

Turning Life into Popular Art: *Bodily Harm's* Life-Tourist

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Throughout her work, Margaret Atwood uses literal and metaphoric camera images, including photographs, commercial and non-commercial art, movies, television programs, filmstrips, and mental pictures as symbols of seeing and being in the world.¹ Her characters and personas often seem to view life through a celluloid film. Seeing themselves, the past, and other people as photograph trophies or the raw material for popular journalistic pieces on life-styles, they fear the attack of cameras which turn them into products for consumption, and yet, paradoxically, they seek validation in being seen, trying to escape "massive involvement" by creating tourist-brochure reality.

Although *Bodily Harm* (1982) may seem to set a new direction in Atwood's work, it again presents a character who specializes in packaging experience (this time including disaster, torture, and revolution) for popular consumption; and it is no closer to social realism or didacticism than *The Edible Woman* (1969) or *Life Before Man* (1979). It is tempting to treat the socio-political dimensions of this work separately from the personal ones, dwelling, for example, on Rennie as a representative of "British" colonialism, or on propaganda about political repression, torture, and exploitation of women, or on Toronto chic.² Ironically, however, seeing *Bodily Harm* this way reveals our own tendency to reduce reality to "pieces." It is easy to be misled, like Atwood's protagonists, by a surface simplicity which conceals depths. Like *Surfacing* (1972), *Bodily Harm* simultaneously externalizes an inner reality and personalizes nationalistic, cultural, and metaphysical realities, revealing characteristics of

¹ A short version of this article was delivered as a paper in the session "Cultural Metamorphosis in Margaret Atwood's Work," The Popular Culture Association, 1 April 1984; it is the basis for a section of a longer article, "Camera Images in Margaret Atwood's Novels," accepted for publication in *Margaret Atwood* (Edinburgh, Tx.: Pan American University Press, forthcoming).

² See, for example, Diana Brydon, "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention," *Canadian Literature* 95 (1982): 181-84; Clark Blaise, "Tale of Two Colonies," rev. of *Bodily Harm*, by Margaret Atwood, *Canadian Literature* 95 (1982): 111-12; Frank Davey, "Life After Man," rev. of *Bodily Harm*, by Margaret Atwood, *Canadian Literature* 95 (1982): 29.

romance. For, like *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* is narrated with a deceptive double vision.

Like characters in all the novels, as well as in *Dancing Girls*, *Murder in the Dark*, and *Bluebeard's Egg*, Rennie often views existence and herself like a film strip, one frozen, "collectible" moment at a time, although finally she is capable of moving out of a frame and beginning to live, rather than "snapshot," a reality which merges past-present-future. Like the first- and third-person split narration of earlier novels, *Bodily Harm's* retrospective "double" voice not only features shifts between past and present but employs a future tense which is a step beyond Joan Foster's decision to write about the future. As a narrator who is telling and writing the book we read, Renata Wilford, whose name suggests being "born again" or "crossing over,"³ looks back at a previous self who, as she remembers and we read, becomes again "present." Because we see primarily through the *fragmented* Rennie's eyes, whether she acts as unreliable first-person narrator or third-person reflector, we must see through the frame Rennie once imposed upon experience. Thus, like Rennie, we look at the story as a "piece," in pieces or shots, with what we come to know as tourist vision. For a time we are able to "vacation" in the book, as Rennie does with Dell mysteries and Joan's readers did with her Gothic romances in *Lady Oracle*, safely distant from both fictional and personal realities. In other words, we mirror Rennie's initial camera vision.

Operating simultaneously as an unseeing or mirror eye and a pseudo-self, the camera-narrator of *Bodily Harm* (Rennie's past self) is packager/photographer/victimizer as well as photo/product/victim. Rennie not only "snapshots" the present by doing mental "pieces" on the order of her actual life-style journalism for *Visor* magazine, she also carries an actual camera bag throughout her trip to the Caribbean. Increasingly aware of it as baggage, to be lugged by Lora and Paul as well as herself when there is nothing to photograph, it symbolizes her tourist vision and identity. Once she has experienced "massive involvement" of her individual, female, human and socio-political body—ironically in a "cell" of a prison she had once visited as a tourist—both passport and camera bag disappear. Even her suitcase then seems to contain clothes "that used to be hers"⁴ as she switches to the future tense and begins her new identity as subversive reporter.

