

IN PURSUIT OF THE FACELESS  
STRANGER:  
DEPTHS AND SURFACES IN  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *BODILY HARM*

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Margaret Atwood's recurrent use of the descent motif to dramatize her thematic concern with the quest for authentic selfhood makes her work a tempting target for explication in terms of the initiatory archetype as this has been analyzed by such writers as C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. This aspect of her writing has come in for considerable attention on the part of critics who, like the novelist herself, experienced the impact of Northrop Frye's theories concerning the relationship between myth and literature in the late fifties and sixties.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the irony implicit in Atwood's repeated use of what has been described as a "basic romance structure" involving a "symbolic journey to an underground prison"<sup>2</sup> has also not escaped notice, and critics such as Frank Davey put us on our guard against the tendency to "mistake novels which deconstruct archetypes for novels which confirm them."<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubt that there is a complex interplay, amounting at points almost to a formal dialectical tension, between the underlying structure of this author's works and the direction of moral implication in which those same works tend. Whereas the classic romance scenario concludes with the triumphant return to his community of a hero newly possessed of life-giving powers or knowledge, in Atwood's work the question of whether anything positive is ultimately to be gained from her protagonist's revelatory flight from a destructive civilization never receives an unequivocal answer. In *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* we are not informed whether or on what terms the protagonists will rejoin the social order from which they have severed themselves, while in *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* doubts are raised as to whether the fugitive is destined to survive at all. Though it may well be subjected to ironic qualification or inversion or "deconstruction" in the very course of its fictional embodiment, however, the fact remains that the initiatory archetype *is* present in Atwood's works, and that no critical discussion of these novels can afford to ignore a pattern whose validity in the contemporary context the author herself is so obviously concerned to examine.

A work in the Atwood canon that illustrates with particular clarity the ambivalence attaching to the initiatory journey is *Bodily Harm* (1981),<sup>4</sup> the thematic and metaphorical structure of which hinges on a paradoxical "rebirth" into the knowledge of death and of the things that death can symbolize. The plot of the novel is not complicated in itself, although some effort must be expended in order to reconstruct the precise chronology of events from the intricately wrought analeptic structure of the work. The protagonist Rennie (Renata) Wilford is a journalist, living in Toronto with an advertising designer named Jake. She is diagnosed as having cancer and undergoes a partial mastectomy which is clinically successful, although she continues to be haunted by the fear of recurrence. She falls in love with Daniel, her physician, but although he partially reciprocates her feelings the affair is more a source of frustration than of fulfilment, and in the meantime the relationship with Jake comes to an end. Shortly afterwards Rennie learns that somebody has broken into her home in her absence and before being frightened away by the police has been waiting for her "as if he was an intimate" (13). The intruder has left a length of rope coiled on the bed, and the police warn Rennie that he will probably return. This sinister incident prompts Rennie's decision to travel to the Caribbean and write a piece about the island of St. Antoine. Among the people she encounters here and on the neighbouring island of Ste. Agathe are Paul, an American involved in contraband activities, and his former mistress Lora, who exploits Rennie to smuggle weapons into the country on Paul's behalf. Despite herself, Rennie becomes embroiled in the turmoil of a local election, a political assassination and an aborted uprising, and together with Lora is arrested and confined to a subterranean cell in an old fort. Here she is forced to witness various scenes of brutality, culminating in the sadistic beating of Lora by their prison guards. The novel ends with the

anticipation of Rennie's release through the intervention of Canadian diplomatic authorities, although there is some uncertainty as to whether this will in fact take place or is only a hopeful fantasy on her part.

