

The Sword is Mightier Than the Pen: An Interview with Margaret Atwood

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In this article, Aaron James Wendland asks world-renowned author, Margaret Atwood, about: the power of poetry and literature; the relationship between fiction and political commentary; the social and political impact of her dystopian and anti-authoritarian work; modern utopias and the role of hope in utopian writing; her undergraduate studies in logic and the history of philosophy; and the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.

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This interview was conducted as part of a benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy that Aaron James Wendland organized in March 2023 at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto.¹ The benefit conference was designed to provide financial support for academic and civic initiatives at Kyiv Mohyla Academy and thereby counteract the destabilizing impact that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had on Ukrainian higher education and civilian life. The interview has been lightly edited for the purpose of publication in *Studia Philosophica Estonica* and the original interview can be found on the Munk School's YouTube channel under the heading: "What Good is Philosophy? - A Benefit Conference for Ukraine."²

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Aaron James Wendland: It is a great honor to introduce Margaret Atwood. Margaret is the author of eighteen novels, including *Life Before Man*, *The*

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¹ For details more details about this benefit conference, see: <https://civic.ukma.edu.ua/benefit/>.

² For an archive of the lectures, see: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBoanhrBnRErZb1Xoh_BzrH4iaLw9Q6HX&si=IXawYDGA5jP-L5Ua.

Handmaid's Tale, and *The Heart Goes Last*. She has also written eighteen books of poetry, eleven works of non-fiction, nine collections of short stories, eight children's books, and two graphic novels. She has won numerous literary awards, including the Booker Prize, the Franz Kafka Prize, and the Governor General's Award, and she is a founder of the Griffin Poetry Prize as well as the Writer's Trust of Canada. Margaret, thank you very much for participating in this benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy. If you don't mind me asking, I have a few questions for you.

Margaret Atwood: It's a pleasure to be here, Aaron, and I look forward to your questions.

AJW: Unlike journalists, novelists are neither bound by the truth nor obliged to cover current affairs. However, some of your novels do grapple with contemporary social, political, and ethical themes. *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, is set against the background of a climate crisis and it clearly deals with issues of power and oppression. With that said, to what end do you engage in social and political commentary? And in keeping with the theme of this benefit conference for the Ukrainian academy, what good do you think your writing has done and what good can it still do?

MA: Well, what a question. So, novels are about people. Even if they say they're about rabbits, they're always about people. And novels always involve time: something happens, something else happens, and then something else happens. And if nothing happens, we stop reading. So, what can those things that happen be?

They can be events that take place within families, but families live somewhere. They have a place and the place that they have has certain conditions. So, when you're writing a novel, you're always describing people in time and place. And when that happens to be a place in a crisis of one kind or another, the individual characters cannot isolate themselves from the crisis that is going on all around them. If it's a flood, they're going to have to do something about the flood. They will react to it in some way. Either they will sit in their attic and say, "I hope somebody rescues me", or they'll build a raft or send up an SOS. They'll do something.

If that crisis is an invasion, a war, everybody in that place is going to be caught up in it, some way or another. And then events happen. Stuff unfolds. Conditions change because time is involved. It's always involved in a novel. Time may not be involved in a lyric poem or a prayer, but it's always involved in a novel. Henry James' biographer, Leon Edel, said, "If it's a novel, there's a clock in it". So, it is time, people, events, place, all interacting.

When I'm writing a novel about a place in crisis, issues of power and control have to come into it. Similarly with short stories. And if there's been a crisis in that place and in that time, and you're writing about a time after it, all of the people who have been through that crisis are going to have been affected by it. It's inevitable. Let's say that novels are about what used to be rather vaguely called the "human condition". But more specifically, they're about people in a time in a place reacting to events and to one another. You can't help it. There are going to be issues of power and control, no matter what you do.

Now the second part of your question was about the good. Yes, I was a philosophy student. Yes, I've read my Plato. Yes, it's problematic, because who says what's good? You're always going to have arguments about what is good. Those are arguments worth having because if we're going to have any kind of a social policy at all we have to have some notion of what we think is good. When I was a philosophy student, the professors were all into logical positivism, which didn't interest me. Ethics and aesthetics interested me, but they were not thought very highly of in philosophy departments in the 1960s. So, I switched to English, in which matters of ethics and aesthetics were much more prominent.

As for my writing, it is hard to tell what sort of "good" it will do, and it's going to depend very much on who is defining "good". But let us say that my opinion is that "good" is an open democracy. Let me add that my idea of "bad" is totalitarianism of whatever kind, and I'm old enough to have seen a number of totalitarian regimes come and go. Having been born in 1939, I spent my early childhood in World War II and have seen the effects of it ever since. You can trace the knock-on effects of that war indefinitely; we're seeing some of them now. Catastrophes happen, and then they have lasting effects. They rearrange time, place, and people. Novelists deal with all of those things.