³ Ildiko De Papp Carrington, "Another Symbolic Descent," rev. of *Bodily Harm*, by Margaret Atwood, *Essays on Canadian Writing* 26 (1983): 61-62.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 259. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

Just how subversive her reporting can be, however, is not at all obvious. Reviewers who are bothered by her rescue or by the abrupt shift to the future tense, which is then interspersed with past and present, have generally missed the again circular and self-reflexive structure of *Bodily Harm*.⁵ On the last page, the paradoxical statements, "She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued" (266), return us to the first words of the novel: "This is how I got here, says Rennie" (17), suggesting that, once the camera is no longer needed, the character whose function is seeing (82) never really leaves the cell. Whether or not she literally returns to Canada (a point Atwood chooses to leave unresolved), symbolically her body ultimately includes all women, all victims and oppressors, all human beings, all. A here and a there, a past which is separate from a present or a future, no longer exists. The cell of malignancy is, finally, both in and of her and us.

Like Atwood's camera-eyes, we may not initially notice the photographs, pictures, and products in *Bodily Harm* which furnish the background or subground for what is in sharp focus. For example, few readers really see the picture of a melon "cut open to reveal the seeds" and the mermaid lamp woman, whose open harem jacket is "pictured" as "grazing the nipples," which decorate Rennie's room at the Sunset Inn where she "vacations" following a mastectomy (47-48). The visual dimension of Atwood's literary work has been much neglected. But recognizing the importance of the background camera imagery in *Bodily Harm* will make us aware that, contrary to some critics' estimations, this novel is revolutionary aesthetically as well as politically.

As in earlier works, cameras and photographs act paradoxically as "neutral" recorders of experience, instruments of attack or invasion, external validators, and vehicles of transformation. Camera images in *Bodily Harm* include actual cameras and photographs, commercial illustrations and products (particularly postcards, posters, tourist brochures, packages, magazines, and mannequin chairs), pictures or other non-commercial art, camera-like instruments or reflectors (including telescopes, binoculars, sunglasses, mirrors), mental photographs or still-life shots, and films or mental films.

In addition to the camera's function as baggage which Rennie must shed to accomplish metamorphosis, it literally operates as a distancing shield (like the related telescope image),

⁵ See Davey, 30, or Stanley S. Atherton, "Tropical Traumas: Images of the Caribbean in Recent Canadian Fiction," *Canadian Literature* 95 (1982): 13-14, who thinks Rennie fantasizes about her release and claims that, when Lora's beating is over, she "worries as much about a burnt-out light bulb" as about Lora.

as well as an object which might expose her to "break-ins" (81); it is a means of increasing Rennie's "scope" (65) as well as a "cover" or "pose" (157-58; 215). As the plane arrives and Dr. Minnow asks her if she has a man, Rennie characteristically smiles and hoists her camera bag. But the next section of narrative deals with memories of her mastectomy, when she did not want to "see how much of herself was missing" and when she "imprinted" on Daniel, seeing him as if through the wrong end of a telescope (34-35). Both like and unlike Paul, the Abbots, or Lesje in *Life Before Man*, who use telescopes or binoculars to see distant objects more clearly without being seen, Rennie often uses cameras like "reversed" telescopes, as well as reflecting mirror sunglasses, to make "close" experiences more distant and to reflect or deflect feelings which threaten to impinge or penetrate.

In addition to Rennie's own camera, other photographing agents, such as the blonde "taking pictures with a flashcube camera" at the floodlit "Driftwood" (133), often form part of the décor. While she waits at the airport to pick up a package, later revealed to be a machine gun, she would like to use the "photo machine" (109). Later, when she is "off the hook," drinking rum at "The Lime Tree," her desire to be such a photo machine is implicit in her explanation of tourist vision. The couple with the jammed camera are "people like her, transients; like her they can look all they want to, they're under no obligation to see, they can take pictures or anything they wish" (166). Ironically, however, if the camera is jammed, film does not "advance." Such pictures, like those of the characters in *Life Before Man*, will include a subground of past shots in all "present" shots, distorting the reality that is framed.