Atwood has been accused, not without an element of justice, of sacrificing characterization to thematic representation, of making her personages the vehicles of ideas or attitudes that she is intent on exploring rather than endowing them with an autonomous fictional life of their own.<sup>5</sup> The character of Rennie Wilford, too, like that of her predecessors in Atwood's fiction, is somewhat excessively determined by the function she performs in articulating the novel's structure of ideas, and there is much in her portrayal which tends toward the merely schematic. Her personality is not so much dramatized as it is defined for us, with the consequence that she reads on occasion like a textbook on alienation. She is described as being almost neurotically disengaged, striving even in her dress for "neutrality" and "invisibility" (15), deliberately living at the level of "surfaces" and "appearances" (26). She "couldn't stand the idea of anyone doing her a favour" (21), thinks of sex as no more than "a pleasant form of exercise" (102), fears love because it "made you visible, soft, penetrable [and] ludicrous" (102), looks upon herself as "off to the side. She preferred it there" (26). As a journalist she has abandoned social and political issues in favour of what she terms "lifestyles" (136), the ephemeral mores of the society she lives in and to a large degree is evidently meant to reflect. Of the celebrities monopolizing the cultural limelight she decides that "she would much rather be the one who wrote things about people like this than be the one they got written about" (26). Rennie's studiously cultivated detachment, her calculated non-participation in life, is summed up in the lugubrious pun with which she greets the news that drastic cancer operations are performed only in the case of what Daniel describes as "massive involvement." "Massive involvement," says Rennie: "It's never been my thing" (34).<sup>6</sup>

It is arguable of course that the self-consciousness with which Rennie formulates her own attitude towards life is in itself symptomatic of her estrangement, and that these explicit comments are therefore meant to be obliquely rather than directly revealing. Whether this is indeed the case or not, Atwood does not limit herself to exhibiting Rennie's character

exclusively through the filter of her own self-conception, and many readers will doubtless prefer the alternative strategies that the author brings to bear. When we learn for instance that Rennie has written an article about picking up men in laundromats, although "she never actually picked men up in laundromats, she just went through the preliminaries and then explained that she was doing research" (43-44), the irony involved is of a different order from that with which Rennie perceives her own situation. A similar irony informs the scene in which Paul initiates a conversation with her at her hotel on St. Antoine, and she decides that his overture "does not have the flavour of a pickup. File it under *attempt at human contact*" (45). At one point in the hotel restaurant she catches herself compulsively churning out deftly turned phrases concerning the cuisine, and impatiently "wishes she could stop reviewing the food and just eat it" (62). The techniques of thematic exposition and symbolic commentary mesh imperfectly when Rennie takes an excursion on a boat with an observation window set in the bottom, and, although she "looks, which is her function" (88), she manages to see very little because of the murkiness of the marine floor. The strikingly effective image of the observation window, which relates (through Dr. Minnow, whose political sobriquet is "Fish") to Rennie's incapacity to fathom local politics, as well as to the dream in which she surveys her own body "under glass" (172), is somewhat spoiled by the intrusive definition of her function.

The epigraph to *Bodily Harm* is taken from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, a work which is centrally concerned with the social and ideological determinants of perception. It is perfectly apparent that Rennie, though she affects a spectator attitude towards life which is emphasized still further when she assumes the role of tourist,<sup>7</sup> is anxious more than anything else to cultivate ways of *not* seeing. Atwood elaborates a dense but highly subtle pattern of imagery to characterize Rennie's tendency to experience the world not at first hand but as filtered through the clichés of a media-ridden civilization. She habitually thinks in terms of films, or photographs, or pictures, or the various other civilized stratagems by which events are framed and neutralized and rendered innocuous.<sup>8</sup> She persists in writing about St. Antoine in tourist brochure terms while an uprising is brewing all around her, and carries a camera slung over her shoulder even while she is transporting an illegal machine gun

from one island to another. Dr. Minnow, a native of Ste. Agathe who, after a period of training abroad, chose to return to his birthplace and involve himself in local politics, urges her to modify her perspective. "All I ask you to do is look," he tells her: "We will call you an observer. . . . Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter" (133-34). That this is no elementary undertaking becomes apparent to Rennie when she is compelled at the end to witness the raw spectacle of human viciousness, and she "doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" (293).

