

# THE HABITS OF LANGUAGE

*Uniform(ity), Transgression and  
Margaret Atwood*

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“Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred — is this not more or less what we may call transgression?”

— MICHEL FOUCAULT, “A Preface to Transgression”

**N**EAR THE BEGINNING of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her heroine Offred conducts the reader on a miniature tour of the new republic of Gilead. “In front of us, to the right,” she explains, “is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (24). Offred’s wry pun utterly transforms this seemingly innocent remark about the uniforms which denote social function in Gilead; language, that most tight-fitting garment of convention and usage, here shows itself capable of surprising elasticity. Indeed, uniforms of all description — civilian as well as military — betray this remarkable elasticity in Atwood’s poetry and fiction; they gather around themselves, to be sure, associations with authoritarianism and male power, yet these associations are never entirely stable. Uniforms in Atwood are notoriously subversive habits, invoking notions both of class levelling and hierarchy, the past as well as modernity, difference as well as convention. But it is especially on the level of language itself that uniforms in Atwood bespeak the never-ending tug of war between convention and transgression — the very dynamic engaged in by reader or author and the text. Language, for Atwood, is, in Offred’s words, like a habit, hard to break — but it can always be twisted and transgressed.

The transgression which one may see operating in Atwood’s texts is that which Michel Foucault describes at length in his “Preface to Transgression.” There, Foucault takes pains to show that transgression is not merely the opposite of limi-

tation; rather, he argues, “Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses” (33-34). This distinction has particular value for critics of Margaret Atwood who have tended to see her work in terms of transcendence; Barbara Blakely, for example, has commented that Atwood’s poetry is “moved by the drive toward transcendence of the sexual circle game, through description of its contours, through projection of alternate consciousness, and through transformation of eye, body and word” (Grace and Weir 38). But does one transcend through description? Atwood’s works have tended to feature an inevitable — though often enlightened — return to the systems and games one is trying to escape; as Robert Lecker has observed of the narrator of *Surfacing*, “She cannot help but speak about her pressing need for speechlessness” (Davidson and Davidson 190).

Some readers of Atwood have seized upon this necessary distinction between transgression and transcendence. As Sherrill Grace has argued, “[T]o read Atwood correctly is to understand her as breaking imprisoning circles, not as resolving (cancelling or transcending) polarities altogether” (Grace and Weir 13). Lorraine Weir has come to a very similar conclusion; she sees in Atwood’s work a gradual development of the Foucauldian notion of transgression *within* the limit. In “Atwood in a Landscape” she links Atwood’s well-known fascination with boundaries and lines to Derridean and Darwinian observations of the human will to limit, to classify, and she concludes that by the time Atwood writes *Two-Headed Poems* she has redefined the “earlier dyadic relationship between the poles of transcendence and limitations in association with earth and world. In a movement homologous to that of the narrator of *Surfacing*, liminality is taken as vehicle of *communitas*, which is to say, after Victor Turner, that those who exist on the margin of a structure move through transgression of its codes and norms into an apprehension of the sacred” (Grace and Weir 150).

So many of Atwood’s speakers and heroines find themselves on the margins, saying along with the speaker of *The Circle Game*,

I move  
and live on the edges  
(what edges)  
I live  
on all the edges there are. (24:53-57)

The present study seeks to show that for these Atwood heroines living on the margins, on the edges, it is often the uniform which signals their movement “through transgression . . . [to] apprehension.” The uniform, which, as we shall see, invokes both limit and departure, becomes a potent symbol of their — and Atwood’s — journey through transgression.

