Lisa Hamilton

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On Duplicity and Death: A Review of Margaret Atwood's *On Writers and Writing*

Imagine you were offered the chance to descend into the labyrinthine tunnels and murky shafts of an ancient cave. You do not know what you will encounter there, deep within the belly of the earth. You know it could be risky spelunking the unknown. The mouth of the cave is black, and you stand in front of it, feeling ill-prepared. Now, what if there was a person with you, standing beside you at the cave's mouth… a priestess ordained in the ways of sacred caves? She offers you a lantern and guidance on the mysteries kept underground. Although this priestess has known many caves, she does not know this cave. This is your cave. Yet, she is knowledgeable, and her wisdom is imprinted upon her like battle scars or ritual tattoos: a treasure map, in a way. One could say stepping into a writer's life is like stepping into the mouth of a strange cave: risky, foolhardy, maybe, and against your sense of self-preservation. But what if Margaret Atwood was your attending priestess, and although she cannot tell you exactly what you will find in the murky depths of your writer's mind, she can impart her wisdom and the wisdom of others and give you a lantern to help you feel more equipped, and perhaps, less afraid of the dark? Even better, you could send another version of yourself into the cavernous deep—your writer self—while your regular self remains safely above ground. Would you then dive into the cave's mysteries?

Atwood's book, *On Writers and Writing*, is not a self-help or a how-to manual (xvii). Instead, it is a journey into the hidden depths of a writer's purpose, identity, and creativity.

When I say “a writer,” I do not mean Atwood specifically, although she does reference her literary journey from childhood onward (xvii). Despite Atwood being one of the most celebrated living writers in the English language today, she does not want readers to simply take her word for it (xvii). In true Atwood form, she uses literary, mythological, and historical sources to include broader context in her meticulously crafted words. Atwood says *On Writers and Writing* is the kind of book a writer “might think of beginning the day after he or she wakes up in the middle of the night and wonders what she’s been up to all this time” (xvii). In this way, the book appeals to new writers, people curious about the writing process, literature lovers, and long-haul writers alike. People new to the craft can take value from the wisdom imparted within the book. Experienced writers can relate to the processes Atwood describes. Curious readers can go deep into the method behind the poetry and books they love. In many ways, Atwood, in her book, articulates the ineffable language of the creative process and shines a light on writing’s obscured multifacetedness, casting a prism, a spectrum that slices the darkness. Atwood is a lamp in the mineshaft, imparting her wisdom after “labouring in the wordmines” herself for years (xvii). She addresses pressing questions like, “What has she [the writer] been up to, and why, and for whom? And what is this *writing* anyway, as a human activity, or a vocation, or as a profession, or as a hack job, or perhaps, even, as art…” (xvii)?

Atwood explores topics such as the ethical and moral responsibilities of the writer (103), how a writer can keep their integrity while trying to earn money (64-5), the function of writing in society (187), and the “communion” (123) between the reader, the writer, and the text. However, Atwood weaves these practical concerns by imbuing the writer's identity and journey with magical, shapeshifting, and, at times, sacred attributes. It is not that Atwood thinks writers are more special than anyone else; it is only that writers choose to engage in a process that borders

on occultism to produce a work. After all, writing is challenging, rejection is plentiful, the pay is meagre (unless you are Atwood, but after all, she has laboured in the wordmines for many years), and writers must have certain idiosyncrasies that drive them to do the things they do. The same way a doctor cannot be squeamish around blood, a writer is required to approach a writer's life in a way that makes non-writers queasy.

On Writers and Writing's chapters are organized into themes, beginning with "Who do you think you are?" and ending with "Negotiating with the dead;" in other words, the typical, lighthearted fair writers tend to dally with (insert ironic chuckle here). In many ways, the book starts with birth—Atwood's own and how her childhood forged her writer's path—and ends with trips to the Underworld. It is an Everyman's journey (155-6)—rather, an Everywriter's journey—where Atwood is the character called Knowledge as she guides the Everywriter to the realm where all living things go, but never return… unless, of course, you are a writer, but even then, your safety is not assured (167).

