Murder in the Dark:  
Margaret Atwood's Inverse Poetics of Intertextual Minuteness  

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The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder.  
Sigmund Freud

The lake, vast and dimensionless,  
doubles everything, the stars,  
the boulders, itself, even the darkness  
that you can walk so long in  
it becomes light.  
Margaret Atwood, *Interlunar*

The dichotomy between *large* and *small* is a motif that recurs frequently in the works of Margaret Atwood. This can clearly be seen in Atwood’s various cartoons, in which the main themes of her works—for example, the status of the author or artist in her/his social surroundings, or the national/cultural relations between the United States and Canada—reemerge in a deliberately exaggerated form. With ironical self-deprecation, a characteristic that Linda Hutcheon sees as epitomizing Canadian culture (Hutcheon, *Splitting Images*), Atwood associates her own position in these comic strips (as author, Canadian, woman) with the characteristic of smallness. An early example of this method is provided by her comic “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cipher”—even in the title, reminiscent of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the...*
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*Artist as a Young Man*, the expected noun, *woman*, is replaced by *cipher*, an irrelevant entity. Similarly, the text and pictures portray an up-and-coming author who is impressed, not to say intimidated, by the confrontation with real or imaginary forces of dominating power.

A look at four episodes from this comic strip in Figure 1 will serve to illustrate my point; among other things, they also highlight the biographical elements contained in this humorous series.¹

![Figure 1](Wilson_chap1_final.qxd)

FIGURE 1
Margaret Atwood, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cipher” (1977).
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(1) “I entered the University in 1957.”
(2) “I was not happy as a freshperson.” (Northrop Frye)
(3) “. . . the sight of Jay Macpherson whisking around corners . . .”

The closing picture in the sequence depicts the established author of 1977, once again with self-deprecating irony and understatement: She is overwhelmed not by professional success, but rather by pet cats (cf. Nathalie Cooke in Nischik, Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact, 15–27).

(4) “Buttons fall from my clothes.”

After completing Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972), Atwood, under the pseudonym Bart Gerrard, published a series of “Survivalwoman” comics, which appeared in the Canadian This Magazine under the rubric Kanadian Kultchur Komix (see Figure 2, page 4).

As can be seen from Survivalwoman’s elegant cape, she is a Canadian counterpart to America’s Superman (or “Superham” as Atwood prefers to call him). In every other respect, however, Survivalwoman, as her very name suggests, is Superman’s polar opposite: She is diminutive, exudes cheerfulness and intelligence, and wears typical northern-Canadian snow boots, indicating a connection with nature and an earthbound quality contrasting strongly with the power and provocativeness evoked by Superman’s leather boots. A popular icon of American imperialist megalomania is thus recreated, in Atwood’s inverted Canadian representation, as a survival-orientated and dwarfish yet fearless champion of independence (“the FIGHTING FAILURE exerts her utmost powers”).

Finally, a more recent comic strip shown in Figure 3, page 4, dating from the mid-nineties, in which the semiotics of small and large remain basically unchanged.

In “The Radio Interview” from “Book Tour Comics,” we see Atwood’s stylized version of herself, elegantly dressed and with characteristic curly locks, yet so tiny that she seemingly can keep her balance only by holding on to the table. This comic strip is a particularly clear example of Atwood’s inversion of conventional large-small hierarchies; here, it is the minuscule author who, with her sparing yet
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**FIGURE 2**
“Kanadian Kulture Komix” by Margaret Atwood under the pseudonym Bart Gerrard.

**FIGURE 3**
“The Radio Interview” by Margaret Atwood for Book Tour Comics.
pointed use of language, triumphs over an interviewer more than three times her size.3

Atwood also makes repeated use of the small-large dichotomy in her literary texts, once again inverting norms to significant effect. In The Robber Bride (1994), the novel to which “The Radio Interview” refers, the importance of physical size, as in the comic strip, is reduced, thus implicitly increasing the value of smallness: “Tall people’s heads are too far from the ground, their center of gravity is too high. One shock and they topple” (39). In “Weight,” from Atwood’s short story collection Wilderness Tips, the reader is told that “Molly was pushy. Or you could call it determined. She had to be, she was so short. . . . She’d made it on brains” (182). Here again, nonphysical qualities can be seen to compensate, or more than compensate, for a small physique. A similar point is made in the following fictional interview, which surely touches upon Atwood’s diverse experiences, both active and passive, in the media circus of literature.4

“I thought you would be different,” says Andrea as we settle.
“Different how?” I ask.
“Bigger,” she says.
I smile at her. “I am bigger.”

