

Anecdote as Escape from Reality in the Short Fiction of Margaret Atwood

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Readers familiar with the fiction of Margaret Atwood recognize that a good deal of her work portrays various attempts, on the part of her protagonists, either to flee or to achieve a genuine subjectivity. *Surfacing*, arguably Atwood's most famous work, traces the journey of a nameless protagonist out of the city into the wilderness where she sheds the psychological and spiritual trappings of modernity and achieves a porous subjectivity that straddles the borders of the living and the dead. In this questioning of the subjectivity of the individual Atwood's work is not unlike that of David Henry Hwang, who, working in a different medium, also opens the gates meant to keep the dead in their "rightful place," thus rejecting the watertight subjectivities of modernity.

In a persuasive article (2008) on the ethical connections of the "subjectivity of the real" in Atwood's fiction, Simone Drichel shows how protagonists in Atwood's travel fiction—particularly *Bodily Harm* (1981)—resist the subjectivity of the real—proffered in encounters with the Other—by escaping into what Said calls "texts" of familiarity, often the set travel pieces of glossy magazines which encapsulate the "gaze" of the concupiscent first world towards the negotiable pleasures of developing vacationlands.

As Drichel amply illustrates, Rennie, the protagonist of *Bodily Harm*, uses much of her energy on her Caribbean island vacation spot to "insulate herself against the threat of too much reality by invoking print material" (30); whenever the reality of life on the island encroaches, "Rennie reverts back to the "textual attitude" in an attempt to reassert her power over what Hegel calls the 'truth of self-certainty'" (30–31). Throughout the novel, Drichel asserts, incidents occur which demonstrate "the same underlying pattern of a safe surface (or image) and a threatening reality beneath" (31).

The purpose of this paper is to examine several short stories by Atwood in which a protagonist attempts to turn the reality of an experience with the Other into an "anecdote," that type of representative text which dilutes the experience and returns the protagonist to the safe halls of familiarity. These instances in which experiences are reduced to anecdotes, I will show, are tantamount to the same type of escape from the real that Drichel documents throughout *Bodily Harm*:

. . . what works in all these examples is a privileging of representation over the real. In fact, it is an attempt to create the real discursively so that representation might provide the lens through which the real is viewed, thus stalling its threat. (31)

To my knowledge no previous research has dealt with Atwood's use of anecdote as retreat from the

real. I would like to explore this idea together with her ideas on the relationship between the act of narration and communicating with the Dead as outlined in the Empson lectures Atwood gave at the University of Cambridge, later collected in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002).

“You may find the subject a little peculiar,” Atwood warns the reader in the title essay of the collection. “It is a little peculiar. Writing itself is a little peculiar” (140). The subject in question is the connection between the art of writing and the journey the writer must make, according to Atwood, to the land of the dead:

The title of this chapter is ‘Negotiating with the dead,’ and its hypothesis is that not just some, but all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead. (140)

Atwood asserts that the story, the narrative itself, is the treasure the writer brings back from such negotiation with the dead. The subjectivity of the writer is open to the presence of the dead, and this in turn lends the subjectivity a visionary quality. To illustrate this point Atwood cites a poem by Canadian Anne Hebert, “The Tomb of Kings,” in which

A dreaming child—a girl, ‘amazed, barely born’—goes down into a tomb, through an underground labyrinth, carrying her heart on her fist in the form of a blind falcon. . . . An exchange takes place—a vampiristic ritual in which the dead drink the living, and try to kill her. She shakes the dead away and frees herself; but as a result of whatever it is that has gone on, her heart—the blind bird—shows signs of being able to see. (159)

I would like to argue in this paper that an encounter with the Other functions in much the same way as an encounter with the dead in Atwood’s stories, and that a refusal to ingest such an experience by turning it into anecdote amounts to a surrender of the gift of vision described above.

One of the earliest stories of this type is “A Travel Piece” (1977). Annette, the protagonist of this story, writes travel pieces for the newspaper and the occasional glossy magazine; she is a professional producer of anecdotes. The formula for her pieces is prescribed; they should consist of

Little anecdotes, the personal touch, details on where to eat and how good the service is, jokes told by the barman if any, where to go shopping for bargains, all those straw hats and curios, out-of-the-way things you might do, such as climbing an extinct volcano or cooking a parrot-fish on a coral reef, if you had the energy and the desire. (139)

Being a travel writer means that Annette must stick to amusing and exotic anecdotes, and she is good at this: “she has a knack for discovering local oddities, she knows what to look for, she has an eye for detail” (131). She also knows what to avoid in her work: she cannot include the ironic fact that the lettering on the aging plane she is seated on as the story opens has eroded and now reads “LIFE JEST INDER FRONT OF YOUR SEAT” (131). She cannot share this humor with her readers because all hints of danger, including the plane’s age, must be avoided:

People, she found, did not want any hint of danger in the kind of articles it was her business to write. Even the ones who would never go to the places she described, who could not afford it, did not want to hear about the danger or even unpleasantness; it was as if they wanted to believe that there was somewhere left in the world where all was well, where unpleasant things did not happen. An unspoiled Eden; that had been a useful phrase. (131)

But this constant production of pleasant anecdotes is taking its toll on Annette, who feels that she is out of touch with reality. She feels that “Things were being kept from her . . . especially in lobbies and in cars taking her to and from airports,” (132). She has mentioned her sense of dis-ease to her husband, who was shocked to find something in her other than “Her capacity for being pleased, delighted even . . .,” an ability which has “pervaded their marriage” (132). Annette’s discomfort lies in her conviction that “Real events happen to other people . . . why not me?” And she is haunted by the idea that “they are happening, all around her, but . . . they’re being kept from her” (133).

Reality breaks in, though, as the aging plane Annette is travelling on begins a swift, unscheduled descent towards the ocean. Annette’s common sense, plus years of passing on travel tips to others, stand her in good stead

The man next to Annette is white as a sheet. She asks him if he wants a Rolaid, but he doesn’t, so she eats one herself. She carries a small arsenal of patent medicines with her on these trips: laxatives, cold remedies, vitamin C, aspirins; everything you can get she’s had a dose of at one time or another. (134)

The same qualities of common sense and preparedness help out as Annette lingers behind the frantically exiting passengers: she picks up some sandwiches from the abandoned galley, and a few bottles of ginger ale. Even as she boards the lifeboat she can’t help noticing the pleasant contrast between the orange of the canvas life boat and the striking blue of the vast ocean around them. Her anecdote machine takes over:

For exploring the Caribbean, a round orange lifeboat strikes an unusual note. The vistas are charming, and you have a body-to-body contact with the sea which is simply not possible in any other kind of boat. Take some sandwiches and plan to stay out for lunch! ((138: italics in original)

As the day wears on and no search plane appears in the blistering sky, Annette’s store of anecdotes wears thin and she begins to think she will have to alter the story she sends to the newspaper:

She won’t even have to write it, it will be her story As Told To, with a picture of herself, emaciated and sunburned but smiling bravely. Tomorrow she should take some pictures of the others. (142)

Though Drichel, in the article mentioned above, does not discuss this story, we can see parallel lines between Rennie’s struggle in that novel and Annette’s passage through “A Travel Piece:” “Rennie,” Drichel asserts, “repeatedly attempts to insulate herself against the threat of too much reality by invoking print material” (30). Annette, too, as we have seen, rehearses texts in the most extreme of circumstances to protect herself from the encroaching reality.

The story ends with the impending slaughter of one of the group who has become delirious after drinking seawater. Someone is searching for a knife to end the delirious member's agony quickly, and Annette is being propelled into the spectre of something she does not want to witness; yet even at this breakthrough of reality her perception is clouded with the text of another slaughter:

Annette feels she is about to witness something mundane and horrible, doubly so because it will be bathed not in sinister blood-red lightning she has walked in all her life; some tacky ritual put on for the tourists, tacky because it is put on for tourists, for those who are not responsible, for those who make the lives of others their transient spectacle and pleasure. She is a professional tourist, she works at being pleased and at not participating; at sitting still and watching. But they are going to slit his throat, like that pig on the beach at Mexico, and for once she does not find it quaint and unusual. (143)

The passage above provides some essential information about the subjectivity of those characters in Atwood who choose to keep reality at a distance by clothing it in anecdote; anecdote is the product of "the professional tourist," and the status of tourist means "not participating," but rather, "sitting still and watching." Anecdote is a form of insulation as well as isolation, allowing one the consolation of "what Hegel calls the 'truth of self-certainty'" (30-31).

The story ends with the impending mercy killing and Annette's questioning of her subjectivity: is she simply an observer, or is she a participant? "Am I one of them or not?" she wonders, finally contemplating her existential status with some doubt.

A related story from the same volume of short stories is "The Man from Mars." Bibliographical information for the individual stories included in *Dancing Girls* (1977) indicates that this story was published two years after "A Travel Piece" (1975). The later story also deals with an encounter with the Other, although the travel involved in this case is not on the part of the protagonist, but on the part of a Vietnamese exchange student who stalks the protagonist.

