Double-Read: on Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

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THERE IS A DOUBLENESS in the language of criticism about which one hardly ever speaks in public and yet which is becoming more and more important to me; it is the split that I experience when the critic who writes about a given book does not seem to have read the book that I read, despite the fact that s/he cites the same title and author. This can occur to a greater or lesser degree for any book but when there is no coincidence of perception at all it always seems to be books by women writers that are in question.

I have just read Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*. The back cover of the paperback edition says:

> By turns comic, satiric, relentless, and terrifying, Margaret Atwood's new novel is ultimately an exploration of human defensiveness, the lust for power both sexual and political, and the need for a compassion that goes beyond what we ordinarily mean by *love*.

I didn't discover this statement until I had finished the novel and it gave me a shock. This did not describe the book I had just finished. I know that blurbs frequently lead one astray and that one never

knows who wrote them, but they do tend to be drafted by someone who has read the book and who wants it to sell. Not only that, but blurbs indicate to readers what they should look for and, if one can judge by most students, it is very clear that people usually see what it has been suggested to them that they will see. So blurbs, accurate or not, are important and add a level of language to the novel in question. This one points out the traditional male themes of power expressed through sex and politics, and suggests the presence of compassion and great love.

The novel I read was not comic; there was no compassion in it, nor was there any love. The novel I read left me feeling slightly degraded, and I had a very strong feeling that the person who had written the novel did not like women very much.

Bodily Harm is dominated by its women characters and they are all portrayed as defective. Rennie has had breast cancer and henceforth is viewed and views herself as a faulty love object/sex machine. The only person who makes love to her after she knows she has cancer is Paul, the ultimate macho male who plays with danger and moves on. She is just another of the taboo and dangerous commodities he deals in (guns, drugs, and women with socially unacceptable diseases), an object linked to an image of death. Rennie does not value herself anywhere but in bed. She sees herself as rotten, and the maggot and split fruit images she uses for herself are never transformed into or counterbalanced by less distasteful or more positive ones.

All the other women are portrayed as ridiculous. Jocasta dresses freakily, is set up negatively as a potential lesbian, and her idea of compassion is to pay for lunch. Lora is an aging hippie, a bore and a nuisance. Elva is presented as an ancient and possibly crazy religious maniac. The German tourists are stereotypical, earnest spinsters. The American tourist has spindly white legs and silly shorts. The black women are either criminals or described as lying around jerking their hips.

All the women are victims because of their sex and as a result of their sex they are brutalized in some way. Atwood does in fact prepare us for this by the quotation she chooses to begin the book:

> A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence. . . defines

what can and cannot be done to her.

(John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

Rennie faces the threat of the coil of rope on her bed, the hostile police, Jake's threatening games when he takes her to bed. The sight of the deaf and dumb man being beaten is transformed into Lora being beaten in her turn. Deaf and dumb beggars: the image of the women in the novel.

Lora has indeed been beaten all her life; she has behaved as a prostitute, and is left at the end of the novel as the very image of degradation. She is unconscious, her face pulped. Those who beat her aimed for breasts and belly and continued until she befouled herself. She is an animal left to die. Elva also gets beaten: she is hit on the head by a pistol butt, but she is not degraded by the men around her. She is in fact an agent of destruction working against women, for she causes pain to the German woman and trouble for Rennie, and thus she degrades herself. These are the women who are hurt physically. Rennie, on the other hand, is never hurt physically by others, and indeed we realize that she has never been allowed active and physical contact with either people or objects. Harm is done to her by way of her imagination through images of death—the chief of which is her cancer. Rennie is beating herself to death from the inside. Cancer: the wages of repression, as Sontag says.[1] Rennie feels degraded in the eyes of men, just as other women are seen to be. Even the schoolgirls are tainted. The description of them when they accompany Rennie creates the same aura of begging and of promiscuity that surrounds the other women in the book.

The tone of the whole novel is set by the policeman who goes on producing pornography until Rennie is sick, and by what he shows the two women—a rat emerging from a vagina. That is perhaps the most satirical comment in the whole book: an anonymous woman, important only for her sex organs, and a rat who uses them. It is the one important piece of double-level language and I wonder how many of us, struck by the graphic image and our immediate horror, fail to see it as the key to the work. Rennie certainly doesn't grasp its importance as she goes from Jake, to Daniel to Paul, offering herself as a substandard sex object.

This image symbolizes the attitude to women manifest through-

out the novel. To return, then, to the blurb quoted above: for me there is no love, no compassion, no comedy; power is power over women and it is taken for granted by the men and by the women. If anybody lusts for it, the women do. The politics are on the surface and are really unimportant for they are only there to keep the plot moving. The novel is perhaps comic and satiric for men; it is certainly relentless and terrifying for women readers.