**B**AD THINGS ALWAYS HAPPENED to the clothes of my heroines,” muses the pulp fiction writer Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* (132). But Joan herself is a heroine who has just bundled up the clothes she was wearing when she staged her own mock suicide and buried them under a house. Clothing doesn’t fare much better in Atwood’s texts than in Joan Foster’s, though uniforms are less likely to have “bad things” befall them than to cause “bad things” to happen to those who are unfortunate enough to inhabit them. Indeed, for several of Atwood’s characters, to enter the world of uniforms is to enter a dark realm of experience and suffering. Lesje, the young paleontologist in *Life Before Man*, recalls the envy she once felt when she would glimpse workers at the Museum, “their lab coats . . . badges, of nationality, membership of some kind” (307). When Lesje herself finally enters this select company, she does not find the comforts of the far-distant past, the childhood of creation, so to speak, any protection against the pain of adult relations; it is through her work at the Museum, in fact, that she is drawn into the crumbling marriage of Nate and Elizabeth. The very opening of the last “Lesje” section of the novel tells this tale of innocence and experience with startling economy: “Uniformed in her lab coat, Lesje descends” (307). The adult world into which the heroine of *Bodily Harm*, the fashion writer Rennie, descends, is a political one, but it too is characterized by the presence of uniforms. Virtually the first sight to greet Rennie’s eyes when she descends the steps of the plane which has taken her to the Caribbean island of St. Antoine is an array of uniforms: one immigration officer and two soldiers. But the government official’s uniform seems, to Rennie, “like a soldier’s” (35), and we are thus prepared for her entry into a society wherein “government” and “army” are often interchangeable powers. It seems, in this context, quite logical that Atwood should come to write the tale of twentieth-century society as a whole entering the age of the uniform with a vengeance: *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When Offred tells us, in the very first passage of the novel, that in the early days of the regime she and her female cohorts in training “folded our clothes neatly on the stools at the ends of the beds” and wrapped themselves up in the “army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S.” (3), she is speaking for a whole society — a society which one day took off its old clothing of individuality and diversity and assumed the uniformity of a theological dictatorship.

More often than not, in Atwood’s texts, this traumatic entry into the world of uniforms takes place during childhood. In *Surfacing*, the narrator recalls the disruption of her early childhood by the news of war-torn Europe which her brother later obligingly offers up to her: “flecked grey newsreels I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death . . .” (18). As an adult, the narrator witnesses pain and useless death first-hand; her own body becomes a personal battlefield when she

loses her child, and the only way that she can recover this lost ground is to strip herself of her human clothing and enter, for a time, the primal world, the world before uniforms. In *Lady Oracle*, this childhood entry into a world of uniforms is even more pronounced; Joan Foster's mother tries to squeeze her gargantuan daughter into dancing costumes, into the comforting uniform of femininity. "She'd followed the instructions," Joan recalls, "but she couldn't get them to look right" (45). Mrs. Delacourt has evidently "followed the instructions" to bourgeois living with unswerving precision; as Joan remarks, "My mother didn't want her living rooms to be different from everyone else's, or even very much better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everybody else's" (70). And so, having encased herself in feminine uniformity, she proceeds to bestow the same favour on her resentful daughter.

The most tyrannical of childhood uniforms to be found in Atwood, however, is the Brownie outfit, with its lingering aroma of infant militarism. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's tussles with dancing costumes pale beside her adventures with this childhood uniform. By now, Joan herself has internalized her mother's penchant for protective coloration; "at Brownies," she recalls, "you were supposed to try to be the same [as everyone else], and I was beginning to find this idea quite attractive. So I liked wearing the same baggy uniform with its odd military beret and tie, learning the same ritual rhymes, handshakes and salutes, and chanting in unison with the others . . ." (54). The association between Brownies or Girl Guides and female uniformity is a fascinating one to trace; glancing through the relevant sections in Elizabeth Ewing's study *Women in Uniform* (1975), I was struck not only by the uniform's eerie tendency to cross out female gender, with its buttoned-down breast pockets, thick belts and ties, but also by the relative lack of change in the uniform over several decades. The dress reflects a wish to reduce the diverse forms of female appearance and behaviour to a veritable international style; as Ewing notes, "With a membership of 6¾ millions in 91 countries, all linked by prescribed uniforms as well as by shared aims and activities, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, formed in 1928, is probably the biggest female organisation in the world" (80).

