



ATWOOD, Margaret. *The Heart Goes Last*. London: Virago, 2016. 419p.¹

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Submetido em 6 e aprovado em 15 de fevereiro de 2018.

Margaret Atwood (1939-), without the slightest shadow of a doubt, is the most revered and celebrated Canadian author, not only in Canada but worldwide. Her wide reach and recognition are mirrored on her wealth of national and international awards garnered in countries as diverse as Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Macedonia, Spain,

Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States; and also on her equally large number of honorary degrees from several universities in North America and overseas. She has acquired the status of both literary celebrity³ and highbrow writer to such an extent that her books are all at once best-sellers and objects of academic scrutiny. She is the sort of prolific writer one is ever likely to come across that has held both critical and popular appeal; a feat for few.

As observed by Howells (2006, p. 1), “[...] the combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision [...] is the hallmark of Atwood’s literary production.” Said writerly output spans across five decades, since the 1960s, in a variety of literary domains, namely fiction, non-fiction, literary criticism, and poetry. She has penned a shitload⁴ of books, among which are novels, short story collections, children’s books, graphic novels, and critical essays on writing and Canadian literature. More recently, she has also authored some episodes for the TV series adaptations of two of her novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Alias Grace* (1996). She was the first writer to contribute to the *Future Library Project* thought out by Scottish conceptual artist

Katie Paterson, in which every year, beginning in 2014, a writer is to contribute one text to an anthology that will be published in a hundred years' time. That makes 2114 the year when Margaret's manuscript *Scribbler Moon* among other writers' texts will be disclosed to the world in print format with paper made out of 1,000 pine trees recently planted in Oslo's Nordmarka forest in Norway. As forests go, she is an active environmentalist and political commentator who frequently uses Twitter to convey her views and concerns, and to interact with her bunch of followers. She has got a finger in every pie, then. One can only hope she keeps up the good work for many years to come.

As to *The Heart Goes Last* (2016), it bears an unmistakable resemblance to other Atwoodian dystopian novels, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The MaddAddam Trilogy*, which comprises *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). These books, which commonly fall within the category of speculative fiction, speculate about the future based on present evidences. The interplay of themes often generates subcategories such as climate fiction, dystopian fiction, and feminist speculative

fiction. Regardless of these specificities, humanity is doomed, society has come unstuck, and catastrophe has set in. This is the premise from which her spellbinding and thought-provoking dystopias stem. What is worse is that humans are the perpetrators of such doom; no cosmic or natural disaster to exempt humankind from its share of responsibility. If natural disasters do occur, they are triggered by human action.

The reader who is already acquainted with those other dystopias is certainly going to perceive their waves rippling through *The Heart Goes Last* (hereafter referred to as THGL). Political, environmental, sexual, and women issues, for instance, are common across Atwood's dystopias and novels. Another common trait, more of a literary device really, is the presence of character's voices that haunt, instruct, mock and pester the leading characters. In THGL, for instance, Charmaine's Grandma Win's voice accompanies her throughout the whole novel; clearly a voice from happier, safer times, which makes Charmaine wish her to just piss off.

As awards go, the *Kitschies Red Tentacle* award was bestowed upon Atwood

for THGL for most progressive, intelligent, and entertaining novel of the year that contains elements of the speculative or fantastic in 2015. This is a telling prize for a novel that depicts an all too plausible near future for humankind with characteristic tongue in cheek. It embraces new ideas and changes with sheer humour and confidence. Readers are likely to catch themselves grinning gleefully while reading the novel; and this is when not actually laughing out loud. If one laughs, though, one does so at one's own peril, for it is bound to be a bittersweet laugh. Despite the flippant tone, in each hilarious passage an undercurrent of impending doom lurks.