That said, I take exception to your statement that novelists don't have to tell the truth. They have to tell the truth in some way. The names may not be real. But if you say Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo, that's a factual error. Unless you say right at the beginning that you're writing a piece of speculative fiction in which Napoleon did win the Battle of Waterloo, people will yell at you quite a bit and so they should.

AJW: Perhaps we can follow up on this by getting into your own work a bit more. When you're writing something like *The Handmaid's Tale*, you clearly know who or what is the target of your criticism, in this case, authoritarian regimes. Does that mean you are writing for the sake of making that criticism public in a new, creative, or accessible way? And are you doing so with

the aim of questioning or destabilizing authoritarian regimes?

MA: I had a few theoretical questions in my mind when I started writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, and one of my theoretical questions in 1984 was: if the United States were to become a totalitarian regime, what kind of totalitarianism would it be? On the theory of Aztec pyramids, or, say, Mesoamerican pyramids, they never tore down an existing pyramid; they built a layer on top of it. So, I asked myself: what is the foundational layer of the United States of America? The foundational layer of the United States of America is 17th-century puritanism, and then you have an Enlightenment layer that goes on top of that at the end of the 18th century. But underneath it, there's this puritanical foundation. And by the way, it wasn't a democracy. That puritanism of the 17th century was not what we would call a democracy, and there's always a sort of tidal pull to revert to what was there before. This potential reversion was one of the ideas behind *The Handmaid's Tale*.

But let's turn to Russia: totalitarianism run by czars. The early revolution was rather communitarian and chaotic. Chaotic, especially in the area of who is married to whom and who takes care of the kids, total chaos. So, they just needed to try and get the trains to run on time and they had to clamp down on some of the power struggles. As a result, Stalin wins, and you get a new czar. And you get a new secret police, which is a lot like the old secret police, except more effective. How do you make sense of all these changes? And how do people really change? It's hard to say, but not impossible, and often these changes are dictated by nature itself.

Take the Toltecs, the Aztecs, the Mayans. Some of the changes that happened with these civilizations were kicked off by climate change, that is, prolonged drought. If you ever experience prolonged drought in an agricultural community, things are going to change. Leaders might say to the people: "You were supposed to be sacrificing to the gods and it was supposed to make everything happen the way it should." But ultimately if leaders fail to deliver on the basics, people will overthrow the regime, which is what happened in a number of places in Mesoamerica. If a totalitarian regime really messes up, there's going to be a strong impulse to get rid of it and try again.

AJW: Interesting. So, in some ways you are downplaying the power of human creativity to change or transform totalitarian regimes. We may write dystopias. We may criticize. Yet in the end, the downfall of political regimes has more to do with phenomena in the natural world and less to do with our agency. Is that right?

MA: Writers don't create conditions for change. They rarely create condi-

tions at all. They reflect conditions. They rearrange fictional conditions, but they have no actual power. “The pen is mightier than the sword” is true only if all the people with the swords die and the books remain in print. I’m sorry to tell you that the sword is mightier than the pen. And although the pen has some influence, which is why totalitarian regimes want to get rid of writers who aren’t toeing the line, plus musicians, plus anybody else who’s not doing the party song and dance. These artists and dissidents have no actual power. They have influence, but not power. I cannot wave my wand and order an army into battle. I do not have that power. And if I did, I don’t think I’d be very good at wielding it.

AJW: Your mention of Stalin and totalitarian regimes leads to my next question. In a recent interview with the *CBC*, you explained that you write dystopias rather than utopias, because dystopias are far more appropriate for the times we are living through. Given the political instability that characterized the Trump era, the outbreak of Covid-19, and Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, I understand why you stick to dystopias. Yet I see classic utopias, say, Plato’s *Republic*, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, and Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, as written in the spirit of optimism and hope – hope that a better world is possible. As it turns out, I saw a similar spirit of optimism and hope amongst the Ukrainian civilian and military population when I was reporting from Kyiv in the summer of 2022, and I wonder what you make of “hope”? What role has hope played in your writing and work? And can the cultivation of hope, possibly through a 21st century version of Wells’ *A Modern Utopia*, serve as a bulwark against the mounting crises we face?

MA: Let me begin with a little background about utopias, before getting to hope. I was a Victorianist once upon a time, and the Victorians created a huge number of utopias. In fact, the Victorians produced so many utopias that Gilbert and Sullivan wrote a parody of them called “Utopia Limited”. In any event, the Victorians wrote fictional utopias; some of them quite bad; others became classics. But they had real utopias, too. And a lot of real utopians moved to North America because they could get cheap land. I followed their histories with great interest, as you might expect. A lot of these utopias went pear-shaped because they weren’t very practical.

