Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

Wilson, Sharon Rose

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Strange Visions: Atwood’s *Interlunar* and Technopoetics

SHANNON HENGEN

But this is Canada, land of contrasts.
Margaret Atwood, “Survival, Then and Now”

[Nature is] a living process which includes opposites: life and death.
Margaret Atwood, *Survival*

[The Coyote . . . brings in another set of story cycles, where there is a resistance and a trickster, producing the opposite of—or something other than—what you thought you meant.
Donna Haraway, “Cyborgs at Large”

Atwood’s volume of poems published in 1984, *Interlunar*, has received little critical attention, although its place in Atwood’s work is significant. Divided into two sections, “Snake Poems” and “Interlunar,” the volume revisits familiar Atwoodian perspectives and imagery but with what might be called a stranger vision. And the volume marks the end of a fairly regular flow of books of poetry beginning in 1967 with *The Circle Game* and including eight other books whose titles are all familiar to Atwoodian scholars (for example, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Power Politics*, and *True Stories*). Eleven years then pass before the appearance of the latest poems, *Morning in the Burned House*, in 1995. Because of the somewhat changed perspective in *Interlunar*, a perspective that could be seen as a kind of conclusion to the
books of poems that precede it, more sustained readings of it are called for, despite its oddity. This chapter, suggestive rather than definitive, will outline both the familiar and the strange.

In *Interlunar* we see the play of contrasts and contrasting imagery that identifies Atwood’s poetry: Stone, tree, moon, and silence, for example, describe a world apart from the human field of language, lust, murder, love, and free will. Figures from classical and popular mythology appear intermittently and interchangeably and attempt to cross between the two worlds. In terms of vision, we see human inability to understand the natural world as both different from and constitutive of humanity, a misunderstanding that results in destruction of both the natural and human worlds. Another way of stating the theme is that human culture, particularly technoscience but also poetry at times, errs in viewing nature from a dominant vantage point, willing culture to overcome. Nature, however, retains its own power. What creeps into Atwood’s poems in *Interlunar* is a sustained suggestion that technoscience represents currently the most obvious cultural activity determined to overcome nature, to eradicate human frailty and loss. These poems become a unique counter-statement to that ideology.

In “Snake Poems,” for example—originally published in a discrete volume in 1983 (by Toronto’s Salamander Press)—the speaker invites us to reconsider the many human values that have been attributed to snakes. They are “the devil in your garden,” she notes ironically (9), including in the poem that follows a list of other “Lies about Snakes”: “that they cause thunder / that they won’t cross ropes, / that they travel in pairs” (10). Alternatively, the most striking feature of snakes to this speaker is precisely that they are “not human”: She muses that “it’s hard to believe in snakes loving” (12). How to describe a nonhuman, a snake, in human language? How to find the trickster’s subject position between apparent opposites?

A figure in another poem, noted below, attempts to learn “the languages of the animals” by eating snake, and by so eating, the figure loses human speech (15–16). In “Psalm to Snake” the speaker intones, “O snake, you are an argument / for poetry” (17), specifically for a poetry that would not impose its culture’s dominant values. We have inadequately understood our natural milieu; poetry in its study of nature should form an argument against false claims of perfectibility made by technoscience. Other books of Atwood’s poems echo and reecho this theme, but in *Interlunar* the commentary moves at times beyond the earth into space, and at those times the poems seem futuristic, linked perhaps to her dystopic fiction of this same time (as other
critics have noted, below). A poem entitled “Valediction: Intergalactic” from the “Interlunar” section sets out a dominant image pattern and its corresponding frame of mind:

[S]o at the end I could see only
the shift between light and dark, and you were
light at first and then dark
and then light and then dark, and I wanted it
to be light all the time . . .

Is this intolerance? Am I
non-human? . . .

. . . Do I prefer
the airless blaze of outer
space to men, even
the beautiful ones?
(43)

Light and dark establish a distinction between human and nonhuman, a distinction that becomes increasingly complicated throughout Interlunar as a poetic vision attempts to inform the clarity of scientific achievement and advancement such as that which took humans into space. Therein lies the strangeness of Atwood’s vision here, for the discourses of science and poetry are ordinarily kept apart. How would poetry and science change were the discourses to mix? How to mix the language of human limitation with that of mastery?