The power to prescribe and circumscribe which Ewing hints at in this description soon displaces the comforting joys of "learning to say the same ritual rhymes." When three other members of this supposed bastion of female solidarity decide to tease and torture Joan on their way home from Brownies, they could scarcely choose a more fitting prop than the Brownie uniform itself, with its power to bind and control: they blindfold her with a Brownie tie. The other prop, used to fasten Joan to a post at the end of a bridge, is similarly redolent of stereotypical girlhood activities: a skipping rope. There is an analogous episode in *Surfacing*, though the differences are at least as telling as the similarities; there, the narrator remembers that "When the boys chased and captured the girls after school and tied them

up with their own skipping ropes, I was the one they would forget on purpose to untie" (72). From a study of male imposition of rigidity and uniformity on the female in *Surfacing*, Atwood has moved to an awareness of how the oppressed may themselves act as the co-opted messengers of oppression; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the task of educating and indoctrinating prospective Handmaids is left to the charge of the "Aunts," who are, in Brownie and Girl Guide fashion, inordinately fond of wrapping their propaganda in repetition and alliteration: "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said" (8). In Atwood's terrifying land of Gilead, one senses, Brown Owl and Tawny Owl are appropriately reincarnated as female concentration camp guards, dressed in brown.

**T**O ENTER THE LAND OF UNIFORMS is, then, for Atwood's heroines, to enter a minefield of constrictions: gender as a social construction, adult pain, even the nightmare world of history. But it is no less an entry into language. In this respect, Atwood investigates the basis of some well-known psychological theories of child development and acquisition of language — that is, that the child leaves behind an undifferentiated world, a world wherein the difference between self and non-self is not clearly distinguishable (Lacan's realm of the "imaginary"), and enters the realm of difference. For Atwood, entry into the social order and entry into language are analogous incursions into the frightening world of social uniformity (or what Lacan called "The Law"); as the speaker of one of the poems from *Power Politics* makes painfully clear, uniforms kill the organ of speech:

the doors are shut, you aren't talking,  
 the chandeliers aren't talking, the carpets  
 also remain silent.  
 You stay closed, your skin  
 is buttoned firmly around you,  
 your mouth is a tin decoration (44.6-11)

This process of "uni-formalization" which begins in childhood can only be undone if the child-narrator ultimately realizes the possibilities for subversion hidden within the uniform — within language itself. And this is precisely what several of Atwood's poetic and fictional personae manage to do. Language, they may find, may free as well as constrain them; the trick, it seems, is to seize upon the subversive elements contained within these uniforms of society and language.

Subversion is possible, for instance, when one realizes the instability of the relationship which the uniform has with class and hierarchy. As we know, the uniform is often defended as a social practice for its enforcing of a compulsory equality, its supposed levelling properties; as Elizabeth Wilson points out, the uniform was "the

first type of mass produced clothing," born of the disappearance of "many of the old signs of rank" in domestic fashion (35). This social levelling mystique would later become the rationale for the much-hated school uniforms of our childhood. But as any survivor of a private school will testify, such uniforms, more often than not, actually reinscribe social hierarchies with a vengeance by shifting the locus of difference elsewhere — to accessories, for instance, or to the quality of one's required dress. As Alison Lurie observes, "Though the uniform is supposed to transform individuals into homogeneous members of a group, it can never do so completely" (18). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's observation of the power structure of the notorious Brownies works within her a demystification of the concept of homogeneity which had earlier captured her sympathies; like members of a pack of a different sort, Joan's three Brownie friends aggressively assert their dominance over the weak individual in the group, and this allegiance to structures of power finds its expression in the anti-levelling, hierarchical elements of their uniforms: "They were ten, and almost ready to join the Girl Guides; 'flying up,' it was called. . . . Elizabeth was going to fly, no doubt about it: she was plastered with badges like a diplomat's suitcase" (56). Political and girlhood hierarchies meet in Atwood's simile; badges on supposedly homogeneous uniforms unmask the myth of social levelling in this pack — the upwardly mobile ritual of "Flying up" is itself a case in point.

