Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

Wilson, Sharon Rose

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In each of the ten stories in Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips*, readers encounter a stranger in an enclosed world. The invaders in these stories—unlikely doubles, members of the opposite sex, immigrants, aliens—bring the unknown, the foreign, the bizarre into everyday life in flat, dull Canada. However, strangers in these stories do more than enliven cabin-fevered Canadian characters. Critical assessments of Margaret Atwood’s writings, in the detached academic mode, generally fail to voice the intensity of Atwood’s commitment to teach and to delight. The stories in *Wilderness Tips* illustrate how Atwood demands of her readers a strong engagement that goes beyond the stance that David Staines considers typical of Canadians and Canadian literature: the “dispassionate witness” (*Beyond the Provinces*, 60). These stories challenge readers to acknowledge the human predicament in the latter half of the twentieth century, consider possible responses, and finally transform themselves into “creative non-victims.” Reading *Wilderness Tips* as variations on the theme of the stranger clarifies Atwood’s critique of contemporary society, reveals her metacriticism of those who write literary criticism about her works, and underscores the intensity with which she attempts to arouse her audience to respond to typical Canadian situations with *um*-Canadian impoliteness and intensity.
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An initial look at strangers in *Wilderness Tips* suggests that Atwood has set up groups of stories that tempt readers to analysis by particular currently fashionable literary theories. Critics have frequently found Atwood creating characters who are doubles of one another. For these critics, Atwood provides strangers who are also doppelgangers. Functioning as a self outside of the self, a stranger whose invasion of personal space sparks introspection and epiphany, is a key role of Ronette in “True Trash,” Molly in “Weight,” and Marcia in “Hack Wednesday.” The difference between two women—a relatively small degree of strangeness—becomes space in which to work out the question of identity. Joanne, her double name suggesting the split in her identity, follows from outside the less analytical, more lived life of her double, Ronette; in the end, Joanne cannot know for sure what has happened to her other, nor become like her, nor enter into the true story of her life: “The melodrama tempts her, the idea of a revelation, a sensation, a neat ending” (*WT*, 30). The terms Atwood uses here suggest that Joanne resists creating a traditional, consciously shaped narrative out of Ronette’s life (“melodrama,” “revelation,” “sensation,” “neat ending”), preferring to see it as a “found” story: “an archaic story, a folktale, a mosaic artifact” (30). Joanne learns from Ronette’s story that observing and analyzing put her at one remove from engaging in life: “What she wants is what Ronette has: the power to give herself up, without reservation and without commentary. . . . Everything Joanne herself does is surrounded by quotation marks” (18–19), marking her sensibility as postmodern. When she does try to engage, her borrowed dress becomes indelibly stained as she enters the world of a folktale. In “Weight” the narrator, like Joanne, remains an outside observer of the aspects of life in which her friend Molly had been engaged: marriage, children, and a legal career representing people unable to pay her. Unlike Joanne, this narrator knows the end of the story of her doppelganger: Hacked up by her husband, Molly’s body has been scattered across Ontario. The narrator’s power over the men that she cajoles, seduces, and blackmails into donating to the battered women’s shelter may avenge the murderous power of Molly’s husband. However, when it occurs to the narrator that she doesn’t have to go to dinner or have an affair with the latest contributor, the options of being like Molly (a victim) or being the opposite of Molly (a victimizer) give way to a third possibility: being a creative non-victim, someone who moves out of victim patterns, transcends traditional roles, and learns to tell her own story (*Survival*, 38–39). Marcia in “Hack Wednesday” is her own double. She is a stranger to herself as past and present selves seem to exist
simultaneously. For her, “Time is going faster and faster” (207). She must cope with changes within her body (aging) and outside it (her partner aging, her children growing up, computers in the workplace, “Rex Morgan, M.D.” disappearing from the newspaper). Her psyche is also double: She is both immersed in and ironically detached from quintessential Canadian attitudes—the stories Canadians tell themselves about themselves: “the supposed Anglo-Canadian prudery, inhibition, and obsession with public opinion” (208), the “moral obligation to deal with winter instead of merely avoiding it” (213), and the anti-Americanism of her husband’s refusal to eat Cheerios “because they’re American” (209). Exploring the theme of the double in these stories could expand beyond traditional thematic criticism into psychological or feminist interpretations of the other self, with emphasis on how Atwood’s ideal of the creative non-victim emerges or fails to emerge in each case, or into postcolonial analyses of the stories, showing how Joanne, the narrator of “Weight,” and Marcia each have a hybridity of perspective that reflects Canada’s colonial status (with respect to both Britain and the United States) and marks the characters’ position in a postmodern world.