In what can at best be a preliminary comment on the larger issues raised in Interlunar, I will briefly review what critics have said about the volume, and I will discuss some of the poems. Finally, I will make a gesture toward describing what Atwood’s vision entails, and to do so I will draw on the theories of U.S. cultural critic Donna Haraway, who, like Atwood, breaks down arbitrary and entrenched distinctions, particularly those between nature and culture, science and literature. This essay cannot critique the progressivist ideology of technoscience, nor can it re claim poetry as the muted twin, but can only show that such critique and reclamation seem to form Atwood’s strange vision in these poems of the mid-1980s.

Commentators have noted the play of contrasts in these poems. Sharon Wilson names “the darkness of interlunar—the period between old and new moons” (Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale, 230); she continues
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that “death makes possible the persona’s descent and ultimate rebirth” (243), which becomes a “full sun phoenix rebirth” (255). Lawrence W. Norfolk writes: “‘Dark’ and ‘light’ are a positive recipe for closure . . . but it is the betweenness . . . which Atwood describes with accuracy and sympathy” (903). Anne Blott defines the book in terms of its title as “a period of waiting that bridges the sinister and demonic waning moon and the regenerative and creative waxing moon. Thus the moon is both constant and changing.” She further refers to Heraclitus, discussed below, and the idea of “acceptance of unacknowledged contraries” (276).

Both Linda Wagner-Martin and Jill LeBihan discuss Interlunar in terms of Atwood’s novel that appeared in the mid-1980s, The Handmaid’s Tale, and both conclude that the poems are more despairing. Wagner-Martin calls them a “stark testimony to disaster” (81), and yet, LeBihan reminds us, in Atwood’s work we must remember the “impossibility of a clear division between the light and dark” (105). Dinah Birch links Interlunar with the novel Cat’s Eye, which she describes as making “closer contact with Atwood’s gift as a poet than any of the six earlier novels.” Connecting poems and novel explicitly by means of the recurring image of light, Birch continues that “like cats, we need to make the most of the limited light we have. ‘It’s old light, and there’s not much of it. But it’s enough to see by’” (3)—the concluding lines of Cat’s Eye.

Karen F. Stein directs us helpfully to the book’s cover: “Atwood’s watercolor for the cover represents light rather than darkness; it is a reflection of a red sun (or moon) in the still water of a pale blue-gray lake” (120). About the “Interlunar” section, she writes that its three parts “delineate a journey from darkness to light and explore poetry’s power to heal or console” (120). “Poetry may provide a momentary solace,” she explains further, “but it is grounded in knowledge of suffering and death” (121). That very grounding, I would argue, assures us of our humanity and if it does not give solace, it at least reminds us that we are not machines.

Concerning Atwood’s latest volume of poems, Morning in the Burned House, Coral Ann Howells writes: “[J]ust as the light of morning at the beginning of the poem emerges from the mourning process, so the ending focusses not on the ashes of a fire’s aftermath but on ‘incandescence’” (144). Inclusion in Interlunar of the poem entitled “The Burned House,” cited below, links the two volumes explicitly. Writing about Atwood’s early poetry, Colin Nicholson comments on the absolute faith in science of many of the early, male poetic personae: “In
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language that drily accepts technological mastery as in some ways superior to human aptitudes, Atwood presents her male figure as blind not only to his own motivation but necessarily refusing to interrogate those attitudes to the natural world which produced his maimed state” (16). The speaker in Interlunar would understand clearly this failure of the discourses of technoscience and poetry to address one another. Eli Mandel and George Woodcock both note a discourse that Atwood’s poetry seems to posit in opposition to technoscience. Mandel writes: “Scarcely a poem of Atwood’s does not in some way allude to magic or sorcery” (60). And he asks: “Does Atwood use magic as a means of political comment?” (63). Woodcock notes Atwood’s speakers’ “intuitive wisdom that in the last resort we will accept the irrational as truer than the rational” (141).