The next liberating step for Atwood's characters is to move from this state of demystification to the active exploitation of this paradox of the uniform. Offred's close friend Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale* is prepared to take this next step, to seize upon the uniform as a subversive weapon; one day she attacks an Aunt in the washroom, steals and dons her characteristic uniform and parades past the guards at the gate of the handmaid training camp. "In that brown outfit," she recalls, "I just walked right through" (229). Moira has thus turned the uniform's supposed homogeneity to her advantage; the art of masking difference may have surprisingly revolutionary potential. Atwood produces a final ironic variation on this inversion of the signifying powers of the uniform; the next time Offred sees Moira, her friend has found her way into an illicit club for officers, a place where the powerful men of Gilead can escape for awhile from the rigidities of a theologically uniformed world. Here, the overturning of the regime's official dress code paradoxically marks the irrepressible drive of human beings toward the uniform; Moira's subversive dress, in this illicit place, is merely an old misogynist uniform recycled and recontextualized: the playboy bunny outfit. Through this wry use of paradox and inversion (themselves departures from literary uniforms), Atwood poses the problem: can subversion truly lead to a liberation from our need for uniformity or can we ever really escape the tyranny of the uniform?

One key to the overturning of the power which the uniform holds over us is to recognize the ambiguous relationship which it bears to power itself. In Atwood's

poetry, especially, the uniform is tied to authority, but the binding knot is never a secure one; the choices which the speaker of the poems in *Power Politics* offers her male lover reveal this tenuous link between the uniform and authority:

You refuse to own  
yourself, you permit  
others to do it for you:  
You become slowly more public  
in a year there will be nothing left  
of you but a megaphone

or you will descend through the roof  
with the spurious authority of a  
government official,  
blue as a policeman, grey as a used angel,  
having long forgotten the difference  
between an annunciation and a parking ticket . . .

. . . If you deny these uniforms  
and choose to repossess  
yourself, your future

will be less dignified, more painful, death will be sooner  
(30.1-12, 17-20)

The only power worth having, for Atwood, is the power to “repossess” oneself, a power one can only attain by relinquishing those artificial, socially constructed uniforms which appear to bestow power while actually robbing us of speech, leaving us only a hollow megaphone rather than a mouth. Note, though, that one does not escape uniforms entirely; Atwood’s speaker warns her lover that if he relinquishes these “spurious” social uniforms he will have to assume an organic uniform, the body, which seems to bring with it only weakness — a “less dignified, more painful” future, with death standing at the end of the road like an avenging angel. Nevertheless, the human body is, despite or perhaps even because of its frailty, the only uniform which one can possess rather than be possessed by; it is, at once, in Auden’s words, “Mortal, guilty, but to me / The entirely beautiful” (*Selected Poems* 50.9-10).

**I**F THE HUMAN BODY is the locus of resistance to the uniform and its devastating effects on the human psyche, the same might be said of the body politic. Uniforms, the first mass-produced clothing, embody the notion of mass culture — a notion which comes to have frightening consequences in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When a theological minority seizes power and imposes its will on the populace, mass rituals become one way in which that minority may retain power

— by, in effect, creating a mass culture. Events such as the bloody “salvagings,” the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of wrongdoers, serve the dual purpose of ridding Gilead of troublemakers and of providing a cathartic outlet for the handmaids’ feelings of rage against the male power structure. Nevertheless, such attempts to forge a mass culture are bound to fail, Atwood suggests, because of the radical possibilities for subversion contained within these rituals and their assumptions. All handmaids must and do take part in these barbaric salvagings, but even in the midst of such a groundswell of hatred and group hysteria, individual difference is not erased; even though Offred places her hand over her heart in ritual fashion “to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman” (260), she is also aware of the subtle forms which ideological difference may assume beneath this uniform of group action: “It’s a mistake to hang back too obviously in any group like this,” she reflects. “It stamps you as lukewarm, lacking in zeal” (261). The regime’s project of devising the ultimate uniform, mass culture, is thus defeated by the never-ending operation of cultural sign systems; even when you create a mass rally, there is still a front and a back in every crowd, or innumerable other ways of signifying difference.