Critics who explore gender differences and the power politics between men and women are likely to be interested in the interactions of Percy Marrow and Susanna in “Uncles” and Selena and Richard in “Isis in Darkness.” In “Uncles” Atwood observes the interrelationship between the genders as Percy creates and destroys Susanna professionally, causing her to perceive an uncomfortable revisionist history of her life that makes him a stranger to her and her a stranger to herself: “‘Maybe I’ve remembered my whole life wrong’” (143). The differences she perceives between males and females—that boys were told “Don’t be a smart aleck” (124), whereas she “could do whatever she liked and still be cute as a button” (125)—prove inaccurate or at least inadequate; the lack of deference between males and females in spite of seeming mutual politeness comes as a shock, making all men as much strangers to Susanna as Percy makes himself by writing the exposé. Susanna assumes that the version of her story that men tell is accurate, letting men make her a stranger to herself. In contrast, the poet Selena in “Isis in Darkness” writes her own story that eludes man’s synthetic power. As Richard tries unsuccessfully to analyze the elusive and changeable Selena, Atwood leads the reader into an inquiry about the feminist concern with difference. Richard’s scholarly note cards become mosaic pieces from which he tries to reconstruct Selena with deference bordering on reverence: “He is the one who will sift through
the rubble, groping for the shape of the past. He is the one who will say it has meaning” (74). Nevertheless, trying to reassemble her makes his “eyes hurt” (74). Here, the man seems to have the power to create meaning; yet the woman, through her complexity, cannot be adequately reduced to the note cards that seem to contain her, nor synthesized from them. In Atwood’s theory of victimization, Susanna allows herself to be a victim of what she perceives as a male-dominated world (Victim Position Two [Survival, 37]), whereas Selena makes herself a creative non-victim (Victim Position Four [Survival, 38–39]). Reading the two stories together clarifies that what apparently reflects a difference in power between males and females can be transformed by a difference in how and by whom their stories are told. In these stories Atwood challenges simplistic views that men have all the power and use it to victimize women. Susanna makes herself a victim of male power by letting men create her identity, whereas Selena creates her own identity and is unaffected by whatever identities Richard may create for her. For feminist critics interested in the ways that men have power to control what is seen as real and to discriminate against whatever lies outside their reality paradigm, these stories offer abundant material.

Lucy in “Death by Landscape” comes from the United States, and George in “Wilderness Tips” comes from Hungary, inviting cultural critics to discuss clashes of customs and beliefs as these characters interact with Canadian characters. As Atwood explores characters who are strangers to each other due to cultural differences, she creates political allegories about Canadian multiculturalism. Canadian writers frequently attempt to define the ever-elusive national identity by contrasting Canadians with people from the United States and by including distinctly different people from various ethnic groups within the Canadian mosaic. American Lucy influences the entire life of Canadian Lois, although Lucy disappears when the girls are teenagers. Lois stares at Canadian paintings on her wall, looking for Lucy the way other Canadians might stare at American programs on the television screen, and she seems to deny her own life because of her feelings about Lucy: “She can hardly remember, now, having her two boys in the hospital, nursing them as babies; she can hardly remember getting married, or what Rob looked like” (117). American culture as center marginalizes Canadian culture. George similarly invades the life stories of Canadians. The three sisters of the story represent types of Canadian women: Prue is a sexual adventurer; Pamela, a reserved academic; and Portia, a loving but betrayed wife. Hungarian George—not a
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British Saint George—seduces them all. Portia’s vision at the end of the story, evoked by her realization of what George with his different code of behavior has done to them all, shows Canada as the sinking Titanic with its passengers “still not aware of the disaster that has already overcome them” (204). However, envisioning herself as Cassandra, “running naked through the ballroom” predicting catastrophe, reminds her that “nothing has happened, really, that hasn’t happened before” (204). These two stories offer more than an entertaining read. By critiquing stories Canadians tell about themselves, they demand that we see the potentially destructive aspects of Canada’s ways of defining itself, whether by its attraction/repulsion response to the United States or its mosaic response toward immigrants, naively valuing them without understanding the cultural differences that make them truly strangers.