As the allusion to Berger's work perhaps suggests, Rennie's addiction to the world of surfaces and appearances is not meant to be viewed as a purely individual phenomenon, but rather as characteristic of the culture to which she belongs. At the same time, however, Atwood does furnish a psychological explanation for Rennie's attitude, relating it to specific incidents in her personal past which are recalled through flashback. Much of Rennie's attitude to life is the direct legacy of her upbringing in a small Ontario town with the gloomily suggestive name of Griswold, which she thinks of as a "subground . . . full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones" (18)—the reverse of a surface. In her adult life she "tries to avoid thinking about Griswold," which is reduced to being "merely something she defines herself against" (18). "Those who'd lately been clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close" is her characteristically ironic comment on her background (18), the obvious implication being that she is consciously detaching herself as completely as possible from her own roots. To some degree this would seem to represent a purely personal reaction against a claustrophobic environment, a determination not to assume potentially encumbering responsibilities or commitments:

All I could think of at the time was how to get away from Griswold. I didn't want to be trapped . . . I didn't want to have a family or be anyone's mother, ever; I had none of those ambitions. I didn't want to own any objects or inherit any. (58)

But the spiritual climate of Griswold itself, with its vacant formalisms and grim pieties, seems more than any personal failure of adaptation to have been responsible for this almost pathological detachment. "As a child," recalls Rennie, "I learned

three things well: how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them" (54). One of Rennie's earliest recollections is of her grandmother in Griswold, "prying my hands away finger by finger" (53) in punishment for some unremembered transgression, after which the girl was confined in a cellar which is a "depth" *par excellence*, and which foreshadows the cell in which her older self will be incarcerated on St. Antoine.

This emblematic episode of the severing of hand contact assumes its place in an elaborate pattern of images constructed around hands and what hands represent both as vehicles of human contact and as instruments of manipulation and domination.<sup>9</sup> Rennie's grandmother, who had attempted to eradicate in the girl any impulse towards tactile participation in her environment, succumbs finally to the senile delusion that she has lost her own hands. She insists to Rennie that the hands on the ends of her arms "are no good any more," and wants "my other hands, the ones I had before, the ones I touch things with" (57). Only at the conclusion of the novel do we learn what Rennie's actual response to her grandmother's delusion has been. "Rennie cannot bear to be touched by those groping hands. . . . She puts her own hands behind her and backs away" (297), while it is her mother who saves the situation by "tak[ing] hold of the grandmother's dangling hands, clasping them in her own" (298). Rennie is evidently afflicted by subconscious guilt at having duplicated her grandmother's cold gesture of rejection. This latent sense of guilt, the obscure recognition of her own failure, manifests itself in her dream that her dead grandmother is appearing to her, extending an impossibly remote promise of salvation:

Rennie puts out her hands but she can't touch her grandmother, her hands go right in, through, it's like touching water or new snow. Her grandmother smiles at her, the hummingbirds are around her head, lighting on her hands. Life everlasting, she says. (115)

When Rennie wakes from this dream, or thinks she does, she is convinced as her grandmother was years before that "there's something she has to find. . . . It's her hands she's looking for" (116), and a few days later she dreams that "her hands are cold, she lifts them up to look at them, but they elude her. Something's missing" (274). It is clear that Jake's remark to Rennie that

"you're cutting yourself off" (101) has a punning significance that extends well beyond her relationship with him.

The event that precipitates the gradual awakening to her own symbolic handlessness which such dreams as these reflect is Rennie's discovery that she has cancer. The disease begins to restore in the most brutal way possible the severed contact between "surface" and "depths," between the individual and her "roots," between Rennie and the body in which she has up to then merely been a tenant. The first stage of this process is the recognition that those elements in her which have been rejected or repressed or simply ignored are in fact inseparable from the self they are now menacing with extinction:

The body, sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it . . . . She'd given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She'd trusted it. Why then had it turned against her? (82)

Rennie has been treating her body as a machine to be kept in good repair, as something subordinate to what she considers to be her real self, and has accordingly tended to regard illnesses such as cancer as no more than the outward manifestations of some mental disability. Daniel tells her that while "the mind isn't separate from the body" (82), neither can the body and its ailments be regarded merely as a function of the mind. Cancer, he reminds her, "isn't a symbol, it's a disease" (83). After the operation that makes this only too vivid to her, her literal "opening up" at Daniel's hands,<sup>10</sup> Rennie finds it increasingly difficult to live at the same level as before, and, as she anxiously probes her body for symptoms of recurrence, she reflects that "from the surface you can feel nothing, but she no longer trusts surfaces" (48).