The photographs Rennie does take, wishes to take, or merely sees perhaps appear insignificant, simply part of the setting, until the distinction between background and foreground, then and now, blurs. As Rennie mentally reviews the Sunset Inn's breakfast and considers faking an article, she thinks she could tart the whole thing up with a few photos from St. Kitts. Instead, she takes her camera, along with an illustrated tourist brochure, insulating her first vision of the island in the same way she layers herself with sunglasses, hat, suntan lotion and insect repellent.⁶ Rejecting a possible photograph of fishermen on a beach which does not match that on the brochure, she takes no pictures until Dr. Morrow holds her "captive" on a "tour" of Fort Industry, the prison where, ironically, she is later incarcerated.

⁶ Like Atwood's other protagonists, she resembles the woman in Atwood's cover collage for *Murder in the Dark* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983).

(Dr. Morrow, who was once offered a job as Minister of Tourism, even mentions that a display and gift shop had once been planned for the prison, which, incidentally, has a high-powered telescope aimed at the docks.) She photographs the gallows in the same way she does the children and is aware of being seen, by the "blank eyes" of the sunglassed men and the binocular-eyes of the Abbots, as she sees a mother who "stares woodenly up at Rennie, as if she's been looked at many times before" (114-16; 19). Because our view of this woman is Rennie's—another person who has been "raw material," violated and "doctored"—we know that, on a subconscious level, Rennie is not even now a camera machine or neutral recorder, although Dr. Minnow has asked that she be "an observer," whose duty is to report. Later, as a "cover" for her illegal possession of weapons, Rennie photographs men tossing boxes into the *Memory*. Aware that photographs and the act of photographing can change reality by attacking it or making it fake—"As soon as you take a picture of something it's a picture. Picturesque" (132)—Rennie nevertheless still has fragmented vision.

Ironically, while she is not yet capable of seeing St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe as anything but two-dimensional photographs, Rennie expects that photographs verify "reality." When she examines Paul's family snapshots and the brand names in the medicine cabinet, "she wants to find something that will make Paul real for her" (195); and she assumes that the Abbots, who "cannot possibly be CIA agents," will verify their innocuousness by producing pictures of grandchildren (167-68). Yet, earlier, when she was offered a good "piece" for Pandora's "Woman of Achievement" series on a judge who "had it all together," Rennie found "the real story," represented by the happy judge's photograph, "a personal affront," suggesting the "something missing" Rennie becomes aware of in Paul, her grandmother, and herself.

The vague uneasiness Rennie feels about the pictures, painting, and products that form the book's décor is revealing. Rennie's apartment in Toronto is refurnished by Jake, the packager, with pink Sally Ann furniture "like thighs" and blowups of Cartier-Bresson photographs:

Three Mexican prostitutes looking out of wooden cubicles, their eyebrows plucked thin and drawn into exaggerated bows, their mouths clown-mouthing, an old man sitting in a field of deserted chairs In the bedroom he hung a Heather Cooper poster, a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks

exposed. She had no expression on her face, she was just standing there, if anything a little bored. The picture is called *Enigma*. The other picture in the bedroom was a stylized print of a woman lying on a forties puffy sofa, like the one in their own living room. She was feet-first, and her head, up at the other end of the sofa, was tiny, featureless, and rounded like a doorknob. In the foreground there was a bull. (97, my emphasis)

As Rennie lies on the bed, nude, with Jake positioning her arms and legs in a pose (much as Peter did in photographing Marian in *The Edible Woman*), Rennie's slight nervousness is put down to her "background." The fact that "Jake liked to pin her hands down . . . to hold her so she couldn't move" is, similarly, "just a game." Then she does a piece from "the woman's angle" on pornography as an art form and views life-sized mannequin tables and chairs featuring women muzzled and locked into de-meaning positions. Initially, she continues taking notes, seeing the raw material of pornography, including shots of nipples being cut off, with detachment, through a video viewer. When a gap does appear in her reality, even though she has trouble making "love" with Jake and recognizes that she is part of the "raw material," she decides, like many of Atwood's other protagonists and personas, that "Surfaces . . . were preferable to depths" (185-89).