This quotation from Cat’s Eye (92) indeed suggests that Atwood’s preoccupation with the small-large dichotomy may also have an autobiographical basis.5 Yet her own small stature is only a superficial explanation for the inverse relationships present in her work. Rather, they are part of a general tendency in Atwood’s work to expose conventions (see note 3 below), that is to say the social, psychological, linguistic, and mythical structures that underpin everyday perceptions and judgments, and to question their value and function.

Since the eighties, Atwood has been using a new medium for her challenging redefinitions and inversions: a type of short text that is hard to categorize and has few real ancestors in Canadian literature. Works in this hybrid genre appeared in the collections Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems and Good Bones, published in 1983 and 1992, respectively.6 The originality of their form and modes of representation, combined with a possible confusion of smallness/shortness with insignificance,7 meant that these Atwood texts were neglected by critics for a long time.8 However, it has now been recognized that with these two collections Atwood introduced a hitherto
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unfamiliar genre into Anglo-Canadian literature: the Baudelairian prose poem. In addition, the short texts in these collections constitute a radical contribution to the development of genre hybridization. A closer evaluation of many of the texts in Murder in the Dark and Good Bones reveals Atwood’s literary art at work in the smallest of spaces. The highly intertextual nature of these works is immediately noticeable, creating networks of meaning and significance despite their limited scope. This frequently goes hand in hand with what I would like to call Atwood’s “poetics of inversion”: her technique of undermining conventional thought patterns, attitudes, values, or textual norms by turning them on their heads. This leads to a multifaceted interplay between explicit and implicit meaning or, to put it another way, a prismatic multiplication of sense. Since this technique is used in a very restricted space, it almost inevitably results in strongly delineated, suggestive, and highly intensified representations, thus providing a possible explanation for the satirical and parodic tendencies discernible in many of the texts.

One of Atwood’s drawings, which was included in the American edition of Good Bones and Simple Murders (a compilation of selected texts from Murder in the Dark and Good Bones), perfectly illustrates Atwood’s technique of inverse portrayal. This drawing appears within the text of the heavyweight prose poem “Good Bones.”

![FIGURE 4](image-url)

Margaret Atwood drawing appearing within the poem “Good Bones.”
Due to its elaborate composition, it is possible to interpret this drawing in many ways, depending on perspective and focus of perception: an undulating moonlit lake or river landscape at twilight; or two sets of two female profiles looking at one another, different from each other (light/dark), yet very similar; or, looking at it the other way round, two female profiles turned away from each other while still constituting two complementary halves of the same figure; or a side view of two dissimilar women (one larger, one smaller), who are nevertheless harmoniously looking in the same direction at the same time; or silhouettes of female physical forms (to put it plainly: stylized female sexual characteristics); or even a stylized bone—a “good bone” indeed! If we were to cover up the lower half of this partly mirroring inverse portrayal, the spectrum of possible interpretations would be reduced by more than half.

Although Atwood’s inverse poetics of intertextual minuteness can be seen at work even more clearly and pithily in a number of texts in *Good Bones*, it nevertheless constitutes an underlying principle in the conception of *Murder in the Dark*, too. The collection opens with a series of eight vignettes, grouped together as Part I, which are linked by their presentation of epiphanic events from the childhood of the lyrical “I.” The first text, “Autobiography,” introduces not only this background situation, but also Atwood’s technique of inversion. As Christl Verduyn rightly says of this text, which is no more than half a page long: “As in subsequent texts, the form of ‘Autobiography’ is in itself unsettling; this must be the world’s shortest, not to say oddest, autobiography!” (125)

Atwood’s use here of the first-person singular and the past tense are redolent of the genre of autobiography. What is being evoked, however, is a fragmentary epiphanic situation that undermines the sequence of events encountered in traditional autobiographies: a mental painting—the almost static description of a landscape as seen and felt—is used to demonstrate the power of artistic perception and representation to alter and, indeed, create reality. This highly concentrated “Autobiography” refers to no human beings other than the “I” (only the products of their civilization: “dam, covered bridge, houses, white church, sawed-off trunks of huge trees,” etc.). Far more important are the relationship of this “I” to its perception of the almost lifeless landscape, as well as the reconstruction and mental working-over of this perception on another, artistic level of reality:

Once, on the rock island, there was the half-eaten carcass of a deer, which smelled like iron, like rust rubbed into your hands so that it
mixes with sweat. This smell is the point at which the landscape dissolves, ceases to be a landscape and becomes something else. (9)

This directly articulated change of perspective sweeps aside the inherently static nature of the landscape description, just as on a linguistic level the mental painting was lent an added dynamism by the use of verbs of motion, which convey the process of perceiving and the transforming power of artistic perception and representation (“the lake disappeared into the sky,” “trunks of huge trees coming up through the water,” “a path running back into the forest,” “the landscape dissolves . . . and becomes something else”). The traditionally diachronic sequence of events in autobiographies is replaced, in “Autobiography,” by a synchronically located metamorphosis, which is developed within the artistic conscience through its powers of transformation (note the two similes introduced by “like”). And indeed the development of this ability to transform (the perception of) reality is the basic hinge for the autobiographies of artists (see the concept of the “Third Eye” in the final text of this collection, “Instructions for the Third Eye,” which is in many ways an extension of the opening text discussed above, with which it forms a frame for the entire collection). Atwood’s provocatively titled “Autobiography” takes as its theme the individual point of view (“there was a white sand cliff, although you couldn’t see it from where I was standing,” “the entrance to another path which cannot be seen from where I was standing but was there anyway”), and implies that even autobiographical texts are quasi-fictional constructs, though this does not make them less important or “true.” This reductive, condensed inversion of the genre of autobiography at the beginning of Murder in the Dark is therefore a metapoetical commentary on the genre to which it alludes, but also on the collection of “Short Fictions and Prose Poems” that it starts off.

Any author writing in the genre of the prose poem is heavily indebted to the work of Charles Baudelaire, all the more so in the case of an Anglo-Canadian writer working in a literary tradition in which the genre is unfamiliar (see Merivale, “From ‘Bad News’ to ‘Good Bones,’” 268).16 Concrete proof of Atwood’s reception of Baudelaire’s poems and prose poems can be found in the highly ironic ending of “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” in Good Bones: “Hypocrite lecteuse! Ma semblable! Ma soeur! / Let us now praise stupid women, / who have given us Literature” (37). The French quotation modifies Baudelaire’s famous closing gambit in “Au lecteur,” the introductory poem to Les Fleurs du mal (“—Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!”

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8), and, not without a certain linguistic irreverence (e.g., “lecteuse” instead of the correct form “lectrice”), places the emphasis firmly on the female gender. This reversal ironically highlights a tradition of misogynist representations of women (cf. Clack, Misogyny, 1–9), a tradition in which Baudelaire plays a central part. Indeed, Atwood’s revisionist attitude to this tradition, her exposing and rewriting of such misogynist portrayals, constitutes, as Patricia Merivale has succinctly suggested in relation to Murder in the Dark, one of Atwood’s fundamental approaches to Baudelaire’s texts:

Atwood’s prose poems of the sex wars invert or subvert the misogyny, bordering on highbrow pornography, of Baudelaire’s prose poems, while maintaining, but recontextualizing, in her lyrical transvestism, the irony of the Baudelairean . . . voice. In that whole misogynist repertory, whose most powerfully intelligent exponent is Charles Baudelaire, woman, reified and dangerously idealized, is seen as perfect only insofar as she reflects the man to himself . . . . These are neat inversions of the misogynist patterns in Baudelaire’s poems of Woman reified by the Poet; in Atwood the Poet watches the man reify her. (Merivale, “Hypocrite Lecteuse!” 105, 102)

I would like to develop Merivale’s excellent analysis in two ways. First, with reference to two texts from Murder in the Dark, I will examine more closely Atwood’s revisionist approach to gender, and particularly to its portrayal in intertexts by Baudelaire. Second, I will differentiate between Atwood’s subversions and inversions, with subversion here taken to be the more inclusive concept.