Rennie's evolving view as to the relative importance of surfaces and depths reveals itself among other things in her relation with two men who represent real or potential aspects of herself: her companion Jake and her physician Daniel. Jake, an adept in the field of advertising, inhabits the plane of disembodied appearances alone, manipulating images which bear no relation to the world of substance. "He was a packager" (103) by profession, and Rennie eventually discovers that "she was one of the things Jake was packaging" (104). Prior to her

illness, Rennie has resembled Jake in evaluating attitudes and beliefs not according to their intrinsic validity or sincerity but in terms of whether they are fashionable or not, while one of her own favourite games has been "redoing" people (141), imagining how they would look if they were differently attired or otherwise altered.

In her way, she has also been a "packager," exploiting the media in order to manipulate tastes and inspire fashion trends of almost awesome triviality. The casual, non-binding relationship she has formed with Jake, a contract of mutual gratification, cannot survive the revelation of depths that Rennie's illness both entails and symbolizes: afterwards "she didn't want him to touch her and she didn't know why, and he didn't really want to touch her either but he wouldn't admit it" (197). On the one hand Rennie's surface is too marred after her operation to lend itself any longer as a convenient screen on which Jake can project his fantasies, while on the other the deeper implications of these same fantasies become increasingly obvious to Rennie herself.

Daniel, by contrast, lives and works at the level of depths rather than surfaces. Rennie attributes the sentiments he arouses in her to the fact that "he knows something about her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like inside" (80-81). She supposes that he must exert a similar fascination on all of his patients, for "he's the only man in the world who knows the truth, he's looked into each one of us and seen death" (142-43). At the same time, unlike Jake and Rennie herself, he is virtually unconscious of himself, indifferent to his own surface or public image: "he didn't seem to think of himself much in any way at all. This was the difference between Daniel and the people she knew" (140). When Daniel asks her how she would "redo" him her reply is formulated in terms of the hand imagery that is employed throughout the novel as a kind of symbolic notation: "'If I could get my hands on you?' said Rennie. 'I wouldn't, you're perfect the way you are'" (142). In making this disclaimer she is not being altogether sincere, for she does in her way try to "redo" him by manoeuvring him into an affair which is contrary to his principles, an effort that might be a displaced manifestation of her compulsion to control the knowledge of disease and death that he has gained by "looking into" her. She is unsuccessful in this endeavour, however, and her incapacity to relate to Daniel on his own terms indicates her continuing failure to come to



grips with the depths at which he both literally and figuratively operates.

At this point Rennie is still suspended between the dimensions of surface and depths, dislodged from the one but not yet able to immerse herself in the other. She thinks of her position with respect to these dimensions in terms of the impossibility of contact with the two men who represent them—"One man I'm not allowed to touch . . . and another I won't allow to touch me" (198)—but it is clear that this incapacity to relate to people in the external world reflects a profound schism within herself. It is above all with her own forgotten self, her "sinister twin," that Rennie must establish contact, as she herself intuits during a dream she has of herself undergoing a surgical operation: "she can see everything, clear and sharp, under glass, her body is down there on the table . . . she wants to rejoin her body but she can't get down" (172-73). It is thus symbolically appropriate that the actual operation through which Daniel saves Rennie's life and at the same time initiates the process by which she awakens to an understanding of her own real nature should be described in terms of a rebirth. When she recovers from the anaesthetic after her operation her hand is being held by Daniel, who is "telling her that he had saved her life . . . and now he was dragging her back into it, this life that he had saved. By the hand" (32). Later Daniel says of her operation that "it was almost like being given a second life" (84), and Rennie thinks of him that "he knows we've been resurrected" (143).

Although the symbolic significance of the name Renata is reinforced by these images of resurrection from some figurative death, the future projection implied by the name Wilford suggests quite clearly that rebirth is only the first stage in a long journey.<sup>11</sup> For a descent into the "depths" that underlie surfaces cannot cease with the simple acknowledgement that one has a vulnerable and in the end "provisional" body (143), however important a phase in the process of self-discovery this may be. Shortly before her operation Rennie has been conducting research into the pornographic exploitation of sexual violence, and she been so repelled by the momentary glimpse she has caught into the dark abyss of human depravity that she has abandoned the project, deciding that "there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths" (211). Once

having been evicted from the world of surfaces by the consciousness of her own susceptibility to the diseases of the flesh, however, Rennie is obliged to pursue her exploration of the depths still further, learning in the end that the "malignancy" she has encountered in the form of her illness (32) is in fact an attribute of the world at large (262, 289).