The critics thus establish a method of reading Interlunar by inviting us to look for contrasts of light and dark; hints of disaster and despair; magic, sorcery, and the irrational alongside dreams of technological mastery of the natural world. Canadianist literary critic Diana M. A. Relke has argued that Canadian women poets overall, and Atwood in particular, have consistently opposed the view of nature promoted by Northrop Frye and described as the “deep terror” myth” (31). Relke writes that “Canada may well have produced an environment conducive to the development of alternative myths of nature, myths informed by self-reflexivity and a sensitivity to the feminine. . . . I . . . suggest that these alternative myths constitute an epistemology of knowledge which operates as a corrective to the hierarchical and oppositional model of nature identified by Frye” (31–32). Atwood’s cultural heritage posits nature as monster, but her own sensibility and that of other female Canadian poets, Relke argues, takes other views. In the closing lines of “Snake Poems” the speaker advises following “The Blue Snake,” who will ask you “why you are here” and will then direct you to “a river / you know you must follow home” (23). Some reconciliation occurs with the darkness that is nature.

The natural world would seem to hold promise for both poets and scientists as repository of necessary knowledge, but the two perspectives bring such contrasting methods to the study of nature that their observations are certain to clash. For science to acknowledge its ultimate powerlessness over suffering, loss, and death would seriously challenge its project. To do so, science would need to ally itself with poetic thinking, and that would be strange indeed, rather along the lines of seeing this essay published in a biology journal. But poetry too must not abandon science, and must resist merely overturning the
hierarchy by placing itself above crass technoscientific ideology and its popular values.

Consider light and dark, central images in *Interlunar*, as presumed opposites linked to more and less satisfying claims about nature. Light carries significance for us in unaccountable ways; we talk about its quality in certain seasons, certain places as though our perceptions of those seasons and places were molded by it. The dark holds similar powers. Light and dark could be understood technoscientifically rather than associatively. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, light is described as “the natural agent (electromagnetic radiation of wavelength between about 390 and 740 mm) that stimulates sight and makes things visible” (685); dark, not surprisingly, is defined as “absence of light” (293). But was Emily Dickinson imagining light as electromagnetic radiation when she wrote “There’s a certain Slant of light, / Winter Afternoons— / That oppresses” (118)? More to the point, do Atwood’s personae in *Interlunar* consider only the technoscientific properties of light and its absence when discerning their own humanity?

The discourse of poetry can seem as meaningful as that of science when studying Atwood’s uses of light and dark. At a time when technoscientific ways of thinking dominate, reading poetry about natural phenomena through what might be called poetic rather than scientific methodology appears necessary, for explanations of how a certain slant of light might oppress do not come entirely from technoscience. Something like wisdom is also at work, at least as consistent and meaningful over time as the discourse of science, and Atwood’s speakers point toward it. Darkness may not in fact imply the absence of light, and light may not always make things visible, as the dictionary definitions would have us believe. Such a perspective sees the poetic and the scientific properties of things simultaneously.

In “After Heraclitus,” Atwood’s speaker refers to what we might call the technopoetics informing this volume—“All nature is a fire / we burn in and are / renewed” (*Interlunar*, 20)—deriving from the thought of Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 500 B.C.), who founded a school of philosophy based in the concept that “the world had its origin in fire and would end in fire” (*Norton Anthology*, 430). The writing of Gerard Manley Hopkins is brought to mind by Atwood’s title, particularly his “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” where he asserts that “nature’s bonfire burns on” (l. 9, *Norton Anthology*, 430). In “God’s Grandeur,” Hopkins writes, “And for all this, nature is never spent” (*Norton Anthology*, 427). Such thinking is not entirely systematized observation of a phenomenon, but more
nearly imagistic rendering of an intuition that cannot be fully expressed. Images and the inarticulate join with data of nature to form a technopoetic view; thus the irrational and felt are given words, speaking to basic human need.