Merivale’s observation that the poet watches man reifying woman holds true for Atwood’s prose poems “Worship” and “Iconography,” from Part IV of Murder in the Dark. Such texts can be seen as radically critical continuations of Baudelaire texts such as his poems “Le serpent qui danse” and “Le chat,” both from Les Fleurs du mal, or his prose poems “Un hémisphère dans une chevelure” and “Un cheval de race” from Le Spleen de Paris. In these Baudelaire texts, Woman, as perceived by the lyrical “I,” is reduced to a physical level, and is reified by ostensibly flattering comparisons to animals and objects, for example:

\[
\text{A te voir marcher en cadence,} \\
\text{Belle d’abandon,} \\
\text{On dirait un serpent qui danse} \\
\text{Au bout d’un bâton.}
\]
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(“Le serpent qui danse,” 50)
When you walk in rhythm, lovely
With abandonment,
You seem to be swayed by a wand,
A dancing serpent.]
(“The Dancing Serpent,” 37)

Usée peut-être, mais non fatiguée, et toujours héroïque, elle fait
penser à ces chevaux de grande race que l’œil du véritable amateur
reconnait, même attelés à un carrosse de louage ou à un lourd chariot.
(“Un cheval de race,” 370)
[Deteriorated perhaps, but not wearied, and still heroic, she
reminds you of those horses of pure breed recognized by a true con-
noisseur’s eye, even when hitched to a hired coach or a heavy wagon.]
(“A Thoroughbred,” 99)

In “Worship,” Atwood, through a strongly ambivalent use of language,
subtly highlights and lays bare the sexuality hinted at in Baudelaire
texts such as “Le serpent qui danse.” She furthermore subjects Baude-
laire’s attitude to sexual gender roles to a radical critique from a female
point of view. Indeed, the beginning of “Worship” (“You have these
sores in your mouth that will not heal. It’s from eating too much sugar,
you tell yourself,” 51) seems to act as a retort to these lines from “Le
serpent qui danse”: “Comme un flot grossi par la fonte / Des glaciers
grondants, / Quand l’eau de ta bouche remonte / Au bord de tes dents”
(50, 52) [“When, like a stream by thawing of / Glaciers made replete, / The water of your mouth rises / Up to your teeth” (37)]. “Worship”
is based on two fundamental themes, which are related to each other
within the text and mingle in a strettolike combination: religious ven-
eration and physical unification. The admiring, not to say worshipping,
attitude of the man to the woman is compared to religious veneration,
and its deficiencies and compensatory function are subjected to a com-
plex and pointed analysis (cf. “Madonna syndrome”), for example:

Thanksgiving. That’s why he brings you roses, on occasion, and
chocolates when he can’t think of anything else. . . . Prayer is want-
ing. . . . You aren’t really a god but despite that you are silent. When
you’re being worshipped there isn’t much to say. (51)

The worshipping attitude is ruthlessly exposed, by means of vaginal
imagery, as reifying self-reflection, not to say selfishness:
Jesus, Jesus, he says, but he’s not praying to Jesus, he’s praying to you, not to your body or your face but to that space you hold at the centre, which is the shape of the universe. Empty. He wants response, an answer from that dark sphere and its red stars, which he can touch but not see. (51)

(Cf. Baudelaire: “Un ciel liquide qui parsème / D’étoiles mon cœur!” “Le serpent qui danse,” 52 [“A liquid sky that sows its stars / Within my heart!” “The Dancing Serpent,” 37])

The reification of women, sexuality, and religious veneration are inextricably intertwined at the close of “Worship,” where words like “use/d” and “service/d” take on a kaleidoscopic range of meaning, and a phrase such as “like a chalice, burnished,” in the context evoked by Atwood, has a manifold sense, with woman being an instrument in the ceremony of sexual love (cf. e.g. “to burnish”: “to polish by friction with something hard and smooth”):

[That’s you up there, shining, burning, like a candle, like a chalice, burnished; with use and service. After you’ve been serviced, after you’ve been used, you’ll be put away again until needed. (51)]

The term service, correlating with the religious conceit of the text in its possible reference to religious service, may have yet another, even more radical meaning here. Service also refers to the insemination of animals, and this meaning here would imply that human sexual love, in spite of its pretensions, may be based on a primitive need to dominate and control. The couching of this idea in religious ritual and imagery renders the representation of woman as an object of, rather than a mutual participant in, sexual love all the more shocking. The suppressed implications of Baudelaire’s strategy in portraying women are thus brought to the fore by Atwood in a subtle act of deliberate subversion. Whereas the Baudelaire text is written exclusively from a male perspective, denying female subjectivity and agency, Atwood also takes account of and assesses the female role in gender relations; her use of the second person (“you”) illustrates a universalizing, and in a way even didactic, tendency.