From the symbolic point of view, the discovery that a stranger has been occupying her home while she is away is an external correlative of Rennie's anguished discovery that a tumour has lodged itself within her body. The police warn Rennie that the stranger will return ("That kind always comes back" [14]), just as she fears a recurrence of her illness. The incident therefore objectifies her growing awareness of the destructive forces lurking just below the familiar surface of life, while the rope the intruder leaves with evidently vicious intent betokens a connection which must be established, however undesired it may be. Perhaps significantly, ropes are several times associated with hands and arms in this novel. On St. Antoine Rennie is assisted into a boat by a man who "reaches out a long ropy arm, a hand like a clamp, to help her up" (87), while another boat is later described as having "looped ropes thick as a wrist" (175). Ropes, like hands, can serve as symbols of mediation, and the intruder who breaks into Rennie's Toronto apartment thus assumes the bizarre function of emissary:

He was an ambassador, from some place she didn't want to know any more about. The piece of rope . . . was . . . a message; it was someone's twisted idea of love. . . . And when you pulled on the rope, which after all reached down into darkness, what would come up? What was at the end, *the end*? A hand, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally a face. At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger. (41)

After this invasion Rennie can no longer maintain her pose of cool detachment from the world: "She felt implicated, even though she had done nothing and nothing had been done to her" (40). The sense of dissociation from herself which has already been growing in her in consequence of her illness, which expresses itself among other things in the dream in which she witnesses an operation being performed on her own body, is aggravated still further, to the point that she begins to "see

herself from the outside, as if she was a moving target in someone else's binoculars" (40).

Rennie's initial reaction to this intrusion and to her consequent sense of having been implicated despite herself (the "massive involvement" which refers both to cancer and to an attitude of mind) is one of refusal and flight, a reversion to the strategy of avoidance which has already prompted her repudiation of Griswold and all it represents. Her decision to travel to St. Antoine is explained in terms of a search for anonymity: "She is away, she is *out*, which is what she wanted. . . . In a way she's invisible. In a way she's safe" (39). After witnessing the exaggerated terror with which she recoils from an innocent attempt at personal contact on the island, Paul tells her that she is suffering from what he terms "alien reaction paranoia," that "because you don't know what's dangerous and what isn't, everything seems dangerous" (76). But her effort to avoid danger by attaining to a personal limbo of perfect neutrality is destined to failure. Not only do the destructive forces she fears reside no less within herself than in the external world, but her desire to insulate herself from that world runs counter to an even more powerful impulse operating within her, the instinctive craving for physical and emotional contact which is gradually leading her back towards her own forgotten humanity.

Once again it is the imagery of hands that functions as an index of her developing attitude. When she has been with Daniel, Rennie has yearned for "the touch of the hand that could transform you, change everything, magic" (195). Passionately dedicated to helping other people, Daniel is virtually identified with the hands that Rennie comes to realize she herself has lost: "all she could imagine were his hands . . . his soul was in his hands" (198). The morning after her arrival on St. Antoine Rennie wonders whether she, like other cancer victims, will resort to faith healing, "the laying on of hands by those who say they can see vibrations flowing out of their fingers in the form of a holy red light" (60). Shortly afterwards she finds herself being pursued by a deaf and dumb man, whose inexplicable attentions strike her as being "too much like the kind of bad dream she wishes she could stop having" (74). It is only when Paul explains that the man simply wants to shake hands with her in the conviction that the gesture will bring her good luck that Rennie realizes that "he's only been trying to give her something" (75).

Some time later Rennie witnesses an old woman on Ste. Agathe applying her healing powers to a tourist, and she too "wants to know what it feels like, she wants to put herself into the care of those magic hands" (194). Immediately afterwards she quite literally puts herself into Paul's hands—he "reaches down for her. She takes hold of his hands; she doesn't know where they're going" (194)—and after she and Paul have become lovers, finds her hands being taken by a group of native girls (232).