The same dynamic operates in Atwood’s political poem “Train Ride Vienna-Bonn,” from the collection *True Stories*, wherein the speaker moves from the stereotypic historical vision of a monolithic automaton-like German people to an awareness of difference:

It’s those helmets we remember,  
the shape of a splayed cranium,  
and the faces under them,  
ruthless and uniform

But these sit on the train  
clean & sane, in their neutral  
beige and cream: this girl smiles,  
she wears a plastic butterfly, and the waiter gives  
a purple egg to my child  
for fun. Kindness abounds. (58.1-10)

Ironically, the speaker reveals in her very first words the potential within herself to turn uniform, to think in terms of fascistic unities rather than progressive differences; she refers to the German soldiers in metonymic terms as “those helmets.” As that well-known chronicler of the symbolism of warfare, Paul Fussell, notes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, there was a tendency in the poets and diarists of the First World War to envision the German enemy as faceless, to defend oneself psychologically from the thought of killing individual human beings by reconstructing those individuals as a mass of spiked helmets. This metonymic habit of mind holds equally true for the Second World War of Atwood’s poem — perhaps even truer, for during this war and its aftermath one had to reconstruct not only



an “enemy,” but one capable of the worst sorts of atrocities imaginable. For the speaker of Atwood’s poem, seeing the contemporary Germans sharing her train car as girls and waiters is, itself, a triumph of difference over uniformity, a hopeful sign that the salvagings of our recent past may not be re-enacted. Nevertheless, Atwood does not offer her readers this sort of smug North American closure; this poem has several segments in addition to the first one which I have quoted; the never-ending historical conflict between uniformity and difference is not so easily resolved. In a later section, she rewinds and replays this elemental historical struggle:

What holds me  
in the story we’ve all heard  
so many times before:  
  
the few who resisted,  
who did not do what they were told.

This is the old fear:  
not what can be done to you  
but what you might do  
yourself, or fail to.

This is the old torture. (61.1-10)

The conflict between uniformity and difference is here revealed as much more than a cultural conflict, with twentieth-century Germany on one side and a younger and wiser North America on the other; the pull towards uniformity and mass culture is lying, potentially, within us all, within our cultures and within the very systems of our language.

As this element of historical perspective in “Train Ride Vienna-Bonn” suggests, time itself is tied to the workings of uniformity and difference; if it was possible for men on the battlefield to reconstruct the enemy as a group of helmets and uniforms rather than as the human bodies which suggest difference and subversion, then the distance of forty or more years intensifies this process of mental uni-formalization. But time itself, or, more precisely, the concept of linear time, is yet another uniform which needs to be interrogated by the speakers of Atwood’s poetry and fiction; the uniform’s relationship to time, like its relationship to power and class, is ambiguous and shifting. Though uniforms are often meant to suggest the efficiently up-to-date, they also strongly suggest the stopping of time altogether, as I discovered during my survey of Brownie and Guide uniforms from the early twentieth century to the present. Like photographs, they are often described as trapped in the past; as Alison Lurie has observed, “official costume tends to freeze the styles of the time in which it was invented” (20), and Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, in their work on occupational costume in England, refer to uniforms as “sets of clothes stuck in an earlier period” (*Occupational Costume in England from the Eleventh Century to 1914*, 204). This sense of uniforms trapping

one in the past is repeatedly dramatized in *The Handmaid's Tale*; the new uniforms are, in Offred's mind and doubtless in the mind of other Gilead citizens, merely variations on the uniforms of the pre-Gilead past — the female domestic workers or Marthas are dressed “in dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before” (9), and, as our academic lecturer Professor James Darcy Pieixoto so helpfully if rather pompously points out in the “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*,” the Gilead leaders borrowed the idea of the handmaids wearing red from “the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian ‘P.O.W.’ camps of the Second World War era” (289). Of course, the reader at this point appends her or his own historical note to the learned discourse of Professor Pieixoto; the choice of various coloured uniforms for people incarcerated by a political system finds its own historical intertext in the assigning of various coloured badges to prisoners in German concentration camps. Rather than heralding the advent of a new regime, uniforms more often drag us back into the nightmares of history from which we are trying to awake.