This rearrangement of perspectives, which nevertheless leaves room for the male point of view as an ironic accompaniment, both within Atwood’s prose poems and in the intertextual dialogue with texts by Baudelaire, becomes a full-fledged inverse portrayal in Atwood’s “Liking...
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Men” from Murder in the Dark (cf. also “Simmering” in the same collection). In the case of “Liking Men,” Merivale’s observation that “in Atwood the poet watches the man reifying her [woman]” is no longer valid. In this text, in which an ironic reversal takes place, with woman portrayed as reifying man, an undercurrent of irony is present from the outset: “It’s time to like men again. Where shall we begin?” (53) With Baudelairean symmetry,18 the text is divided through the middle into two halves by the crucial phrase, “You don’t want to go on but you can’t stop yourself” (53). After various parts of the male body have been rejected as too problematic, the seemingly harmless feet of the man are ironically reified and singled out as objects for the action of “liking men.” But a positive approach (“You think of kissing those feet, . . . you like to give pleasure,” 53) proves almost impossible to maintain: the associations called up by footwear, benign at first (“Rubber boots, for wading out to the barn in the rain in order to save the baby calf. . . . Knowing what to do, doing it well, Sexy,” 53), lead inexorably, from “dance shoes,” “golf shoes,” and “rubber boots,” via “riding boots,” “cowboy boots,” and “jackboots,” to war and rape scenes in which men are portrayed in brutally aggressive roles. Going beyond Baudelaire, the “I” in “Liking Men” attempts to differentiate between Man as a category, which includes warmongers and rapists, and men as individuals: “[J]ust because all rapists are men it doesn’t follow that all men are rapists, . . . you try desperately to retain the image of the man you love and also like” (54). This attempt takes the “I” back to the birth of the man and, therefore, back to the social conditions that influence him: “Maybe that’s what you have to go back to, in order to trace him here, the journey he took, step by step” (54). “Liking Men,” then, points both intratextually and intertextually to the constructedness and therefore mutability of gender roles and images. Atwood’s inversion technique—as we have already seen in the apparently reflected double moonscape in her drawing—goes beyond mere mirroring and, indeed, in its intertextual double coding reaches beyond Baudelaire’s self-reflective portrayal of women; as Margery Evans says of Baudelaire:

In Le Spleen de Paris . . . the descriptions of women are, quite self-consciously, a series of fictions which may help to give the poet a sense of his own existence (“à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis”) but which in no way purport to be an objective rendering of a common, shared reality. (56f.)
In contrast to this, Atwood's inverse portrayal of women and gender relations has a fundamentally political aim, as can be seen even more clearly in her later collection *Good Bones* (e.g. “Making a Man” with the humorous indirect attacks on the reification of women, often as commercial commodity, in popular culture). In fact, Atwood's acute awareness of gender differences may simply be seen as an integral part of her humanitarianism, her being a champion for human rights in her literary just as well as in her nonliterary public roles (for example, her membership in Amnesty International).

In bringing the genre of the prose poem to the Anglo-Canadian literary scene, Atwood enters into an intertextual dialogue with Baudelaire in a number of ways: in her choice of genre, thematically (notably in her representation of gender), and as regards specific intertextual cross-fertilizations. In this respect, Atwood's “A Beggar” from Part II (“Raw Materials”) of *Murder in the Dark* can be interpreted as a rewriting of Baudelaire's “Assomons les pauvres” from *Le Spleen de Paris*; and “Bad News,” the opening text of *Good Bones*, can be seen as a brilliant new version of Baudelaire's “Au lecteur” from *Les Fleurs du mal* (see also the aforementioned direct reference to Baudelaire in “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” from *Good Bones*). It is nevertheless Baudelaire's self-reflective, discriminatory gender representations (cf. e.g. Baudelaire's “L'Homme et la mer” with his “Le chat,” “Le serpent qui danse,” or “Un cheval de race”) that act as the greatest spur to Atwood, and that, as she progresses from *Murder in the Dark* to *Good Bones*, lead her to increasingly inverted counter-representations (for example, “Men at Sea” from *Good Bones* as an inverse rewriting of “L'Homme et la mer”). The development of Atwood's inversion technique, as well as her increasing radicalness (based also on her increasing injection of playful and comic, facetious elements into her short fictions and prose poems), become clear in a comparison of, for example, “Worship” and “Liking Men” from *Murder in the Dark* with “Making a Man” from *Good Bones*, or indeed “Iconography” (MD) with “Gertrude Talks Back” (GB).