It is Paul who serves as the agency whereby Rennie is at last restored to her own body. At first she is afraid that the scar left by her operation will repel him as it has Jake, but these fears are dispelled when she perceives his actual reaction, and understands that "he's seen people a lot deader than her" (204). The lovemaking scene that follows implicates Rennie's final coming to terms not only with her physical self, but also with the certain consciousness of her own inevitable decline and death:

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened, she's being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body's desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; but meanwhile she's solid after all, she's still here on the earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched. (204)

This quasi-mystical moment of "incarnation" represents the bridging of the gap between mind and body that Rennie has recognized in the dream in which she perceives her own body "under glass." Having discovered that contact with the world is still possible, that she can after all be touched, Rennie herself is enabled in her turn to "lay on hands." She begins with Paul himself: "She owes him something: he was the one who gave her back her body; wasn't he? . . . Rennie puts her hands on him. It can be, after all, a sort of comfort. A kindness" (248).

But the process of enlightenment in which she is engaged does not reach its termination even here. Rennie may have become reconciled to the perpetual threat of physical malignancy within herself, but she has yet to confront a still more terrifying form of malignancy in the world about her, a spiritual cancer menacing her very conception of what it is to be human in the

first place. This is the capacity for cruelty which she briefly glimpsed in Toronto, while researching her article on pornography, and which so profoundly disturbed her on that occasion that she refused to pursue her investigations any further. Once again the process of discovery expresses itself symbolically as a journey of descent, assuming the form this time of Rennie's physical incarceration in a subterranean cell on the Kafkaesque charge of "suspicion" (262). When she first visits Fort Industry in the company of Dr. Minnow, the underground corridor he shows her is "too much like a cellar for Rennie" (131). It recalls the cellar to which she was confined by her grandmother for real or imagined misdemeanours, a punishment which as we have seen is both psychologically and symbolically linked with her preference for surfaces over depths. "When I was shut in the cellar I always sat on the top stair" (53), Rennie recalls in connection with the ordeals to which she was subjected as a child. Here she is afforded no such option.

Rennie shares her cell with Lora, a woman she regards as different from herself in every respect. Lora is deeply immersed in the life of the island, not excluding its criminal aspects, and displays nothing of Rennie's own fastidious detachment; when the old native healer on Ste. Agathe is wounded, for instance, it is Lora who washes the blood from her face, whereas Rennie herself feels squeamish at the sight of blood and wants only to be let "off the hook" (230). Thrust into each other's company, the two women pass the time by recounting their personal experiences; much of the novel, indeed, as the reader only now learns, has in fact consisted in these narrations. Listening to her companion, Rennie is chagrined to discover that "Lora has better stories" (271) than herself, that she has undergone experiences whose lurid authenticity contrasts vividly with the pseudo-existence that Rennie has been living. Lora, it turns out, has actually been raised in cellars of one kind and another (110), and she is therefore conversant with the depths that Rennie has always shunned. She has picked up certain tricks for survival in the course of her adventures, and Rennie is disgusted to learn that she is prostituting herself in order to secure minor concessions from the prison guards. Although she realizes quickly enough that she is hardly in a position to pass judgement on Lora, she is still unable to overcome her repugnance. "She looks down at her hands, which ought to contain comfort.

Compassion. She ought to go over to Lora and put her arms around her and pat her on the back, but she can't" (286).

Rennie's attitude begins to undergo a transformation once she understands where the rope that has been left in her apartment in Toronto in fact leads. The rope has been rather smugly exhibited to her by two police officers, ostensibly the personifications of civilized order, who while waiting for her return have ensconced themselves in her kitchen like the faceless stranger himself (12). One of these men asks questions concerning Rennie's personal life and habits that are not altogether innocent of malice, and may indeed betray a suppressed voyeuristic streak (13-15). Rennie encounters subsequent pairs of policemen, none of whom inspire much confidence, at the air terminal on St. Antoine (35-36), at a bar (92), in the street outside her hotel (146), and in her own hotel room when she is arrested on the charge of "suspicion" (261-62). After the uprising on Ste. Agathe has been quelled, the local police have rounded up the insurgents and "tied the men up with ropes" (267). Some time later a number of these prisoners are tortured by their police guards in a courtyard dominated by a scaffold, a structure which, dating back to the British occupation of the island, recalls the use civilization makes of ropes as instruments of social regimentation. One prisoner, who turns out to be the deaf and dumb man met earlier, is treated with particular ferocity: "The man falls forward, he's kept from hitting the pavement by the ropes that link him to the other men" (289-90). As she witnesses this orgy of gratuitous cruelty Rennie is overwhelmed by a dark revelation of universal complicity in evil:

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. Nobody is exempt from anything. (290)

After this climactic vision, which subverts the categories of inside and outside, of here and there, by which she has hitherto sought to confer moral immunity on herself, Rennie can no longer deny her own involvement in anything. Depths have become surfaces. The diagrammatic simplicity of the victor/victim dichotomy is undermined by the consciousness that the roles can be reversed without in the least affecting the

essential structure of relationships.<sup>12</sup> As Paul, in some ways Rennie's mentor in her journey towards enlightenment, has earlier remarked, "there's only people with power and people without power. Sometimes they change places, that's all" (240).

But although this obliteration of the tidy distinctions upon which her existence has been founded leaves Rennie feeling fatally implicated in everything she sees, it also has its positive aspect. When, shortly after the torture episode, Lora too is savagely beaten by the prison guards, Rennie finally finds it within herself to acknowledge her essential kinship with her companion and embody that recognition in a concrete act. At first Lora's mangled face seems to be "the face of a stranger" (298)—the mask of the "faceless stranger" that Rennie has been fleeing from throughout the novel—but then she realizes that "it's the face of Lora after all, there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name" (299). She uses her own saliva to wash the blood off Lora's face, as Lora herself has earlier washed the blood from the face of the old healer. After this,

She's holding Lora's left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, and yet she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there's an invisible hole in the air. Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she's gritting her teeth with the effort . . . 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. (299)

Rennie is thus duplicating in her own way the act that Daniel performed for her sake some time before, laying on hands in order to bring another human being back to life. By so doing she rediscovers the hands she forfeited in her youth, "feel[ing] the shape of a hand in hers . . . there but not there. . . . It will always be there now" (300). The consequence of this crucial act of midwifery would seem to be that "something" is indeed "born," if not Lora herself then the new "subversive" reporter Rennie (301), who is capable for the first time in her life of seeing things not as society pretends they are but as they are in reality. "What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same" (300). What remains uncertain is

whether this "rebirth" is a purely private, existential event only, or one that might bring some benefit to the rest of mankind.

A number of critics have debated the question of whether Rennie is actually released from prison or not, as well as that of whether Lora is literally restored to life through Rennie's ministrations. Atwood's convoluted narrative design seems expressly calculated to generate doubts as to the "reality" of the final episodes, and as Carrington points out the "paradoxical statements" with which the novel concludes "suggest that these scenes of rescue and return represent only a fantasy ascent from the dark underground of the dungeon."<sup>13</sup> Without wishing to go too deeply into this question, I would suggest that Atwood, in shifting to the future tense to describe Rennie's release, intends to introduce an element of formal ambiguity which is essential to her meaning. For the clear implication of the work is that Rennie, whether she is physically liberated from the prison or not, can never escape the knowledge of human evil which that prison has come to symbolize. At the same time the recognition of human kinship which finds positive expression in Rennie's effort to revive Lora is one whose redemptive value is entirely independent of its practical consequences. In a certain sense, then, it is irrelevant whether Rennie is liberated or not, or whether Lora is resuscitated or not. Rennie remains imprisoned within the malignant cell even if she is free, and is freed by the capacity to lay on hands even if she remains in prison. It is this paradox that explains the apparently contradictory statements with which the novel concludes: "She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky" (301).