The tumor in “Hairball,” the preserved 2,000-year-old body in “The Bog Man,” and the 150-year-old frozen body of John Torrington in “The Age of Lead” are the most alien of the strangers in Wilderness Tips. For Freudian critics who want to discover what is inside a character, “Hairball” presents a hidden self brought to light. For new historical critics, the exhumed bodies of the bog man and John Torrington shed light on the past, present, and future. For critics interested in the myths and symbols that define Canada today, these stories present a plethora of material that challenges and deconstructs key cultural myths. Hairball, who is benign only in the doctor’s diagnosis, invades Kat’s body and the party held by Ger’s wife. The potentially slapstick comedy of the untold opening of the truffle box containing the tumor is funny because of its incongruity. But Kat’s behavior—which readers sympathetic to Kat’s predicament applaud—is not polite; it not only joyously transgresses the Canadian code of good manners, but also violates the biblical injunction, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2, King James Version), satirizing two cultural beliefs.

In “The Bog Man” the well-preserved human body may be an object of wonder, yet the bog man represents a past that Julie repudiates when she envisions her lover changing into a bog man. Julie goes into a telephone booth and ultimately transforms herself; Connor’s failure to get inside the booth to metamorphose into Superman nullifies cultural myths concerning male power. Years later Julie wonders, “how can she explain him, him and his once golden aura? She no longer tries” (94). Bereft of his saintly halo, Connor, like the bog man, is ultimately a total stranger. Julie prefers a story that “is now like an
artifact from a vanished civilization, the customs of which have become obscure" (95). This allows her to be a dispassionate witness to the stranger she once confronted. But as readers who watch her story-making, can we be as dispassionate? Are we to feel no outrage at the professor for beginning an affair with his student without mentioning that he is married? Do we feel it is appropriate that Julie takes revenge on him as he declares his love for her while he pounds on the door of the phone booth? Because she “is truly frightened of him” (93), she is caught between her fear and the social code of good manners and kindness that says she should listen with sympathy, especially since she is a woman. Is the story she constantly revises and retells for thirty years adequate? Is she a creative non-victim or a victimizer? We are told that “She knows the damage was done, was severe, at least at the time; but how can it be acknowledged without sounding like a form of gloating?” (94–95). Neither Julie’s nor Connor’s actions are charming or polite. The brutal, transgressive worlds of Connor and the bog man have great power and energy, now lost. We should grieve for the diminution: “By this time he is almost an anecdote” (95). Julie may feel that way because the story is from her distant past; for us, however, the story is present. We should feel strongly because we know that this is no anecdote, but an indictment of viewpoints characteristic of our time.

In “The Age of Lead” John Torrington and his companions on the Franklin Expedition, we are told, died because of the new technology that was intended to save their lives, just as Vincent, dying of “a mutated virus that didn’t even have a name yet” (160), may be the victim of a modern malaise, symbolized by the clutter of “plastic drinking cups, crumpled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates . . . like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment” (162), an image that magnifies a kind of environmental pollution that some might consider trivial by linking it with the devastation of war. Neither Jane’s sympathy (Atwood’s choice of Lady Franklin’s first name for her modern character suggests the story is a retelling of Jane Griffin Franklin’s efforts to rescue her lost husband), nor technology’s latest advances, nor the health care system in which Canadians take such pride are effective in this situation. But are we just dispassionate observers of the destruction by technology that this story recounts? By the end of the story, Atwood overthrows any sense of superiority we may have felt as we began to read about John Torrington. Atwood presents us with our world. We should be upset. Because the mysterious disease killing Vincent is specifically not AIDS, we
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become aware that AIDS may only be a precursor to dreadful diseases yet to come; even as knowing and being able to prevent the mysterious disease that killed John Torrington does not end human suffering, solving the puzzle of AIDS or cancer will change rather than end the story of sickness and death. “The most troubling warning,” embodied in both John Torrington and Vincent, “is that there are some secrets, mysteries, truths that will always escape our desire to possess, label, control” (Grace, “Franklin Lives,” 162). In these three stories, by means of the outrageous character of the stranger, Atwood not only satirizes both the myth of the polite Canadian and the myth of technology’s ability to improve human life, but also pokes fun at those critics who espouse artistic detachment, who see reading as a dispassionate way of gazing on the problems of other people, problems that they themselves expect never to encounter, rather than as a way of engaging in a transformative process set up by a writer who bears witness to the problems confronting humanity now. “Witness is what you must bear,” Atwood writes in “Notes towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written” (Selected Poems II, 73).