The picture of a cut-open melon in Rennie's room at the Sunset Inn is, like most of the other pictures and products, now apparent as an image of Rennie and, in one sense, all women. Having been surgically as well as sexually "opened" or violated by men and a reality or malignancy of which she would rather repress knowledge, Rennie fears that the scar on her breast will split open "like a diseased fruit" and that a centipede, maggots, worms, or something which might be in Paul's garden or in the "cellar" of her Griswold "subground"⁷ will crawl out.

Her unconscious interpretation of other commercial illustrations, products, and pictures also reveals a growing awareness which she would like to keep submerged. Rennie, whom Jake has packaged in white, subconsciously recognizes herself in the tourist-brochure picture of the laughing white woman sheathed in a white bathing suit with "a modesty panel."⁸ The

⁷ According to Rennie, a subground is "something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into" (23).

⁸ Rennie's Giswold "subground," her own modesty panel, is, of course, one of the main

woman in the picture is, of course, looking at the camera while, in the background, a machete leans against a tree and a black man looks at her. Following the itinerary suggested by the tourist brochure, Rennie visits a church where she sees another self-image, a picture of the temptation of St. Anthony by the thighs, breasts, and tongues of pale, female demons. Instead of dealing directly with the feelings the picture must raise, as might be expected, she buys postcards of it. Later, from the boat named *Memory* even the fort looks like a postcard, but from Paul's house the "postcard boats" which dot the harbour appear to be "one dimensional," "a scrim," behind which "the real truth" threatens to appear at any moment (194).

Rennie's and other people's very numerous mental photographs and films function in the same fragmented ways as cameras and photographs. Feeling like the narrator of *Surfacing*, scanned and even dismembered by the eye rays or "lazer-beam gaze" of others, Rennie nevertheless "pictures" Daniel's parents as Finnish versions of American Gothic and plays a forties movie scene with Jake. Painful events are often disguised with comic book images. She pictures Daniel as Rex Morgan, M.D., Paul as Tarzan, and herself as Paul's comic book date. She cannot picture Daniel's wife or Jake's "new lady" and is aware that her suburban "picture" of Paul is faked. When pictures begin moving and threaten to become real, Rennie imposes the frames of television, video, and movie screens, and she wishes to change channels, turn down the volume, or "switch off." As the Abbots label birds through binoculars and Lora scans her, she looks at grayish foam and dark shapes through the screen-like glass-bottomed boat.⁹ Then, as Lora begins her life-story, Rennie "switches off the sound and concentrates only on the picture," turning it into a magazine "still." She arranges Lora "into a makeover piece, before and after, with a series of shots in between showing the process" (82-83). Later, feeling fragmented, dismembered, when he sees her, she discovers that Marsden, who has seen too many movies in the States and is always directing hero "scenes" for Prince, is the new agent. "Everything starts to move," and Rennie thinks, "Somebody change the channel" (229). Even the sounds of violence must be "televised." When Rennie is "safe" on St. Antoine after Paul's "rescue," she hears "another sound, too loud, like a television set with a con show on it heard through a hotel room wall. Rennie puts her hands over her ears" (230). When she is in the jail cell with Lora, longing for popcorn and late-night television, Lora tells the story

reasons she is concerned with "good taste," so that she automatically tunes out, retouches, or re-makes whatever does not seem "decent," "normal," or polite. See 54, 188, 230.

⁹ Earlier, she also imagines watching her body on the operating table through glass, "in the middle of a performance" (155), but she is unable to rejoice it.

of her "non-violent" rape to top Rennie's story about the man with the rope: "It's a movie with the sound gone." Ironically, Lora feels that men in their situation would be digging a tunnel or strangling the guards, "like at the movies," as Rennie once again "tunes out" *True Confessions*. Significantly, she imagines herself "safe" at home with her grandmother and mother: "Her hands are cold, she lifts them up to look at them, but they elude her. Something's missing" (238-43). Neither the past, the present, nor the future will do; it's as if she has literally disappeared or, like *Edible Woman's* Marian, reached the point of absolute zero: "Pretend you're really here, she thinks. Now, what would you do?" (250-51).