While the novel is undoubtedly funny, it contains nevertheless far too many horrors already happening in real life to keep readers laughing for long. These horrors include organ harvesting, the use of babies' blood as a likely rejuvenating method, sex slaves, and sex robots. Its jest is only in the telling, not in its subject matter. She is clearly taking the piss out of human tragedy, but not for its own sake. Underneath all her drollery, she is drop-dead earnest. Indeed, it is playfulness fraught with foreboding, a cautionary tale for our troubled times,

in which the human component in its multifarious leanings is at stake.

Through the emotional entanglements of the lustful, fickle and mischievous characters, Atwood has engendered the perfect stage for stinging social satire. Society is falling apart and along with it are its citizens, who often find themselves in tight spots, torn between hard choices. Through the lenses of a married couple, Charmaine and Stan, Atwood meanders along moral dilemmas. For each quandary they face they are required to pluck up their moral courage and choose their own course, which they fail to do. And once their choices are not their own, they seem to fail by default.

The capitalist system in the United States has collapsed, and its citizens are left to chance. So Charmain and Stan decide to sign up for a socioeconomic experiment that is advertised on TV as the ultimate quick fix. Under the name of Consilience (Con + Resilience)/Positron Prison, a corporation builds a walled-up city where people are supposed to be residents in comfortable houses for a month and then switch over to being inmates in a prison for another, without ever meeting their alternate couple. In this city everybody is

a respectful civilian and a criminal. They are enticed by the promise of living what is advertised as a meaningful life, ‘maximum possible happiness’, which means “[...] gainful employment, three wholesome meals a day, a lawn to tend, a hedge to trim, the assurance that you were contributing to the general good, and a toilet that flushed” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 56). Who would say no to that? What with being unemployed, not a penny to their name, living off what they could get inside a car, fleeing gangs of thieves on the rampage, they can hardly be blamed for wanting better life conditions. Who would aspire otherwise? But does comfort make for a meaningful life? The thing is that all that glitters is not gold, and, as it is often the case with too much of a good thing, here lies the rub: they cannot get out of Consilience. Soon enough complications ensue and they realise Consilience is not all it is cracked up to be. Behind the city’s glittering wholesome facade lies a scam to the benefit of few at the expense of many. Does it ring a bell?

They are also allured by the notion of self-improvement, of developing one’s potential to the fullest, of reinventing oneself at will. “Be the person you’ve always wanted to be!” (ATWOOD, 2016,

p. 36), says Consilience’s advert. In an age in which people feel like choosing their identities as if trying on different clothing styles, no wonder anyone would leap at the prospect without second thoughts. Then again, while impersonated as Elvis Presley, Stan wonders: “Is that all we are? he thinks. Unmistakable clothing, a hairstyle, a few exaggerated features, a gesture?” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 296).

Their realisation of Consilience’s dark underbelly comes too late. But even then they attempt to turn a blind eye to all that; after all, they have a house, a job, and are well-fed. Why bother with nagging worries? What is it to them? It follows that their lives are steeped in self-deception. They are constantly trying to frame their actions in a better light, always wrestling with their small voices, which makes for some funny passages as in “Charmaine, Charmaine, whispers the small voice in her head. You are such a fraud. So are you, she tells it” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 199). For instance, after murdering a man, or rather ‘repurposing’ him, as Consilience sugar-coating lingo would have it, Charmain claims to her knitting circle to have had a perfect day! She firmly believes she is doing her duty for the greater good. What

she is actually doing is waving aside the ‘big-picture worries’, pretending not to notice what is right under her nose. It all leads to a central question of the novel: “If you do bad things for reasons we’ve been told are good, does it make you a bad person?” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 413). And once again she chooses not to dwell on it for long, naturally.