Of course, Atwood’s stories also tempt subtle or devious readings. Doubles may be more obviously present in “True Trash,” “Weight,” and “Hack Wednesday” than in the other stories, but surely George is the evil twin of the women’s ineffectual brother, Roland, and Lucy is the lost half of Lois. Hairball, the bog man, and John Torrington might be discussed as doubles that manifest inner worlds of Kat, Connor, and Vincent. Using Sharon Wilson’s notion that doppelgangers can be opposite sexes (270), Susanna and Percy or Richard and Selena might be seen as doubles in opposition, with one in each pair representing fantasy and the other reality. Stories other than “Uncles” and “Isis in Darkness” explore gender differences. In “True Trash,” Joanne and Ronette become tainted by experiences that seem not to affect the male characters in the same way. In “Wilderness Tips,” the battle of the sexes and the double standard provide both the tragedy and the humor as the patriarch watches from the washroom wall. Although the sisters in “Wilderness Tips” have become very different people, all can be hoodwinked by the same male and all fail to support each other in the sisterhood of women. Marcia and Eric reveal differing aging patterns in women and men. Lois’s childhood experiences at camp reveal part of the process of gender role acquisition for women. Kat, Julie, and Jane all fight for the man they think they love, engaging unsuccessfully in the battle of the sexes. And although Hairball, the bog man, and John Torrington may be the strangest of the strangers in these stories, all the
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stories do contain strangers whose presence reveals inadequacies in the perceptions of the other characters.

In providing obvious fodder for certain types of critics and more subtle gleanings for more ingenious critics, is Atwood mocking the literary critical establishment? Are we ridiculous to be tracking down one more example of the doppelganger, one more battle of the sexes, one more appropriation of voice, one more example of the workings of the multicultural mosaic, one more wild conceit in Atwood’s writings? Is there folly in not simply enjoying these stories as a good read? As readers, should we be Ronettes rather than Joannes? If Atwood reuses her best known motifs, we critics cry, “nothing new here.” Sherrill E. Grace, for example, calls the stories in *Wilderness Tips* “too familiar, even boring,” comparing them to “pictures at a retrospective exhibition” that “seem to have been chosen deliberately to evoke, echo and recall” (“Surviving,” 31). Yet if Atwood does not reuse her most familiar motifs, her signature is missing—she loses her way of saying, “Margaret Atwood is present in this story as its maker; listen for her distinctive voice.” Furthermore, if as critics we read the story for other readers, are we appropriating their voices with patriarchal (or matriarchal) voices, preempting their individual analyses, their right to tell their own story from the story Atwood provides?