*Bodily Harm* is, as Atwood herself once described it, an "anti-thriller,"<sup>14</sup> and frustrates the reader's conditioned expectation that suspense will be resolved in the customary manner. This refusal to play the game would seem to be part and parcel of Atwood's didactic point, for the conventions of the thriller (or of any other popular genre) might also be seen as culturally transmitted moulds through which raw experience is crystallized, neutralized and packaged for general consumption. Writing about life as if it were susceptible to thriller treatment is not much different from treating life as if it were simply a potential photograph or film or series of "lifestyles" articles. It is another way of not seeing, of confining one's experience to a



fraudulent surface, a way which is parodied by Rennie's own abbreviated technique for reading mystery stories.<sup>15</sup> But murder is real, as is human evil in all its manifestations, and an unmediated encounter with the crude actuality of bodily harm entails the shattering of the conventionalized modes of perceiving the world that genres of his kind exemplify. Looked at from a certain point of view, then, *Bodily Harm* is a self-deconstructing novel, to use an unwieldy but perhaps useful term. When Atwood says that her book takes the components of the thriller genre "and then pulls them inside out, as you would a glove,"<sup>16</sup> it is clear that the process she is describing mirrors that through which her protagonist is "turned inside out" during her climactic moment of vision in the prison (290). In overturning the very convention it implicitly invokes, denying its own generic postulates, the book enacts on a formal level the more general process of subverting those illusory categories that distance the perceiver from the world and from herself: the distinctions between aggressors and victims, depths and surfaces, here and there, mind and body, "I" and "thou." The structural ambiguity of the novel thus serves to reinforce a moral message which is very far from ambiguous, that only through a process of radical subversion is it possible to confront the malignant cell that lurks both within and outside the self, and to recognize in it the stranger's face which is our own.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To cite a handful of studies written in this vein, see Rosemary Sullivan, "Surfacing and Deliverance," *Canadian Literature* 67 (1976): 6-20; Rosemary Sullivan, "Breaking the Circle," *The Malahat Review* 41 (1977): 30-41; Josie P. Campbell, "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Mosaic* 11 (1978): 17-28; Catherine McLay, "The Dark Voyage: *The Edible Woman* as Romance," in Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, eds., *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1981): 123-38; Annis Pratt, "Surfacing and the Rebirth Journey," in Davidson and Davidson 139-57; Ildiko de Papp Carrington, "Another Symbolic Descent," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 26 (1983): 45-63; Ildiko de Papp Carrington, *Margaret Atwood and Her Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Carrington, *Margaret Atwood and Her Works* 6.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Davey, *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984): 67.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, rpt. 1984). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Robin Skelton's review of *The Edible Woman* in *The Malahat Review* 13 (1970): 108-9.

<sup>6</sup> The pun recurs on 234 and 296.

<sup>7</sup> Carrington points out that "Rennie's way of seeing life through the eyes of a tourist is a metaphor for a deliberate refusal to commit oneself to life, to risk the vulnerability of active participation," and draws a valuable analogy with Atwood's short story "A Travel Piece." "Another Symbolic Descent" 45-46.

<sup>8</sup> These images have been discussed at length by Sharon R. Wilson in "Turning Life into Popular Art: *Bodily Harm's* Life-Tourist," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 10 (1985): 136-45.

<sup>9</sup> This vein of imagery has been closely examined by Carrington. See "Another Symbolic Descent" 52-53 and *Margaret Atwood and Her Works* 64-66.

<sup>10</sup> "Opening up" is one of the many verbal leitmotifs of this novel. Rennie cannot recall whether Jake has said "I want to be the one you open up for" (106) or "I want to be the one who opens you up" (106), but in either case of course Jake cannot serve as an agent of opening. Later Rennie wants to "open up" Daniel (196), who has literally opened her up, and is herself finally "opened" by Paul (204).

<sup>11</sup> The significance of Rennie's full name is discussed by Carrington in "Another Symbolic Descent" 49.

<sup>12</sup> "Victor/Victim," the title of a novel by Michael Charters, is the term Atwood uses to designate the "basic game" in Position Two of her taxonomy of victim positions. See *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972): 37.

<sup>13</sup> Carrington, "Another Symbolic Descent" 58.

<sup>14</sup> Betsy Draine, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," in *Interviews with Contemporary Writers: Second Series, 1972-1982*, ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison: U of Wisconsin): 379.

<sup>15</sup> She tries to pick the predestined murder victim from the cast of characters, then skips ahead to the murder and attempts to guess the identity of the criminal, and finally turns to the end of the book to see if she is right (245-46).

<sup>16</sup> Draine 379.