More often than not, they are not willing to give up their comfort for what would be the right choices. Instead, they choose the easier and more comfortable options, because in *Consilience* choosing the right course of action also means treading the path to dusty death. In their attempt to leave *Consilience* schemes are hatched, emotions are faked, all spontaneity is undermined, and every move is carefully rehearsed. They hurtle through a madcap chapter of accidents in which there is no lily-white character; every single one of them is capable of deceiving for the pettiest reasons. They are nobody’s role models as acknowledged by Atwood when thanking her husband Graeme Gibson “[...] who, though always an inspiration, did not inspire any of the characters in this book. And that’s a good thing” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 419). Their chaotic

journey tests their loyalties and forces them to prove how far they would go to juggle their duties in *Consilience/Positron* with their own desires in such a way that the personal and the political intertwine. Overall, Atwood has envisaged a world of fabrications, where everything is man-made, where people eat ‘undifferentiated foodstuffs’, where the truth is likened to botulism, where enjoying a flashy lifestyle is all that matters. One cannot even shun the feeling that the characters are actually makeshift humans; or else all too human, wallowed in shallowness, unable to endure the consequences of their choices. It is a world that stands as an indictment of potentially noxious human tendencies in our own society at large.

The combination of choices and the freedom to make them forms a thread that runs throughout the novel’s weave till the very end. In his supposed deathbed, for instance, Stan muses on the choices he has made in life; a passage that is worth quoting in full:

I should have worked out more, he thinks. I should have done everything more. I should have cut loose from... from what? Looking back on his life, he sees himself spread out on the earth like a giant covered in

tiny threads that have held him down. Tiny threads of petty cares and small concerns, and fears he took seriously at the time. Debts, timetables, the need for money, the longing for comfort; the earworm of sex, repeating itself over and over like a neural feedback loop. He's been the puppet of his own constricted desires.

He shouldn't have let himself be caged in here, walled off from freedom. But what does freedom mean anymore? And who had caged him and walled him off? He'd done it himself. So many small choices. The reduction of himself to a series of numbers stored by others, controlled by others. He should have left the disintegrating cities, fled the pinched, cramped life on offer there. Broken out of the electronic net, thrown away all the passwords, gone forth to range over the land, a gaunt wolf howling at midnight.

But there isn't any land to range over any more. There isn't any place without fences, roadways, networks. Or is there? And who would go with him, be with him? (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 205).

It is a bleak realisation that he has been a prisoner throughout his entire life and that genuine freedom can only be found in the wild. But is there such a place? The wild? Hasn't all the world been charted already? Can there be any sort of escape? And if there is, are we willing to make our choices and own up to them?

THGL is as witty as it gets; highly readable, comic, pacy, unsettling, and spine-chilling all at once. Although it is not as sombre as other Atwood's dystopias, it is likely to set readers pondering on a great many issues, such as moral responsibility, identity, personal freedom, politics, social media and communication, biotechnology, social surveillance, love, and sex; if anything, they will never look at teddy bears the same way again. It is also a dire warning against letting ourselves be fooled by those prying over and taking undue advantages out of our weaknesses and wants. Despite the parallels and correlations that might be traced in the world we live in, Atwood's dystopias are still fictional worlds. Let us hope they remain so. Not reading this novel, or any other book by Nobel-prize worthy, dystopia-meister Margaret Atwood, is a tremendous oversight. We should learn to make room for her and for a true wealth of Canadian authors (namely Alice Munro (cf. CARNEIRO, 2016), Anne Michaels, Carol Shields (cf. CARNEIRO, 2017a), Lawrence Hill, Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, Yann Martel (cf. CARNEIRO, 2017b), among many others) in Brazilian bookshelves.

As regards translation, as far as I can tell, THGL has not been translated into Brazilian Portuguese as yet. However, it is likely to be released by Rocco, the publishing house which has already published 20 translations of Atwood's books. Given her extensive production, there is still a host of works yet to be translated in our country. Even so, I daresay Atwood is the most translated Canadian author in Brazil. Her books have been published since the 1980s by Marco Zero, Editora Globo, Companhia das Letras and Rocco, with some retranslations. Her short story collection *Wilderness Tips* (1991) was her latest translated work in Brazil as *Dicas da Imensidão* (2017) by Ana Deiró, who is also the translator of *O Conto da Aia* (2006), which has been reissued in 2017 after an increase in popularity following the policies of the US president Donald Trump and Hulu's TV series adaptation, which, by the way, has won multiple prizes this awards season (2018) including the Golden Globes, Primetime Emmy Awards, Critics Choice Awards, Directors Guild of America, Writers Guild of America, and many others.