The three stories of very strange strangers offer a key to reading this book: rage. The words “rage,” “outraged,” “anger,” and “angry” recur throughout *Wilderness Tips*. In “Hairball” Kat wants to name a magazine “All the Rage,” but “the board was put off by the vibrations of anger in the word ‘rage’” (41); she later writes of Hairball disguised as a truffle, “This is all the rage” (47). In “Hack Wednesday,” Marcia remembers “when airlessness was all the rage” (214). The waitresses in “True Trash” are “outraged” at a story (8). Donny in “True Trash,” Richard in “Isis in Darkness,” and Lois in “Death by Landscape” are described as “angry” (27, 56, 115). Susanna feels “anger” in “Uncles” (125). In the stories in *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood’s strangers are not nice polite Canadians who, with infinite tact, help needy and grateful friends to graceful epiphanies, but foreigners, trespassers, meddlers, non-natives who jab alien elements into the peaceful, orderly, well-governed lives of Canadians. Hugh MacLennan writes that he was told by a movie mogul, “Boy meets girl in Winnipeg and who cares?” (“On Being,” 23). But in *Wilderness Tips* Atwood demands that we care: The exaggeration of the interloper clashes with the diminution of the Canadian to produce a kind of humor that, in spite of its understated tone, should make the reader angry about the way things are. Readers
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who find the “consistently muted palette” of the stories in Wilderness Tips “too much of the same thing” (Grace, “Surviving,” 31) have missed the demanding role that Atwood assigns to readers of this volume: responding with rage and then transcending it.

Atwood is defining Canada and trying to improve it, just as she has frequently done throughout her career. In a 1999 reassessment of Survival, Atwood asserts that “its central concerns remain with us, and must still be confronted. Are we really that different from anybody else? If so, how? And is that how something worth preserving?” (“Survival Then and Now,” 58). Taken together, the stories in Wilderness Tips explore ways that outsiders affect Canadians and Canadian society. However, this exploration is not dispassionate, because Atwood calls on readers to react with the passion sometimes lacking in the reactions of the characters.

For Atwood, the detached, dispassionate gaze is insufficient (Victim Position One [Survival, 36]). So is assent to victimization (Victim Position Two [Survival, 37]). So is activism against victimization (Victim Position Three [Survival, 37–38]). Only transformation into creative non-victims (Victim Position Four [Survival, 38–39]) proves adequate to the demands of the human predicament. In Wilderness Tips Atwood offers that next moment, the moment beyond the ends of stories, as the transforming moment, the moment in which each reader begins or continues the journey toward being a creative non-victim by his or her responses to the story. Readers’ roles can go beyond Staines’s concept of the “dispassionate witness” (“Beyond the Provinces,” 60). By the end of her story as told by Atwood, Joanne is no longer threatened by the kinds of victimization experienced by Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or her descendant in “True Trash,” Ronette. Joanne puts together stories, understanding that they may not take standard shapes or have traditional endings. But she has missed the fact that the owner of the camp, Mr. B., has the same name as the man who attempts to seduce but later marries Pamela; Ronette’s life may not be a story of a woman’s generous act toward a boy (following the archetype of the experienced older woman who initiates the inexperienced male into the mysteries of sex, satirized in Atwood’s version by the extreme youth of the boy and the resulting pregnancy for the theoretically knowledgeable woman), but the age-old story of a powerful man victimizing a defenseless woman. The story of the Canadian charm and politeness with which Ronette gives herself to Donny omits the alternative story that Mr. B.’s name suggests, leaving us to feel an outrage that the characters don’t feel. Ronette’s politeness and feminine nurturing are not
affirmed by the outcome—pregnancy with no possibility of marriage in an era when that would have seriously stigmatized a woman. Joanne is a creative non-victim in that she is composing a story rather than simply experiencing it; yet the story that she constructs is too incomplete to make adequate sense of the world. Atwood constructs a larger story; readers who construct a story that includes Joanne’s version of Ronette’s story and Atwood’s version of Joanne’s story have learned what Atwood is teaching, which is less about women still being victimized sexually by men than about old patterns that repeat, stories that define a culture, and a vision that might move a society beyond its no longer productive archetypes and myths.

Readers of “Weight” experience outrage at the way that the narrator uses her sexuality to gain power over men. Yet, as we watch this exaggerated scenario, we begin to recognize that this is exactly what some women have always done. Hasn’t sexuality been a major source of power for women? At the end, the narrator revises her vision when she realizes that she does not have to have sex with this man in order to have power over him. However, she has not yet found a way out of the age-old battle of the sexes—the same battle that killed her double. If readers can experience anger at the narrator’s initial vision, applaud her revised vision, and then move on ultimately to see more than she does, Atwood’s story will not only have brought delight, but will also have initiated a learning process.

