

## DARK VISIONS

Margaret Atwood's imaginative travels into the regions of the inhospitable

International Symposium of the Inklings Gesellschaft ([www.inklings-gesellschaft.de](http://www.inklings-gesellschaft.de))

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"The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature" is the subtitle of a series of four lectures, called *Strange Things*, which Margaret Atwood presented at the University of Oxford in 1991.

Long before their geographic discovery, the North, the Northwest Passage, the North Pole, the deserts of ice, the Polar night, have been objects of a European obsession that covers the regions of scientific challenge as well as those of poetic imagination.

They might be defined – in Atwood's own words – as a "state of mind". The enormous efforts undertaken to discover the Northwest and Northeast Passages, to locate the North Pole, to produce a map of Greenland, have left their reflections in the literary representations of voyages into the regions of the inhospitable. Its metaphorical dimensions manifest themselves in images of terror and the disastrous. V. Bryussov's tale *The Republic of the Southern Cross* (1905), or, as a recent example, Chr. Ransmayr's novel *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (*The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*, 1984) are examples of such images; narrative and lyrical references to both the Franklin expedition during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the investigations concerning the reasons of its failure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Beattie & Geiger, *Frozen in Time*, 1987) are floating in the twilight of science and poetic imagination.

The fascination caused by the inhospitable reflects the state of modern consciousness: like a research vessel frozen in the ice, it finds itself caught in the object worlds created by the natural sciences and technology, by the belief in progress and by visions of fear. It has a premonition of the approaching catastrophe. In this context the North is the symbol of the extreme situations of contemporary humanity. Will it be possible to escape them or will we be their victims? These are the central topics of Margaret Atwood's novels. The dimensions she opens up to her readers, may they be autobiographical, science-fictional or dystopian, or, as several critics have suggested, feminist, show the many ways by which mankind and environment are threatened, but also alternative possibilities.

A key to the understanding of Atwood's oeuvre is the recently finished *MaddAddam* trilogy. Although it includes disturbing visions of times to come, it should not be understood as a cluster of cautionary dystopian novels but rather, in the author's own words, as "speculative fiction", which is concerned with what "[...] could really happen. [...] speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand and that takes place on Planet Earth." Thus, the trilogy may also give impulses of hope.

Papers presented at the symposium are scheduled to be published in the next Inklings yearbook.

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