In her contributions to the genre of the prose poem, Atwood documents the fact that, as Umberto Eco puts it in his afterword to *The Name of the Rose*, “the postmodern discourse . . . demands, in order to be understood, not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking. . . . The past, since it cannot be destroyed, . . . must be revisited; but with irony.” Atwood's subversive textual assassinations, her “Murder in the Dark” (see Freud: “The distortion of a text is not
unlike a murder”) seek to question the basis, justification, and consequences of traditional judgments and prejudices and call the singular, one-sided point of view into question without, however, seeking to negate it. Atwood’s subversive poetics of inversion defamiliarizes, irritates, disturbs, and amuses, opening up explanatory chasms as soon as it closes them. The author as murderer of the conventional, “daylight” stories, to take up the playful symbolism of the title story, “Murder in the Dark,” teaches us the meaning of fear in order to uncover for us new and often uncomfortable views (see the end of “Iconography”: “Watch yourself. That’s what the mirrors are for, this story is a mirror story which rhymes with horror story, almost but not quite. We fall back into these rhythms as if into safe hands,” 52). In Atwood’s prose poems this is rendered in language that is closer to poetry than to prose. As she herself puts it in an interview on the differences between prose, prose poetry, and poetry: “The difference between a prose poem and a short story for me is that the prose poem is still concerned with that rhythmical syllabic structure. You’re as meticulous about the syllables in a prose poem as you are in a poem.”

And in order to demonstrate the range of Atwood’s inverse poetics, I will indeed conclude with a lasting image from one of Atwood’s poems, “Woman Skating,” taken from her 1970 poetry collection Procedures for Underground. In this poem, woman can be seen to stand for all human beings, especially those with a creative or artistic bent. The poem, which may be linked to the aforementioned inverse landscape portrayal, evokes a pastoral, northern lakeland landscape on a late afternoon:

A lake sunken among
cedar and black spruce hills;
late afternoon.

On the ice a woman skating,
jacket sudden
red against the white,
concentrating on moving
in perfect circles.

The middle section of the poem, which offers in itself a specifying inverted perspective on the rest of the poem, leads up to this wonderful closing image:
With arms wide the skater
turns, leaving her breath like a diver’s
trail of bubbles.
Seeing the ice
as what it is, water:
seeing the months
as they are, the years
in sequence occurring
underfoot, watching
the miniature human
figure balanced on steel
needles (those compasses
floated in saucers) on time
sustained, above
time circling: miracle

Over all I place
A glass bell.

(96–97)

Here, we can see Atwood’s inverse poetics at work once again. Her way of looking at things from a different perspective opens up whole new vistas of meaning, in this case generating an unusual, metapoetic synthesis of stasis and movement (“ice/water,” “balanced/floated,” “time sustained/time circling”), and elevating the seemingly tiny (“miniature human figure, steel needles, glass bell”) to a higher sphere of meaning. Drops of water freeze into a sheet of ice; individual months link together to form a year; a human figure is visible, apparently so tiny set against the enormous natural backdrop, yet whose skill creates an epiphanic moment for the observer in the poem and the reader, in which T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” seems for an instant to be tangible: “the miniature human figure balanced . . . on time sustained, above time circling: miracle.” In an everyday context (compare the contrasting, realistic parenthetical insertion in the middle section of the poem, omitted in my quotation), such visionary moments are all too rare. In art, particularly in Atwood’s art, they can be achieved more often, even, as demonstrated, in the most restricted of spaces: “Over all I place / A glass bell.”
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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Margaret Atwood for permission to reprint the comics included in this text.

2. See Atwood’s “Afterword” in her poetry collection, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970): “If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia,” 62.

3. For details of conventional concepts such as “bigger is better” or “significant is big,” which influence thought as well as language, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, e.g. 22 and 50.