For some readers, the elegiac tone of “Hack Wednesday,” sweetly sentimental about aging to begin with, becomes cloying by the end of the story. Yet, as in the story of John and Mary that Atwood satirizes in “Happy Endings” in Murder in the Dark, the “only authentic ending” is “John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die” (40); fact, not nostalgia. Alzheimer’s disease may one day obliterate bittersweet memories and make Marcia a real stranger to herself. Her partner’s futile crusades may devolve into more meaningless symptoms of old age. Amid the sentimentality, we can recall Dylan Thomas’s plea: “Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (128). From there we can move beyond rage into being creative non-victims, people who can accept their own experience “for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others’ versions of it” (Atwood, Survival, 39), which may be precisely what Marcia does.

When Selena and Susanna allow strangers to tell their stories, and thereby make them strangers to themselves, we should be incensed that the characters let what the males say be given the status of single truth;
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we should then move on to tell their stories as our own vision dictates. Because Richard is a literary critic and obviously cannot tell Selena’s whole story, reviewing this story reminds us not to let literary critics or our adherence to various schools of literary criticism tell the story for us. Because Percy’s subjectivity colors his vision of Susanna, “Uncles” serves as a call to assert one’s own view in the face of conflicting alternative stories, thereby allowing the process of reading to become transformative.

Outsiders Lucy and George have taken over the stories of the Canadian characters. Why aren’t we outraged at this? Can Lucy’s and George’s stories coexist with rather than co-opt other stories? These stories ask questions regarding the multiple stories current in the Canadian mosaic. In “Survival, Then and Now” Atwood writes, “Canada’s well-known failure to embrace a single ‘identity’ of the yodelling or Beefeater variety has come to seem less like a failure than a deliberate and rather brave refusal” (57). Yet these stories raise the question of whether all of the multiple identities available to Canadians are equally conducive to the well-being of the community as a whole and its members individually; Atwood challenges the stories her nation tells itself about the destructive power of the United States and the value of generously embracing refugees.

Moreover, the stories in Wilderness Tips appear to contradict each other. What seems clear in one story gets muddied by another. Is Lucy a good summer visitor while George is a bad immigrant? Lucy seemingly fails to cope with the Canadian wilderness and apparently does not survive; yet in another sense her disappearance makes her potent and pernicious. George has learned to survive in the Canadian wilderness, yet he hardly seems a role model for survival. Perhaps survival is not the only goal for Canadians, and “Wilderness Tips” contains a revision of Atwood’s former thesis. Naming George’s wife Portia suggests that she represents the Christian virtue of her predecessor in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice who asserts, “The quality of mercy is not strained” (606). Does Atwood’s Portia look foolish to us as she acts out this ideal? Or does mercy truly bless “him that gives and him that takes” (Shakespeare, 606)? Would we want to live in a world in which Atwood’s story is the final revision of Portia’s story? John Torrington seems to symbolize how we retell and revise the past but forget to learn from it. In contrast, Julie begins to learn how to tell her own story from her experiences with the bog man. But is she an acceptable storyteller when her retelling loses so much of the energy of the past? Is the powerfully assertive narrator of “Weight” a better role
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model for women than Marcia, who seems adrift in passing time, yet perhaps lives her daily life more richly than Molly’s friend? Do the fates of Ronette and Molly warn against actively engaging in life? Yet detachment in Joanne and in Molly’s friend seems lacking if slightly less dangerous than engagement. Is Kat’s revenge on Ger and his wife more acceptable than the revenge that Molly’s friend takes on males? Should we prefer Joanne or Julie to Richard as a collector of stories? Is Atwood suggesting that men and women are equally unfit to tell the stories of others? Should we blame Percy for destroying Susanna or Richard for not rescuing Selena? Should we be angry with Atwood for this muddle of contradictions? Is she playing games with thematic critics and critics who look for consistency? Atwood as postmodern trickster invites us to listen to a narrator or see with a focalizer whose vision seems plausible and pleasing to accept, but then Atwood reveals how foolish we have been in not thinking for ourselves. The shifts of vision and the independent thought required of the reader make these stories unsettling, yet the discomfort is part of the process of transformation that these stories set in motion.