WHAT WE HAVE SEEN SO FAR is the uniform's functioning as ideology, and how, in many instances, that ideology can be unmasked or subverted; such a pattern is indeed writ large when one considers the uniform's relationship to gender. As I suggested earlier, the uniform often seeks to cross out gender differences, and the rationale for this supposed erasure of sexual difference frequently involves the concept of androgyny; just as our class differences shall be erased by the uniform, so this line of reasoning goes, so too shall our gender differences be erased, leaving us in a position of unbiased equality. Yet, as the work of deconstructive and Marxist theorists has shown, the resolution of difference is not that easily achieved; indeed, the very project of resolving difference is, more often than not, a cornerstone of dominant ideology. For example, when I mentioned that the apparent project of the Brownie uniform was to cross out gender difference, the elements of dress which I specifically referred to as aiding this project were all stereotypically male articles of dress: buttoned-down breast pockets, ties, wide belts. This, of course, is not androgyny; it is the re-inscription of the dominant power. As many critics of the concept of androgyny have argued, the ideal of erasing gender difference could all too easily translate into the erasing of the female, into assimilation.

Atwood's poems and fictions unmask the darker sides of this drive toward gender uniformity. For her, the uniform is so closely tied to dominant ideology that any strategy which would involve adopting the uniform rather than subverting it seems suspect from the start. As the speaker of the poem “Song of the Worms” from *You Are Happy* (1974) explains,

We know what a boot looks like  
 when seen from underneath,  
 we know the philosophy of boots,  
 their metaphysics of kicks and ladders.  
 We are afraid of boots  
 but contemptuous of the foot that needs them. (35.11-16)

“Boots” here becomes the metonymic representation of what Barbara Ehrenreich has called “the oldest male elite . . . the Warrior Caste” (*Ms.* May 1987, 24). And, as Ehrenreich argues, the uniform, like the boot of Atwood’s poem, is its special territory and means of self-expression; writing of the testimony of Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North before the American Congress during the summer of 1987, Ehrenreich claimed, “The main point — the only message of his silent testimony — was the uniform.” This member of a civilian government “had chosen to confront the public in a costume that proclaimed his license to kill” (24). The uniform is, for Atwood as well, a silent witness whose cultural assumptions speak loudly enough.

This is why, in Atwood’s poetry and fiction, the strategy must be to explode the myth of the uniform, the promises which it seems to offer to gender and class equality existing peaceably alongside the notion of rightfully invested power. Exploding this powerful myth involves embracing multiplicity and diversity, concepts which we have been taught not to associate with effective action, but rather with doubt and confusion. As early as *The Edible Woman* (1969), we see the first stage of this project in motion: the rejection of the female uniform. Marian McAlpin, the heroine of that first novel, is repeatedly cast as a mothering nurse figure; Duncan warns her that “every woman loves an invalid. I bring out the Florence Nightingale in them. But be careful . . . Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know” (100). Duncan’s rather bizarre advice proves surprisingly useful; later, when Marian and Duncan are discussing the possibility of going to bed, a situation which Duncan considers with his characteristic egotism, Marian thinks, “The situation . . . called for stout shoes and starched cuffs and a leather bag full of hypodermic needles” (190). By the end of the novel, Marian realizes, however, that the Florence Nightingale uniform of perpetual help produces not a cannibal woman, but a cannibalized woman. Joan Foster from *Lady Oracle* makes the same discovery when she beholds a statue of Diana of Ephesus in Tivoli: “draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws” (253) — the ultimate symbol of woman as nurse. On the spot, Joan decides that “Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not any more. My ability to give was limited” (253). Joan rejects the nursing myth, just as surely as she rejects her former lover Paul, a Polish count who happens to write nurse novels and who has appropriately confining notions of female deportment and potential. Indeed, she becomes, by the end of the novel, an anti-nurse: she brains a reporter with a handy

Cinzano bottle. Even so, Atwood cannot resist hinting at the continuing mystique of the female uniform; as Joan confesses about her newfound though unconscious friend, "I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage . . ." (345).