Once she has reached this point, the present can no longer be turned into a "safe" photograph or moving picture; she can no longer find refuge in tourist vision but is instead "invaded," "massively involved," "turned inside out." As in Atwood's other works, cameras and photographs have been instrumental in the protagonist's metamorphosis. As she lies in her cell suffering from the tourist's illness which "everyone gets . . . sooner or later" and attempts to tune down distant screaming, this time she, too, screams as she recognizes that the man with the rope in her dream "isn't really there, he's only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own" (254). As she looks through the bars into the courtyard to witness the beating of the deaf and dumb man who "has a voice but no words," she no longer thinks about picturesque photographs or television programs or movies which need to be switched off or turned down. Instead, she makes connections. Past, present, and future, background and foreground, will no longer be separate. If she cannot change the reality of others' dehumanizing cameras, she can at least see without photographing:

It's indedent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they're still amateurs. She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there* . . . Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt.

(256)

Since there is no "here" or "there," no hard boundary between outside and inside, political and personal, attacker and

victim, the next shifts to future time, now marked with a future tense which fades into the present, parallel the future projects of characters in *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man*. Rennie never leaves the "cell," nor can she leave the "harm" which pervades reality or her "body." Regardless of whether her presence in the cell is literal as well as symbolic, the self-conscious narrator, whose narration does subversely bear witness and report, is no longer living in disjointed "pieces" or fragments of time. The meaning of the words, "This is how I got here," of the novel's opening becomes clear as Rennie witnesses Lora's brutal beating: "She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" (258). The next words, "This is what will happen," indicate that symbolically, if not literally, the epic or narrative situation is centered in the "here" of what Rennie does see: the bruises, the "massive involvement . . . maybe they were there already, maybe they were always there."

When the scene again shifts, far back in time to Rennie's grandmother's kitchen, Rennie, unlike her grandmother, is no longer trapped behind a television set: "There's a radio on somewhere, a soft blur of noise, or maybe it's the television, a blue-gray oblong of mist in the living room where her grandmother sits propped in front of it, seeing visions." Rennie remembers how she hid her own hands and backed away from her grandmother, who was frantic because she could not find her hands, as she helplessly watched her mother take hold of the "dangling hands, clasping them in her own." In the present of the cell, Rennie is able to transform the past by acting in the present. While she wants to throw up, to tell herself that "she has no connection" with Lora, she takes the hand which has always reminded her of her own nibbled flesh, recognizing that "there's no such thing as a faceless stranger. . . . This is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done. She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born" (262-64). Like Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, she is reborn when she is again able to touch and feel.

Thus, without passport picture or camera bag (in what might be called the book's future-present tense), she "leaves" the cell without leaving, flying by sheer force of will to "the terminal, the end of the line. Also where you can get on." Now the *Leisure* magazine pictures, like those on the calendars in the prison waiting rooms, are transformed. The variously hued bodies beside the beaches and blue-green sea are now perceived as serving, being served, and serviced and associated with Lora's "bodily harm":

A blond in a low-riding tie-dye sarong, the splotches reddish. She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now . . . What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same.

(264-65)

Like the protagonists of Atwood's other novels, Rennie has broken out of the framed photograph and transcended camera vision, as well as other protective layers and distorting filters. Like Annette in "A Travel Piece" in *Dancing Girls*, Rennie has "gone through the screen to the other side,"¹⁰ but, unlike Annette and the characters in *The Edible Woman* and *Life Before Man*, as well as most of the poetry personas, Rennie recovers her voice as well as her vision. Not "a mute symbol," not an overcoated cover illustration who shields herself behind layers as dark masses begin to cover the sun, Rennie may now have "third eye" vision, in which "what you see depends partly on what you want to look at and partly on how."¹¹ To a greater extent than Marian, the narrator of *Surfacing*, Joan, Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje, Rennie experiences a metamorphosis is political as well as personal and profoundly radical. No longer in the bushes waiting (*Surfacing*) or just beginning to see her life push into the "foreground" (*Life Before Man*), no longer finding it necessary to cut away part of herself in order to see "everything" (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*), Rennie has penetrated to the center of paradox where all boundaries fade. Thus, camera images in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* not only dramatize the fragmented self but also initiate the process of a metamorphosis which seems to continue even beyond the "frame" of the book.

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¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Dancing Girls* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam): 148.

¹¹ See "Torture" in Atwood's *True Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981): 80, cover collage for *Murder in the Dark*, and "Instructions for the Third Eye," *Murder in the Dark*: 61.