Often literary critics want a writer such as Atwood to be politically correct, by their definition of correctness, desiring her stories to fit into their categories of belief. Looking at all ten stories in Wilderness Tips demonstrates how Atwood satirizes these critics with stories that seem to contradict one another or create ambiguity rather than eliminate it. Atwood’s role as a satirist requires no consistency except the consistency of ridiculing folly wherever it may be found. Literature’s function to teach does not mean to Atwood that stories should offer clearly stated rules to live by; there is no “moral of the story” in the traditional sense. Rather, the stories in Wilderness Tips open up subjects for discussion, leading into a process of thinking and rethinking. Atwood delights us by her outrageousness even as she evokes passionate responses that move us away from being mere dispassionate observers of absurdity and injustice. By tempting readers to various kinds of rational analyses, Atwood makes them complicit in their own victimization, because they think that they are not victims at all (Victim Position One); failing to acknowledge their own victimization, they victimize others by constructing the story of the story for other readers out of theories about literature rather than letting other readers speak in their own voices. Yet if we do react to the stories in our own ways rather than in any prescribed way; if, remembering that “Art is anger” (Van Herk, 330), we let rage take us into our own reading of each text, we can move toward becoming creative non-victims, able to tell our
own stories. For Atwood, the value of reading and writing fiction is that we broaden our vision by identifying ourselves with strangers: “If writing novels—and reading them—have any redeeming social value, it’s probably that they force you to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else” (Second Words, 430). As we read these stories, Atwood makes us entertain strangers—and it may be that in her wily art she is making us entertain “angels unawares,” characters who change us as we encounter and react to them and their interactions with other characters, pushing us along one more step in our own journeys toward becoming creative non-victims able to move beyond the myths and archetypes that have defined us in the past, able to retell our own stories in new ways in a world where a tiny piece of the Berlin Wall may be the largest possible symbol of hope for peace and freedom.

NOTES

1. Atwood uses the term “creative non-victim” in Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature to describe people who are free to be creative because they do not divert their energy into suppressing, displacing, or protesting victimization (38–39). Atwood’s discussion of Victim Positions in Survival is sometimes dismissed as trivial, derived from popular psychology (see, for example, James Steele’s “The Literary Criticism of Margaret Atwood,” p. 77). However, I disagree. The Victim Positions seem to me a reworking of the highly respected psychological stages outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in On Death and Dying (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance, Hope). The positions Atwood defines, taken in order, not only mark a progression often seen in the thinking of the characters in Atwood’s stories, from the earliest to the most recent, but also explain (as I show in this essay) the process that readers of Atwood’s stories undergo.

2. Bruno Bettelheim sees the staining associated with the young woman in the folktale “Bluebeard’s Egg” as indicating that her curiosity has caused her to lose her innocence/virginity (300–2). In Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, Sharon Rose Wilson traces the “Bluebeard’s Egg” motif in many of Atwood’s works.

3. See, for example, Staines’s comment on L. M. Montgomery’s Chronicles of Avonlea: “For Avonlea residents, the United States is the foreign, the exotic, the centre that makes them seem on the periphery” (11).

4. Atwood paraphrases this verse and connects it with the Canadian virtue of good manners when she writes about the Canadians whom George takes advantage of in “Wilderness Tips”: “These people were lax and trusting, and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren’t ready for him” (190).

5. Coral Ann Howells notes that Wilderness Tips gives “a bleaker vision of survival on a globalized scale” (59) than Atwood’s previous works, and after discussing Atwood’s critiques in various stories, concludes that “Atwood’s conception of futures already being shaped by the present and foreshadowed by the past makes for dire warnings, yet she continues to write, diagnosing the symptoms of a general malaise
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as they appear in her specifically Canadian context” (68). Howells believes that “it is through the very power of myth to transform perceptions that hopes for regeneration and survival may lie” (68).

6. See Arnold E. Davidson’s “Negotiating *Wilderness Tips*,” pp. 184–86, for a discussion of additional ways in which “the obvious interconnections between the stories modifies their meanings, individually and collectively” (186).