THE FEMALES IN ATWOOD'S POEMS, stories, and novels can only step beyond this uniform mystique once they have not only rejected the uniform but also actively transgressed it, turned it inside-out, as Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale* does when she steals the Aunt's uniform. This transgression of uniforms must be a more than superficial or gratuitous act; when the Royal Porcupine in *Lady Oracle* adopts an opera cloak and porcupine quill hat, he merely replaces one costume with another; as she says to Joan when they meet, "This is my dress uniform" (239). No wonder that he is soon transformed in Joan's eyes, from the exotic-sounding Royal Porcupine to ordinary Chuck Brewster, who wants both Joan and domesticity; as Joan finally cries in despair, "Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" (269).

Uniforms are truly transgressed and not merely replaced when the essential structure of power is changed thereby. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Offred begins to steal into her Commander's study to play illicit games of Scrabble, she transgresses the uniforms of Gilead; suddenly she is able to ask the Commander questions, to criticize and even to condescend to him. Appropriately, too, this social transgression is signalled by the transgression of a physical uniform; when the chauffeur Nick's hat "is on askew or not at all" (144), this is a sign to Offred that she may enter the study.

This transgression, short-lived though it is, is always associated for Atwood with language — in this instance, with the surreptitious games of Scrabble — a game in which the rules and conventions of language are sacrosanct, and in which the bible of language, the dictionary, proves the final arbiter. Nevertheless, as Offred discovers, there can be freedom even within the prison house of language: "Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too, and we take extra letters and make words with them that don't exist, like *smurt* and *crup*, giggling over them" (197). How appropriate it is, for that matter, that the defiant message which Offred's handmaid predecessor has carved in a corner of her room is a virtual transgression of language — bastardized Latin: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. The uniforms of language, too, are surprisingly susceptible to violation and subversion.

This is Atwood's project in her poetry and prose: to build a language of transgression. In her poetry especially she repeatedly asks the same question: how do we enter language as poets or readers without losing our ability to transgress its

conventions? To be a writer, Atwood has said, “is to see one’s body in a special dress, relating to other bodies as a social entity” (*Second Words* 343) — but how does one ensure that one is wearing the dress, rather than being worn by it? One poem which demonstrates how this trick of transgression may be performed by poet and reader is “A Red Shirt” from *Two-Headed Poems* (1976). There, the speaker and her sister sew a red shirt for the speaker’s daughter — a shirt which holds, for the adult female makers, connotations of the female body, of violence against women everywhere. The young daughter, however, is, as yet, blissfully unaware of the associations which have been sewn into *her* female uniform, her body:

The shirt is finished: red  
with purple flowers and pearl  
buttons. My daughter puts it on,  
hugging the colour  
which means nothing to her  
except that it is warm  
and bright. In her bare  
feet she runs across the floor,  
escaping from us, her new game,  
waving her red arms  
in delight, and the air  
explodes with banners. (106.1-12)

We must each of us put on the uniform of language and culture in childhood; but, in Atwood’s world, there is always the marvellous possibility of running away, escaping, transgressing our uniforms — the possibility of playing a “new game.”

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## FOR THEIR WELLBEING

*Eunice Brooks*

Positively not godkin,  
 the virgin, mother, and crone,  
 lust, prudence, and wisdom,  
 are my selves.  
 The cauldron is my universe  
 and my uterus. I look into it  
 for reflections of women.  
 Comes the scent of sea culls,  
 oysters, mussels, and roe.  
 The common sense of women.  
 I name those who come to mind.  
 For their wellbeing, I speak  
 to my goddess within.