Consider now the varied appearances of light and dark and their interconnections in *Interlunar*. In one of the volume’s last poems, the speaker recalls a poetics of nature whereby fire continues to burn when not seen. “The Burned House” describes the fire that consumed the place to which the speaker has returned many years later and where

I stretch my new hands into the flames
which burned here and are still burning
slowly and unseen: that hesitation
which passes over the flesh
like breath ruffling water,
that withering,
that shimmer.

(93)

Unseen flame turns to a visible “shimmer,” and the burned house, which seems destroyed, becomes instead part of a continual process of decay and renewal that persists beyond ordinary human acknowledgement. In such a poetics of nature, darkness itself is reclaimed. The volume ends with the title poem, “Interlunar,” which in turn closes:

I wish to show you the darkness
you are so afraid of.

Trust me. This darkness
is a place you can enter and be
as safe in as you are anywhere;

The lake . . .
doubles everything, . . .
. . . even the darkness
that you can walk so long in
it becomes light.

(102–3)
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Darkness figures slightly differently as the abode of gods in the first section of the book, “Snake Poems.” In “Eating Snake,” the speaker supposes that

All peoples are driven
  to the point of eating their gods
  after a time; it’s the old greed
  for a plateful of outer space, that craving for darkness.

(13)

The white snake is believed to appear “at the dark of the moon” and bring on human craving for it.

There was a man who tried it . . .

He went blind in an instant.
Light rose in him . . .

Human speech left him . . .

Beware of the white snake, says the story.
Choose ignorance.

(15–16)

While part of nature, humans are also defined by a culture that cannot simply be abandoned. And the moon itself does the work of this wise thinking as white against black, and white in black at “the dark of the moon.” *Interlunar*, the book’s title, suggests those changes between and within.

In “Quattrocento,” also in the first section of poems, the Garden is set in “still unending noon” (19) from which the Tempter offers release and “the possibility of death” (18). The Fall implies specifically that “you / must learn to see in darkness” (19). Once banished from paradise,

Here you can praise the light,
  having so little of it:

it’s the death you carry in you
  . . . that makes the world
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shine for you
as it never did before.

Light is praised on earth because it is not “unending noon” here, because dark comes with its intimations of death (perhaps explaining why Dickinson’s weak light of a winter afternoon can oppress). In the volume’s next section, the three-part “Interlunar,” a healer can see in goldenrod and purple asters “the light spilling out . . . / unasked for
and unused” (39), as though the powers of light were misunderstood. In “Valediction, Intergalactic,” the speaker admits, as quoted above, that “I wanted it / to be light all the time” (43). Not knowing how to value light, not acknowledging its link to darkness, diminishes our humanity; to understand the play of light and dark is to begin to see how culture and nature interact.

The moon appears again in a culminating poem of section 1 of “Interlunar,” “A Sunday Drive,” set in Bombay, India, a city appearing to be in a state of living decay to the onlooker who avers that “The moon is responsible for all this, / goddess of increase / and death” (51). Moonlight’s mysterious netherworld must somehow be accounted for amid praise for the bright clarities of day; both shape nature. The broken figure in “Letter from the House of Questions,” a torture prison, prays by writing in the dust of the prison floor: “I would spend the rest of my life / in a house corner, in the sun” (76) simply. In the final poem of section 2 of “Interlunar,” entitled “Reading a Political Thriller beside a Remote Lake in the Canadian Shield,” the speaker sees sunset and moonrise as motiveless, enduring, and pure in comparison with the plot of the political thriller, although the “lake is dying” in the last stanza because of the greed and “viciousness” that inform the “real world” of the thriller (79–80). We see that just as technoscience has not redeemed the greed, violence, and destitution that comprise much of the human world, poetry has been unable to make such proclamations effectively.

The piece “The Words Continue Their Journey” in the volume’s final section treats poets and poetry, reminding us that poets have “the sort of thing / we think of as a voice,” which they use to define being human (82). Their journey has taken a wrong turn; they are stranded in “the full glare / of the sun” and also, simultaneously, on “this moon
terrain / where everything is dry and perishing and so / vivid, . . . van-ishing out of sight” (83). A conflation of sun and moonlight is tied imagistically in this poem with the disappearance of poetry itself. Yet we are assured, as in an earlier poem, that
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each thing
burns over and over and we will
too, even the lake’s
on fire now.
(“The Sidewalk,” 88)

Another kind of offering, like prayer, comes in “The White Cup,” where “This is the one thing I wanted to give you, / this quiet shining / which is a constant entering, a going into” (89). In “The Light,” the poet asks:

Where does the light go when the door closes? . . .

