambivalence towards the ambiguous moral position such an attempt bespeaks. Perhaps Atwood falls victim to the dilemma she sets forth much later in *Negotiating*

with the Dead: "The short form of the social responsibility problem is probably: are you your brother's keeper, and if so to what extent are you willing to mangle your artistic standards and become a Pulpiteer, a preachy manipulator of two-dimensional images, in order to ram home some - usually someone else's - worthy message or other?" And if you aren't your brother's keeper, if you stay shut up within your ivory tower, are you, by default, Cain the homicidal - no, the fratricidal, since all men are brothers - with blood on your hands and a mark on your forehead? Does your inaction lead to societal crime? (Atwood 2003, 91).

Atwood seems to anticipate the outrage these poems might evoke in a reader like Davey, a reader who questions "the dubious authority to represent (politically and aesthetically) the victims of the horrendous oppression that occurs 'elsewhere'....How can this writer speak 'on behalf of' the systematically electro-shocked, raped, and mutilated political prisoner...[from] her own 'safe' position in culture?" (Davey 1992, 53).

It seems Atwood is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't, as all efforts to circumvent issues of appropriation backfire. In *Negotiating With the Dead*, speaking in the abstract, Atwood confronts the dilemma: "Even when an eyewitness story isn't forged, but is a piece of fiction and admitted to be such, writers can be accused of appropriating the voices of others. A socially conscious writer can quite easily be charged with exploiting the misery and misfortune of the downtrodden for his own gain" (Atwood 2003, 106). One wonders what the alternative is: silence? If Davey remains unconvinced of Atwood's motives, he nevertheless articulates the dilemma in which she finds herself: "Even if the poem envisaged in the title is construed as a possible, socially-mediated text and not as some unmediated and hypothetical entity beyond discourse, it can 'never be written' both because its potential writer is dying and because its available writer is alien to its intertexts" (Davey 1992, 53).

Unlike Davey, who foregrounds the problematics of appropriation he identifies in Atwood's project, others, such as myself, see Atwood's achievement in these poems differently, and indeed, more positively. Hilda Hollis reads the poems as a more literary intervention, as an ironic deconstruction. She

argues that, "while charting a difficult course," Atwood manages to "dispute...universalizing moral and social interpretations" but sees her real accomplishment as "simultaneously recogniz[ing] corporeality, a phenomenon that exceeds Western metaphysics" (Hollis 1995, 118). Hollis reads Atwood's project as a retort to Paul de Man and others who, in their impulse to foreground irony, render political action pointless.

While Hollis' dismissal of de Man's critical project may be reductive, she is correct in recognizing the power in the suffering bodies of tortured women. Atwood's speaker tells us in "Spelling," "the point where language falls away...The body/itself becomes a mouth" (1981, 26-35). Hollis suggests these bodies "tell a truth outside language" (Hollis 1995, 134) or, as she later says, "the suffering body exists outside of discourse. It is a sign that does not lose its origin" (137). In collapsing the distinction between sign and signified with the tortured body, Hollis argues: "The doubling that is part of communication occurs without a gap when it is the body itself, a nonlinguistic word, speaking. The word is one with its origin" (1995, 135). Atwood, perhaps distrusting her own position, or at least, as Hollis contends, "recognizing the inherent distance in language, identifies her words as 'metaphor'...because she cannot fully represent this body in pain" (Hollis 1995, 135). Hollis contends, "Atwood insists that women, and more generally those in oppressed positions, cannot afford the luxury of seeing existence as indeterminate" (1995, 129). For Atwood, there is nothing abstract about the tortured body.

In *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written*, Margaret Atwood's success may be as tenuous as her original, provisional assertion. If she falls prey to the accusations of those critics, like Davey, who find "the most intriguing aspect of 'Notes towards a Poem That Can Never be Written' is the effort the speaking-subject makes to have its appropriation and conversion of the victim's physical suffering into its own aesthetically usable pain seem morally acceptable" (Davey 1992, 53-4), perhaps it is because she does not let the ambivalence of such a morally ambiguous position paralyze her efforts, qualified and provisional as they might be. Perhaps it is a courageous act to recognize the

problematic nature of one's position as a first world writer critiquing human rights violations in third-world cultures and not allow such important questions to render one inactive.

Atwood's writing constitutes an act of witness in itself. The form her action takes is, of course, the works themselves, for her poems and novels put into circulation issues that would be erased were it not for her efforts. Writing thus becomes an ethical imperative, subsuming merely aesthetic considerations. Through works such as *Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written*, Margaret Atwood affords her audience the ability to act in pragmatic ways to end the human suffering perpetuated by totalitarian regimes. Critics like Frank Davey who cry "appropriation" fail to consider what is at stake if a respected writer with a large readership like Atwood doesn't expose human rights abuses, for, in evading these issues, the only alternative is silence and hence complicity with torture. Thus, for Atwood, the act of writing becomes an important humanitarian act.

In her 1981 address to Amnesty International, Atwood argues that the human mind "can retain memory and courage in the face of unspeakable suffering. Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings" (Atwood, 1982a, 396-97). Or, in the words of section five of the title poem *Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written*:

The facts of this world seen clearly
Are seen through tears;

To see clearly and without flinching,
without turning away,
this is agony, the eyes taped open
two inches from the sun.

The razor across the eyeball
is a detail from an old film.
It is also a truth.
Witness is what you must bear.
(Atwood 1981)

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