

The Writer's Responsibility

by Margaret Atwood

- 1 The subject we have come together to address is one which increases in importance as the giants of this world move closer and closer to violent and fatal confrontation. Broadly put, it is: what is the writer's responsibility, if any, to the society in which he or she lives? The question is not a new one; it's been with us at least since the time of Plato; but 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.
- 2 We in Canada are ill-equipped to come to grips even with the problem, let alone the solution. We live in a society in which the main consensus seems to be that the artist's duty is to entertain and divert, nothing more. Occasionally our critics get a little heavy and start talking about the human condition, but on the whole the audience prefers art not to be a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul, containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland and all the other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth. When we take an author seriously, we prefer to believe that her vision derives from her individual and subjective and neurotic tortured soul — we like artists to have tortured souls — not from the world she is looking at. Sometimes our artists believe this version too, and the ego takes over. *I, me* and *mine* are our favourite pronouns; *we, us* and *ours* are low on the list. The artist is not seen as a lense for focusing the world but as a solipsism. We are good at measuring an author's production in terms of his craft. We are not good at analyzing it in terms of his politics,

and by and large we do not do so.

By "politics" I do not mean how you voted in the last election, although that is included. I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what. Such material enters a writer's work not because the writer is or is not consciously political but because a writer is an observer, a witness, and such observations are the air he breathes. They are the air all of us breathe; the only difference is that the author looks, and then writes down what he sees. What he sees will depend on how closely he looks and at what, but look he must.

In some countries, an author is censored not only for what he says but for how he says it, and an unconventional style is therefore a declaration of artistic freedom. Here we are eclectic; we don't mind experimental styles, in fact we devote learned journals to their analysis; but our critics sneer somewhat at anything they consider "heavy social commentary" or — a worse word — "message." Stylistic heavy guns are dandy, as long as they aren't pointed anywhere in particular. We like the human condition as long as it is seen as personal and individual. Placing politics and poetics in two watertight compartments is a luxury, just as specialization of any kind is a luxury, and it is possible only in a society where luxuries abound. Most countries in the world cannot afford such luxuries, and this North American way of thinking is alien to them. It was even alien in North America, not long ago. We've already forgotten that in the 1950's many artists, both in the United States and here, were persecuted solely on the grounds of their presumed politics. Which leads us to another mistaken Canadian belief: the belief that it can't happen here.

It has happened here, many times. Although our country is one of the most peaceful and prosperous on earth, although we do not shoot artists here, although we do not execute political opponents and although this is one of the few remaining countries in which we can have a gathering like this without expecting to be arrested or blown up, we should not overlook the fact that Canada's record on civil rights issues is less than pristine. Our treatment of our native peoples has been shameful. This is the country in which citizens of Japanese origin were interned during the Second World War and had their property stolen (when a government steals property it is called "confiscation"); it is also the country in which thousands of citizens were arrested, jailed and held without warrant or explanation, during the time of the War Measures Act, a scant eleven years ago. There was no general outcry in either case. Worse

things have not happened not because we are genetically exempt but because we lead pampered lives.

6 Our methods of controlling artists are not violent, but they do exist. We control through the marketplace and through critical opinion. We are also controlled by the economics of culture, which in Canada still happen to be those of a colonial branch-plant. In 1960 the number of Canadian books published here was minute, and the numbers sold pathetic. Things have changed very much in twenty years, but Canadian books still account for a mere 25 percent of the overall book trade and paperback books for under 5 percent. Talking about this situation is still considered nationalistic chauvinism. Nevertheless, looked at in the context of the wider picture, I suppose we are lucky to have any percent at all; they haven't yet sent in the Marines and if they do it won't be over books, but over oil.

7 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; one of the first efforts made in any totalitarian takeover is to suppress the writers, the singers the journalists, those who are the collective voice. Get rid of the union leaders and pervert the legal system and what you are left with is a reign of terror.

8 As we read the newspapers, we learn we are existing right now in a state of war. The individual wars may not be large and they are being fought far from here, but there is really only one war, that between those who would like the future to be, in the words of George Orwell, a boot grinding forever into a human face, and those who would like it to be a state of something we still dream of as freedom. The battle shifts according to the ground occupied by the enemy. Greek myth tells of a man called Procrustes, who was a great equalizer. He had a system for making all human beings the same size: if they were too small he stretched them, if they were too tall he cut off their feet or their heads. The Procrustes today are international operators, not confined to any one ideology or religion. The world is full of perversions of the notion of equality, just as it is full of perversions of the notion of freedom. True freedom is not being able to do whatever you like to whomever you want to do it to. Freedom that exists as a result of the servitude of others is not true freedom.

9 The most lethal weapon in the world's arsenals is not the neutron bomb or chemical warfare; but the human mind that devises such things and

puts them to use. But it is the human mind also that can summon up the power to resist, that can imagine a better world than the one before it, that 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. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill, as many in this society would like to believe, regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them. The ultimate desire of Procrustes is a population of lobotomized zombies. The writer, unless he is a mere word processor, retains three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: a human imagination, in the many forms it may take; the power to communicate; and hope. It may seem odd for me to speak of hope in the midst of what many of my fellow Canadians will call a bleak vision, but as the American writer Flannery O'Connor once said, people without hope do not write novels.

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The Writer's Subject

1. Why is Atwood so critical of the attitudes of Canadians to art and artists?
2. What are the implications of the phrase "a Disneyland of the soul" (para. 2)?
3. What is Atwood's definition of "politics," and how does it bear on her view of the writer's responsibility? (para. 3)
4. Why does Atwood regard the separation of politics and poetics as a "luxury"? (para. 4)
5. After giving examples of Canadian violations of civil rights (para. 5), Atwood concludes that "Worse things have not happened not because we are genetically exempt but because we lead pampered lives." Discuss what Atwood means by this observation.
6. What does Atwood mean by describing the economics of Canadian culture as "those of a colonial branch-plant" (para. 6)?
7. Atwood asserts that "we are existing right now in a state of war" (para. 8). Who are the opponents in this war?

8. What answer does Atwood give to the question she raises in paragraph 1, "what is the writer's responsibility, if any, to the society in which he or she lives? What qualities must the writer possess to fulfil that responsibility?"

The Writer's Style and Strategy

1. Explain the significance of Atwood's use of "amputation" in the opening paragraph.
2. Is there any evidence in style, diction, or tone to indicate that this essay was originally prepared as a spoken address?
3. Why does Atwood first refer to the writer as "she" (para. 2), then shift to a masculine pronoun in subsequent paragraphs?
4. At several points Atwood uses irony as a means of underscoring her point of view. Pick out one or two examples of effective irony.
5. Examine the organization of paragraph 5. What means of development does Atwood employ? Why does she begin the second sentence with four subordinate clauses, each introduced by "although"?
6. Atwood defines "true freedom" negatively rather than positively in paragraph 8. Why does she employ this strategy of definition?

Suggested Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Atwood provides several examples of the violations of civil rights in Canada. Investigate one of these and explain what climate of opinion or historical events led to the occurrence.
2. Atwood says that our society expects artists "to entertain and divert, nothing more." Is it possible, in your view, for artists to perform the duties which Atwood discusses and, at the same time, entertain and divert? Provide clear examples to support your view.
3. We regard our society as free. We are still subject, however, to various forms of censorship in the arts and in communication. Find and discuss one or two examples of censorship in any medium (books, movies, television, radio, newspapers, exhibitions, advertisements, etc.).