After finding this massive discrepancy between my attitude and that of the cover blurb, I listened to an interview with Margaret Atwood on CBC radio.[2] She talked about imprisonment and torture in the Third World, and how lucky and naive Canadians are; she talked about what people did with their hands. That wasn't my novel either so I went to the reviews.[3]

At best the reviewers recognized a certain amount of unpleasantness in the world and in the male species. Certain of them spent time on hands—women's lost hands—but no one drew the obvious conclusion that people who have lost their hands are powerless, handicapped and defenseless. The men use their hands to choke, beat or otherwise torture the women in the novel; the women's hands are cut off. They can do nothing on their own behalf except very occasionally alleviate each other's pain within the context of their powerlessness—Elva helps the German, and Rennie makes a similar gesture towards Lora, and this is blown up out of all proportion by the reviewers.

It all reminds me of the first time I encountered this problem of wildly divergent interpretations: I was doing some work on Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Les Belles Images*. The critics at the time of publication had described it as very little better than a Harlequin romance, whereas I saw it as the ficitional illustration of one or two precise arguments offered by *The Second Sex*.[4] Beauvoir herself spoke of it as the most literary of her novels. I could come to terms with that as, after all, what is more literary than an *exemplum*, but I never did come to terms with what the critics had written. In my opinion they are wrong because they had not taken into account her previous work. How could the author of *The Second Sex* start writing stories for *Elle*? They were so wrong that their wrong-headedness had to be deliberate, I thought, for how could people who had been writing

about Beauvoir for years be so stupid? Then I realized that if you looked primarily at the male characters you got the critics' reading, and mine came from the female characters who very obviously dominated the novel. The error was the same as the one I feel is being made by the critics (and readers) of *Bodily Harm.* Just as *Bodily Harm* is clearly a novel about Rennie's attitude to herself and the way she has been set up to see herself in terms dictated by male sexual desires, so *Les Belles Images* is the story of Laurence's growing awareness of the way in which women are brought up to conform to the images projected by their menfolk, valuable only if valued by a man. Both novels show very clearly how women are repressed and psychically deformed by the patterns of male expectation that society imposes upon them. In both novels the major characters are female, the themes are those important to women, and thus the structural patterns are necessarily different from those in a novel oriented towards male values.

It seems to me that critics and blurb writers do what all my male students and some of my female students do when first faced by female patterns they know. Male patterns are seen as valuable and important; they are dominant in society, they are pointed out to us, analyzed, discussed, and we are used to looking for them. And the result is that we usually find them whether they are there or not. The back-cover description of *Bodily Harm* is an excellent example of the practice, and when followed as it is by: "Rennie. . . is Atwood's most believable and most memorable character. . . [her] most satisfying novel yet" (*The Globe and Mail*), we are all being helped by double-talk to devalue ourselves a little more. How could the critic who read the book I read call this novel satisfying?

In fact the critic did not find it satisfying, at least not in the way suggested by the excerpt in the blurb. He actually wrote: "In terms of literary skill this is her most satisfying novel yet" and went on to talk about male aggression, disease, "the air of menace" that is generated by events and metaphors, the humiliation of Rennie, and Atwoods's sardonic humour. His review ended with the following statement: "But the overriding pessimism of the novel is the feeling Atwood conveys that as long as men run the world, things won't change much."[5] This is by far the closest reading to my own, though

I would not agree with the last sentence which twists the novel into a male orientation yet again. I would say that "the overriding pessimism" is the feeling Atwood conveys that women should continue to be used as victims because they deserve no better.

I am not disputing the fact that the critics see what they write, but rather I am bewailing what they omit. The patterns the critics define are certainly there, but the sub-text on women is so much more important because it is unrelentingly vicious. The maggot and rat images, the beatings and degradations mentioned are but the most blatant of the multitudinous examples of the undermining of women's sense of self present in the novel. The description and use of the female characters reinforce all levels of stereotyping and oppression of women. Yet no one that I have read talks about *Bodily Harm* as a piece of overt misogyny, and it is on its way into the canon of accepted literature that will be taught to classes (mainly women) by teachers (mainly men) who will continue down the path laid by these first critics. No wonder students come to me sometimes to worry out loud. "I don't think I'm any good," they say. "I don't like that book but it must be a very good one if it's on a course. When I read it, it doesn't seem to be the one the prof was talking about."

It seems to me that there is frequently a discrepancy between what the first people who write about a book say about it and what the book actually says. And when the first readers are trained in the male-dominated critical approaches of the traditional humanities, and the book is by a woman, the chance of discrepancy is much greater than for a book by a male writer. Yet, once the critical patterns have been laid out, once we have been told what we should see, it becomes increasingly difficult for the majority of readers to see anything else. Double-read is a serious problem for us all.

Notes

[1]Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor* (New York, 1977), p. 21.

[2]"Sunday Morning", 22nd August 1982.

[3]The first six I was able to put my hands on were the following: *Macleans* (5th Oct. 1982), pp. 43–44, *Books in Canada* (Oct. 1981), pp. 9–11, *Canadian Forum* (Dec. 1981), p. 29, *Library Journal (Feb.* 15, 1982), p. 471, *Saturday Review* (March 1982), p. 62, *Newsweek* (March 29, 1982), p. 71.

[4]See J. Waelti-Walters, *Fairytales and the Female Imagination* (Montreal, 1982), Chapter 3.

[5]William French, *Globe & Mail* (October 3rd 1981), Section E, p. 17.