I think my favorite example was called: “Fruitlands”. It was a bunch of transcendentalists who were going to live on nothing but fruit, plus vegetables that grew upwards. So, no potatoes. Vegetables that grew upwards because that was an aspirational direction. The vegetables that grew downwards were too earthy. The problem was that none of them knew anything about growing fruit. Or anything else, as it turned out. How long did that

last? About six months. If you're going to have a utopia, you really need to start with the material world.

That is why I helped start a program called: "Practical Utopias". We recently assembled 200 people from around the world, all ages from 18 to 75, with many different vocations and interests. We hired facilitators to make sure they didn't kill one another as they disputed. We hired illustrators to draw what they had done. The participants were given a mandate to create a practical utopia that was carbon neutral or carbon negative, scalable, that is, cheap enough so everybody can do it, and attractive enough so they would want to do it, meaning not everybody is eating tofu and dressing in old flour sacks.

The participants pitched in, and they first worked on the material world: housing, transport, clothing, food, disposal of dead bodies, an important thing. They came up with some very interesting plans and ideas, having done the research. They had a lot of research tools, and a lot of new materials are now being invented, new energy modes. This is all very hopeful.

Then they were tasked with settling on social arrangements. Who's going to make the decisions? How will you arrange that? Do you want a democracy? What kind? Are you going to allow religion? How? What are you going to do about police forces? Because not everybody is going to follow the rules. If they did, it would be the first time in human history that has ever happened.

The participants had to make hard decisions about these things, and they were pretty good at just about everything, except they hedged a bit on the police. They didn't want to think that anybody was going to behave badly. That is the problem with utopian romanticism. They generally think that everybody's going to be good. That's very hopeful.

I would like to think I am a bit more realistic about human nature. Hope, however, is a part of the built-in human toolkit. If you did not have hope, which means the facility of anticipating a better future than the one you're sitting in right now, then nothing happens. If you feel hopeless, nothing happens. So, hope is a necessary precondition for positive change, but it doesn't always work out, as you know. As it is, I've set a fairly low bar for our practical utopias: as long as people aren't actively killing each other at the end of the project, then things aren't too bad.

AJW: So, is your involvement in these practical utopias ultimately an expression of your hope?

MA: Oh, I'm a very hopeful person. I was also the first participant in the Future Library of Norway, which started in 2014. It's a Sleeping Beauty story.

A forest will grow for 100 years outside Oslo. In each of those years, a different writer from around the world, in every language that they use, will submit a secret manuscript made out of words. It could be anything. You're not allowed to say what it is. It could be a novel, a short story, a letter, a laundry list, one word, a poem, an essay, or a film script. All very secret, only two copies. You take it to Norway, and it gets put into the Future Library of Norway. And in 2114, all of the boxes will be opened. Enough trees will be cut from the forest, which will have grown, and the paper will be made to print the Future Library of Norway, assuming there will still be people, a Norway, an Oslo, a library, and that the people will still be interested in reading. Think how hopeful that is!

AJW: I reckon we are running out of time, so here's my final question. In the *Republic*, Plato writes about an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. The quarrel is over the which genre should be prioritized when raising citizens of the polis. Plato is clearly critical of Homer's mythmaking and storytelling, and Plato believes the dialectical and argumentative style of philosophy should be the basis of education in an ideal city. For what it's worth, I always thought the distinction Plato made between poetry and philosophy was far too sharp – not least, because Plato's philosophy is itself filled with mythmaking and storytelling. But as a poet yourself, I wonder what you make of the distinction between poetry and philosophy? And given that you, like Plato, are interested in questions about the good life for human beings, I wonder if your writing has been influenced by the history of philosophy, and if there is a particular philosopher that helped shape your understanding of the world?

MA: Okay, in a negative way, yes, like not this one, not this one, not this one. But just to make things narrower, there is a sharp distinction between poetry and logic. In logic, A cannot be both itself and non-A at the same time, whereas in poetry, A is routinely not-A and itself at the same time through simile and metaphor. But let's go back to basics. What is it that human beings do as a matter of course? You can see pretty much what human beings do as a matter of course by looking at what small children do as a matter of course. They all learn languages, they're musical, they're rhythmic, they jump up and down, and from about the age of one, they understand stories. Even before they can say words, they know that on this page, the cow is swimming in the river and on the next page, it's gone out of the river. They know that there's this followed by that, followed by that, which is what a story is.

Human beings are innately storytellers. Whether those stories are good stories or bad stories or truthful stories or lies, we understand the world

through stories more easily than we understand the world through philosophical disputation. We are all prone to argue. Encounter a seven-year-old, you'll find a little lawyer who has all the reasons why they should have an extra ice cream cone all laid out. So yes, logic and reasoning and arguing are things that human beings do. And since we tell stories and philosophize, I see no reason to kick one out and prioritize the other exclusively. These are human activities. And I think that the next question is, instead of saying we should only do storytelling or we should only do logical argumentation, why don't we teach people how to do both of those things in the best way possible?