How does a writer commit these death-defying feats? One way Atwood suggests a writer navigates the otherwise unnavigable is to split their identities in two. Notions of an artist's duplicity, their alter-ego, and their doppelganger gained traction with the Romantic writers (32), and much like how we see art and artists today, western society has held on to many Romantic ideals, especially as they pertain to the creatives who dwell among us (32). Atwood admits, "You might say I was fated to be a writer—either that or a con artist or a spy… because I was endowed with a double identity" (36). In the chapter "Duplicity: the Jekyll hand, the Hyde Hand, and the Slippery Double: *Why There Is Always Two*," Atwood writes:

> You see how quickly we have begun talking about hands—two of them. Dexter and sinister. There has been a widespread suspicion among writers—widespread over at least

> the past century and a half—that there are two of him sharing the same body, with a hard-to-predict and difficult-to-pinpoint moment when one turns into the other. When writers have spoken consciously of their own double natures, they're likely to say that one half does the living, the other half the writing, and—if of a melancholy turn of mind—that each is parasitic upon the other (37).

So, what happens at that hard-to-predict moment when the writer transforms from their living self to their author self? In the "Self as Source," Cheryl Moskowitz writes, "When Robert Lewis Stevenson created the split person of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, he was responding to the opposing forces of good and evil in his own conscience and upbringing" (37). In a similar vein, Atwood wonders how a mild-mannered, rule-following, pro-social person can be the same individual who writes cynically about murderers and other morally objectionable characters:

> Now, what disembodied hand or invisible monster just wrote that cold-blooded comment? Surely it wasn't me; I am a nice, cosy sort of person, a bit absent-minded, a dab hand at cookies, beloved by domestic animals, and a knitter of sweaters with arms that are too long (35).

Is it reasonable to assume, therefore, that writers *are* the characters they create? Or are they merely expressing universal archetypes or exploring the forbidden aspects of the human mind that the rest of us are uncomfortable acknowledging? Without giving a definitive answer, Atwood alludes to *Alice in Wonderland*:

> The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor

> there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time, she is all of these at once (57).

It is safe to say, therefore, that in order to write about other characters, a writer, in a way, parasitically infects that character's mind, but that writer self is a cloak or even an armour they must wear to journey through the cavernous recesses of the human psyche (132). It is not unreasonable to expect writers to borrow from their living selves to create personas that are at once believable and empathetic and offensive and loathsome. Humans, in general, are never one thing, either entirely good or entirely evil; it is just that writers dare to entertain the darkness. But Atwood is ambiguous: the writer is and is not the writing they produce.

It was not a flight of fancy when I invited you to imagine Atwood as your attending priestess at your writer's cave. According to Atwood, once religion lost traction, artists took upon more spiritual responsibility to define the "divine Real Presence" (62) to the masses: "…as religion lost helium in society at large, the Real Presence crept back into the realm of art" (61) and "The artist was to be its priest" (62). If artists became priests of the imagination, female artists became nuns of the imagination, but with a twist: "Both the nun of the imagination and the priestess of the imagination may finish up in a non-living condition at the foot of Art's alter, but the difference is that the priestess takes someone else when she goes" (88). Who better than Atwood to be the priestess of your imaginative journey to the realm of the dead?

Writers write because of mortality (156). Not only is it a writer's mortality they wish to justify with their art, but it is their sacred duty to descend into the Underworld to bring information, stories, and insights from the dark and into the light:

> All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile from the past. And all must commit acts of larceny or else of reclamation. Depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back to the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more… (178).

And the purpose of a writer's perilous journey to the Underworld? The work, be it a poem, a short story, or a novel. And just as a writer cannot stay in the Underworld, a reader cannot live in a book, either. A reader transcends space and time while reading, but they must return to their regular world, their world of the living, their life (173). Hopefully, if the writing is good, they are transformed from their tourist visa access to the Underworld of storytelling, and they, too, now carry the light the writer brought back for them in the form of their art, and they now have that light to reintegrate into their lives.

It wasn't until I finished reading *On Writers and Writing* that I realized Atwood had taken me on a journey to the Underworld. Throughout this book, which is a reflection on writing based on a series of lectures given at the University of Cambridge in the year 2000 (xv), Atwood was my Virgil, the way Virgil was Dante's guide in *The Divine Comedy* (174). Atwood was my friend Knowledge, the way Knowledge guided Everyman in the eponymous tale (156). Atwood was Sybil of Cumae to my Aeneus as we trip the light fantastic through Hades (167). The only thing is, Atwood left me there, in the Underworld, in her final chapter of the book, "Negotiating with the dead." She passed the lantern to me in the deepest, darkest cave where the stories are kept, and it is my duty now to see what I can find and return it to the light.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *On Writers and Writing*. Emblem, 2014.

Moskowitz, Cheryl. “The Self as Source: Writing Generated From Personal Reflection.” *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*, edited by Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2005, pp. 35–46.