Nowhere, you say. And that is
where the light shines endlessly, full
and inexhaustible. It shines nowhere.
(92)

In this volume, whose predominant color setting is the half-light of the moon, darkness pervades while somehow, inexplicably in terms of technoscientific discourse, the light also “shines nowhere,” “inexhaustible” and “full.” To allow light to imply only power and darkness only the irrational and inarticulate is to misunderstand both. It is as though in our historical phase, the predominance of the discourse of science prevents expression of its other side, its poetry. But both can be renewed by their interconnections, were a voice to appear to articulate them.

Such a bridging figure might be U.S. cultural critic Donna Haraway, professor of science studies, feminist theory, and women’s studies, through such works as *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, should she discuss women’s poetry rather than feminist science fiction. Haraway explains how nature has come to be described as a product of culture:

In the 1940s there was quite a revolution in the science of ecology. The new ecosystem biology basically argued that the ecological object of knowledge was not the community of plants and animals, that the ecosystem meant both the living and the *nonliving* components of the system. . . . So you would watch the nitrogen cycle, you would watch the heat budget. That was an epistemological revolution in ecology. . . .
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[T]he ecological object of knowledge can no longer rely on the silent structured division between nature and culture. The ecological object of knowledge also includes human history and actions. . . . The nature/culture division has broken down for political reasons—because of decolonization, because of the intensity of the ecological crisis, because of the threats of destruction from technoscience. ("Overhauling," 81)

To repeat: “The nature/culture division has broken down.” And now, Haraway asks, is a new sense of community possible beyond Darwinian thinking, in which nonhuman beings can be granted agency, and in which no subject is privileged as innocent? “Margaret Atwood’s project,” writes Diana Relke in the article noted above, is “to bridge the gap between . . . culture and nature” (44). The ground between human and nonhuman, occupied by cyborgs and coyotes in Haraway’s view and by revisionist, trickster poets in Atwood’s, describes the most likely place for wisdom to emerge, strange as it may seem. Dominant ideologies such as technoscience in our time oversimplify and so diminish what they attempt to explain, inhibiting agency.

In an essay that makes direct reference to Atwood’s fiction (307), Haraway describes why new articulations and communities of meaning are crucial:

Real women and real animals cannot escape their complex relations to the signifying systems and histories of domination that constructed Woman, the Primitive, Race, Nature, Animal, the Other to Man. But not being able to escape these histories does not make real women of all colors unable to reinvent and to relive the stories on other terms. Knowing that we are embedded in inherited fields of knowledge and power does not disqualify any of us from working to construct other, more liberatory, conditions for our loves. ("Monkeys," 296)

Restricting herself to the study of science fiction when she turns to literature, Haraway has not yet speculated on how a cyborg feminist critic might conjoin imagistic and systematic thought. But about her own notorious essay “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” Haraway says: “I think it’s an example of how writing itself is a collective, often unconscious process. . . . Many readings are possible, many readings included within it. I often find the essay being used to carry on other agendas” ("Overhauling,"
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66–67). That Haraway describes writing as unconscious distances her somewhat from conventional technoscientific discourse and inches her toward the poetic, and on this uncommon cultural terrain where technoscience gives way to poetry, Atwood and Haraway meet. In such areas of “betweenness,” gestured toward by Lawrence W. Norfolk in his review of *Interlunar*, quoted above, we find real meaning. When the future of poetry itself is the issue, as it seems to be in *Interlunar*, alongside the ability of any discourse conventionally seen as outside of technoscience to address technoscience, the writing seems timely and significant indeed. That Atwood publishes a book of poems after *Interlunar*, quelling suspicions that she abandoned poetry during the eleven-year breach, may suggest her own renewed belief in the future of the poem.