Christine is the youngest, and plainest, daughter of an upper-class Toronto family. She meets the Vietnamese student when he asks her for directions as she is returning home from a game of tennis. Her response to seeing him indicates how scripted her knowledge of the Other is:

He was . . . what was referred to in their family as "a person from another culture": oriental without a doubt, though perhaps not Chinese. Christine judged he must be a foreign student and gave her official welcoming smile. In high school she had been president of the United Nations Club; that year her school had been picked to represent the Egyptian delegation at the Mock Assembly. It had been an unpopular assignment — nobody wanted to be the Arabs — but she had seen it through. She had made a rather good speech about the Palestinian refugees. (10)

The scripts she has learned from family and from school are a mixture of politically correct responses, some designed to keep "other cultures" at a distance, and others designed to reward for abstract knowledge of Other-related issues.

Christine attempts to keep the encounter in the park as short as possible: she draws a map and gives it to him “with a terminal smile” (10). The foreign student wants more information; he gives her his name and asks for hers on a piece of paper, a demand which makes Christine rehearse other scripts:

Christine hesitated. If this had been a person from her own culture she would have thought he was trying to pick her up . . . In his culture, whatever it was, this exchange of names on pieces of paper was probably a formal politeness, like saying thank you. She took the pen from him. (11)

What follows is the Vietnamese student’s stalking of Christine, a stalking which both horrifies and transforms her. The intense attention of a man is a mystery to her; she has never experienced it before. Her parents had always considered her “a beefy heavyweight, a plodder, lacking in flair, ordinary as bread” (23). Compared to her socially successful, attractive older sisters, Christine herself is unscripted, though she falls back upon social scripts to cope with the pressures of everyday life. Her male friends think of her as “one of the boys”:

She was helpful and a hard worker, always good for a game of tennis with the athletes among them. They invited her along to drink beer with them so they could get into the cleaner, more desirable Ladies and Escorts side of the beer parlour, taking it for granted she would buy her share of the rounds. . . . There was nothing devious about her and nothing interesting. (23)

The persistent attentions of the Vietnamese student start to transform her; “a man was chasing her, a peculiar sort of man, granted, but still a man, and he was without doubt attracted to her, he couldn’t leave her alone” (24). The men around her begin to re-examine Christine for something they had missed, though their scrutiny leaves “the secret of her charm still intact” (24). Christine’s own image of herself changes: “In the bathtub she no longer imagined she was a dolphin; instead she imagined she was an elusive water-pixie, or sometimes, in moments of audacity, Marilyn Monroe” (24).

Dieter Meindl’s (1994) appraisal of the story seems unnecessarily harsh and missing the very point I am trying to make in this paper: that adherence to scripted roles and refusal to deal with the Other results in loss as the experience is turned into anecdote. Meindl asserts that the piece is a

grotesque story of a bulky Canadian upper-class girl pursued by a tiny, seedy Asiatic student. Christine absolutely refuses to get to know the meekly obstinate man, who insists on calling her her friend. (220)

The fact that Christine is finally unable to reduce the experience to anecdote works against Meindl’s dismissal of her experience with the foreign student. After the police are called in and he is forcefully removed to Montreal, the city specified on his student visa, Christine is free to turn him into an anecdote: “Now that he was no longer an embarrassing present reality, he could be talked about, he could become an amusing story” (28). But more information of his pursuit of other women in different places arrives, and Christine is left at a loss as to what it was that attracted him to her: “Christine ceased to tell her amusing story. She had been one among many, then. She went back to playing

tennis, she had been neglecting her game” (29).

Years pass, Christine graduates and takes the job scripted for her at the Department of Health and Welfare. She fades into the working upper-middle class as the Vietnam war is escalating. Pictures in the newspapers bring back the image of her stalker. She becomes so obsessed with scanning the pictures and the newsreels she starts to have “nightmares in which he was coming through the French doors of her mother’s house in his shabby jacket, carrying a packsack and a rifle and a huge bouquet of richly coloured flowers” (31).

While Atwood displays her characteristic irony in describing the scripted parts of Christine’s life, her description of Christine’s scrutiny of the war reportage and her transformation from a girl who couldn’t place Vietnam on the map (“it was such a minor place; she could never keep them separate in her mind”) (30) to a woman in whose state of mind “the distant country and terrain (were) becoming almost more familiar to her than her own” (31) is curiously without irony.

Finally, it is not difference, but similarity, that Christine perceives in her understanding of the foreign student; as she tries to place him in the North or South of the country she relaxes and decides

She could not see him in the army, on either side; he wasn’t the type, and to her knowledge he had not believed in any particular ideology. He would be something nondescript, something in the background, like herself; perhaps he had become an interpreter. (31)

Works Cited

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