I cannot close this review without pointing out that the blue wind-up heart

cut against the pink backdrop on the novel's cover art is a spot on depiction of a polemic topic. The heart, on one hand, is a natural human organ, the handle, on the other hand, is a man-made contraption. So, the cover art might be taken as a nod to the influence of the artificial on the natural. There is a touch of transhumanism to it all in that one can find glimpses of emerging technologies and human enhancement technologies related to genetic engineering, robotics, and neuro surgery, which place ethical issues at the forefront of attention. There is a moment when the government of Consilience, by means of neuro surgery, seeks to alter the brain of its inhabitants, especially women, so they get to love one and only man, a blatant tampering with the human body and free-will, a sexually self-satisfying drive, or else a carefully designed political strategy. In addition, sex robots are tailor-made so as to suite the buyers' every need and interests. They become extremely popular among men who would not put up with rebellious, strong-willed (real) women, but would rather have obedient, pliable and sexually available ones. Even though it is attempted to give the robots some semblance of normality by adding human traits to them, they are still

mechanical contrivances at heart. Also, one character gets a full-face transplant, which hints at the exciting prospect craved by more than one character of living a whole new life as a whole new person. All these developments are portrayed with both a humorous and gloomy touch, with a feeling that life has taken an unnatural turn, that deep down something is disturbingly and irredeemably wrong; hence a longing for naturalness and normality.

On a final note, since time immemorial humans have developed ways and means of making life easier and of solving their common problems. Science and technology have paved the way for extraordinary developments, no doubt. But what of the havoc, destruction, death and inequality trails blazed by this very same science and technology? It all comes down to our moral responsibility, then, to the decisions we make with the resources we have. Even after all these advancements we are still grappling with possibly insurmountable moral issues. Human character is flawed and it seems unlikely the ongoing human drive for tampering with what is already good will ever be curbed. On these grounds, it feels like we will forever be banging our

heads against a brick wall. We are always craving for more, for better. But better for whom? Should we let our wills and whims run wild? Do we ever spare a thought to the consequences? Atwood's dystopias are evidence that we do not know when to stop. The catastrophic scenario they portray is a result of continuous human interference. Have we not gone far enough? The writing is on the wall. Should we heed it and do something, or should we wait and see what happens? Should we play the glad game, take stock of the life we already have and be happy with it? There are simply no easy answers.

Margaret has cast her mind into the future and she has not seen much good. Although they are not to be taken as hard facts, her dystopias stand as harbingers of what might happen if we do not curtail our current practices. They do not herald the evolution of civilisation but its regression. More often than not, what seems to be a panacea turns out to be the kiss of death. Well, what with an array of uncertainties, confirmed denizens of the human world, at the very least we cannot complain we have not been warned. And here one's suddenly reminded of T. S. Eliot's often-quoted final verses of *The Hollow Men*: "This is the

way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper”.

(That’s the way I had thought of closing this review. But why end it with such portentous thoughts? Away with all this chaos-mongering, this doomsaying! Why dwell on the negative? It is just a fiction book, isn’t it? Why should we be worrying? Hadn’t we better cheer up and think *positively*? Believe that whatever may come, everything will end up fine? “Forget those sad things, honey, Grandma Win would say. Let’s make popcorn” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 36). Uh-oh...)

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Notes

¹ *The Heart Goes Last* was first published in 2015 by Bloomsbury in the UK. The presently reviewed paperback edition, however, was published in 2016 by Virago Press, a publishing house known for the publication of books written by women.

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³ Margaret Atwood was the first novelist and poet inductee on Canada’s Walk of Fame in 2001.

⁴ Pardon my French, but I mean no offence or disapproval upon the use of the word ‘shitload’. It is merely a playful reference to the swear words and slangs used at will throughout the novel under review.