4. For further details see Susanne Becker, “Celebrity, or a Disneyland of the Soul: Margaret Atwood and the Media,” in Reingard M. Nischik, ed., Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact.

5. Pertinent references can also be found repeatedly in Atwood’s nonfictional texts, e.g. “where there is a David in Canadian literature there is usually a Goliath, . . . the evil giant (or giantess),” in Survival, 58; or in numerous interviews, e.g. in Earl G. Ingersoll, ed., Margaret Atwood: Conversations.

6. The idea, hinted at by some Atwood critics, that such a prose-lyric hybrid could eventually replace Atwood’s purely poetical work, has been disproved by the more recent publication of Atwood’s superb collection of poems, Morning in the Burned House (1995). Such a suggestion was in any case hardly plausible, considering the versatility of the author.

7. See William French’s summing up in his 1983 review of Murder in the Dark: “not quite a major work but hardly minor as its length might indicate,” n.p.

8. As late as 1996, Patricia Merivale could still refer to Murder in the Dark as “Atwood’s most critically neglected text,” yet also as “one of her most difficult, challenging, and rewarding” (99). Twenty years after the first publication of the earlier collection, relevant literary studies of Murder in the Dark and Good Bones can still be counted almost on the fingers of one hand: Christl Verduyn, “Murder in the Dark”; Lorna Irvine, “Murder and Mayhem”; Pierre Spriet, “Margaret Atwood’s Post-modernism”; Patricia Merivale, “From ‘Bad News’ to ‘Good Bones’” and “Hypocrite Lecteuse!”; and Michel Delville, “Murdering the Text.”

9. See especially Merivale, “Hypocrite Lecteuse!” and “From ‘Bad News’ to ‘Good Bones,’” e.g.: “Atwood has, for the moment, the Baudelairean mode almost to herself in Canadian poetry, as she quite brilliantly demonstrates in Murder in the Dark. Good Bones consolidates her generic monopoly in such prose poems, while extending her range” (Merivale, “From ‘Bad News’ to ‘Good Bones,’” 268). For genre hybridization in general, and specifically in Atwood’s novels, see Coral Ann Howells in Nischik, ed., 139–56.

10. Referring to Baudelaire’s prose poetry in particular, critics have recently pointed out the highly intertextual nature of the prose poem. See Merivale, “Hypocrite Lecteuse!” especially page 100: “a multiplicity of generic allusions, to different kinds of prose narratives, seems characteristic of the prose poem.”

11. For a general overview of parody in Atwood’s works see chapter 5 in Martin Kuester, “Atwood: Parodies from a Feminist Point of View.”

12. This book was published by Doubleday, the publishing house of Atwood’s American publisher, Nan A. Talese, in 1994; the only text in this book not included in the earlier collections is the murder-mystery parody “Simple Murders.”


14. The portrayal of the moon (here as crescent) suggests a wealth of additional allusions (cf. Horst S. Daemmrich and Ingrid Daemmrich 1987, or Elisabeth Frenzel
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1992, under the heading “moon” (“Mond”). The most important are: the moon as symbol of the divine and source of inspiration; the moon as ruler over the element water controls the tides and is the source of life; its reflection in the water at night doubles its brightness; the moon god was regarded as being female or androgynous; connection to fertility, creation, imagination; to emotions, passions, especially love. Concerning the crescent moon: a conventional representation is a female figure on the crescent, as source of life; the crescent moon is traditionally associated with good weather or luck; Archibald MacLeish put it poetologically, “A poem ought to be like a crescent moon” (Frenzel, 539).

15. See an article of mine, “Von guten Knochen und Mord im Dunkeln: Margaret Atwood's inverse Poetik intertexteller Winzigkeit,” published in German in 2002, which bases its argument, in contrast to the present article, exclusively on examples from Good Bones.

16. Although Aloysius Bertrand’s Gaspard de la nuit (1842) is generally considered to be the first sequence of prose poems, its influence was minor in comparison to that of Baudelaire’s Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose (1862) (see Margery A. Evans, Baudelaire and Intertextuality), which became the template for the genre as a whole.

17. I am indebted to my former student Ellen McCarthy for the formulation of this further potential meaning of “service.”

18. Merivale, “Hypocrite Lecteuse!” 102; Evans, Baudelaire and Intertextuality.


20. Quoted in Irvine, 265.

21. Interview with Karla Hammond, 79.