

Truths of Storytelling: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff*

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Burkhard Niederhoff has put his finger on one of the most interesting differences between Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's quest to survive as an emotionally responsive and responsible adult involves uncovering the truth—or at least a truth—about herself and her past; in *Alias Grace*, evading the truth may be necessary to the main character's psychological survival. In Niederhoff's concluding words, both novels are about a woman attempting to “abandon her role as victim,” but in the latter work, “[t]he struggle for survival and against victimisation no longer involves the recognition of truth” (87). One might go further to suggest that *Alias Grace* represents truth as inaccessible or perhaps even irrelevant. At Niederhoff's implied invitation, I want to consider the different sorts of truth—or refusals of truth—the characters choose, and what such narrative choices suggest about the fictional worlds their author has created.

The differing resolutions and emphases of the novels may be due in large part to a difference of genre. *Surfacing*, for all its debts to the murder mystery and ghost story, is essentially a quest romance, in which the woman hero undergoes a physical and spiritual ordeal in order to gain insight into herself and her world. The novel's various motifs of journeying—to the North, into childhood memories, and into madness—lead us to understand the narrator's search for her

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm>>.

father as a journey into her own “home ground, foreign territory” (12), the rocky terrain of self. The journey involves a painful but potentially restorative movement from denial to self-knowledge. As many critics have noted, the dive into the lake in search of the rock paintings her father was mapping is symbolically a dive into her unconscious, the place of repressed knowledge, as well as a baptismal death in preparation for rebirth. Experiencing “gratitude” (155) and “feeling” (156) immediately after the dive, she becomes convinced that “everything is waiting to become alive” (170), and her encounters with the ghosts of her parents and dead child equip her to face the future. Niederhoff points out that although the novel’s conclusion is open-ended, “some sort of change, some sort of movement from death to life, has certainly occurred” (74).

Significantly, the narrator’s struggle to survive, “to refuse to be a victim” (206), involves not resistance to external injustice, though such injustice is acknowledged (“the Americans” do “exist” and “must be dealt with” [203]), but recognition of her own failures of responsibility and self-understanding: “I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone” (206). In other words, the narrator must come to see that she has preferred victimhood—preferred to believe herself “classified as wounded” (94)—because such a belief has been easier than accepting her personal culpability for various failures and acts of violence. These include her lies, passivity, and abandonment of her parents, but especially the abortion she blamed on her ex-lover and on the world at large. Niederhoff’s reference to her “irrational but all too understandable fear that her unborn child was conscious of what she did to it” (66) perhaps too quickly dismisses the moral implications that the novel squarely addresses, for it is not the possible consciousness of the unborn child that has haunted the narrator (though such a concern would not be irrational), but the moral meaning of her choice to destroy human life. “Whatever it is,” she thinks after the dive, “part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it” (153). Facing and accepting

her guilt, and recognizing the humanity of those she has accused of betraying her, are central to her reclaiming of choice and will.

In contrast, the main character in *Alias Grace* is a shadowy figure, a postmodern autobiographer who hides as much as she reveals about herself and may or may not know the truth about the murders for which she has been imprisoned. She is almost certainly fabricating a usable past for Dr. Simon Jordan, whom she both mistrusts and wants to please. Heidi Darroch has suggested that Jordan himself “unwittingly condition[s] Grace’s narrative” (117) through his responses of interest, boredom, or excitement, and that their interactions thus provide a glimpse of the complexities of modern trauma therapy. On such a reading, Grace’s narrative can be judged as neither true nor false but instead is a reflection of both characters’ desires: Dr. Jordan’s for medical authority, Grace’s for pardon, for a personal story, and for a listener.

To aid his “pragmatic” (77) focus on how characters survive their pasts, Niederhoff accepts the hypnosis scene “at face value” (76) as evidence that Grace has had to split herself into two selves, the second unknown to the first, to survive her traumatic experiences, but I am not sure that the pragmatic aspects of her story can be thus separated from the novel’s interpretative challenges. The ambiguities of the hypnotism scene, especially given what we know about Dr. DuPont’s previous connection with Grace and his abilities as a hypnotist and ventriloquist, are inextricable from the narrative playfulness and skepticism that characterize the novel as a whole. Such playfulness makes it difficult to analyze the effects of Grace’s “knowing or not knowing the truth” (77). Her real memories and self-knowledge may be, as Sharon R. Wilson suggests, to some extent “beside the point” (133) in a historical murder mystery constructed to thwart readerly certainty. The climactic hypnotism scene is satisfying not so much because it reveals the truth of the murders (in fact, it offers very partial answers) but because it provides a resolution to the mystery of Grace’s past that supports a variety of conflicting interpretations. On

the level of plot, there is no better example of Atwood's ability to incite and then frustrate readerly curiosity.

Niederhoff argues that, if Grace were to find out the truth revealed in the hypnosis scene, "her mental balance would be in jeopardy" (85) and that therefore "not knowing the truth" (87) is her only hope for survival. But just as we do not know the truth of her past, we also do not know that her mental balance is *not* in jeopardy at the novel's end. Her dreams and hallucinations of "huge dark-red flowers" (5) are linked to images of Nancy's murder, seeming to indicate that Grace is haunted by blood. Her eerily calm belief, expressed in her letter to Dr. Jordan, that either a tumour or a fetus is growing within her suggests her sense of her body as under occupation by another. She reports to Dr. Jordan that she is relatively content in her marriage to James Walsh, but the assessment is undermined by details of the sadomasochistic eroticism that characterizes the relationship; the Tree of Paradise quilt linking Mary, Nancy, and Grace seems to point to a permanent fixation on the women's bloody deaths—though critics have also read it as symbolizing female solidarity or reconciliation.¹ In a novel built on puzzles and surprises, we would not be particularly surprised if a novelistic coda were to reveal Grace's murder of Walsh, or her own suicide, so perilous seems her escape. Unlike in *Surfacing*, where the narrator has moved forward at least a "scrupulously earned inch" (Struthers 66), no emotional or psychological development can be observed in Grace, and it is difficult to say whether or how she has achieved more than "[b]are [s]urvival" (*Survival* 41).

We are back to the matter of genre. Despite its interest in the procedures and theories associated with nineteenth-century psychoanalysis, and despite its formal structure as a confessional narrative, *Alias Grace* is not seriously interested in character, emphasizing instead the bewildering proliferation of identities evident in the accounts of Grace's crime, a proliferation that leads her, innocently or slyly, to wonder "how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23). Niederhoff comments on Grace that, while "no angel, [...] she comes across as a remarkably honest, sane and considerate human being"

(76), but the very thinness of this description suggests how little the reader is in a position to know her, how she eludes us as a character, just as she slips away from Dr. Jordan's attempt to uncover her memories. We cannot imagine from Grace the *Surfacing* narrator's confession of her sense of "sickening complicity, sticky as glue, [...] as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it" (140-41). Such a confession is, in fact, about the best that Grace *could* say for herself, given her silence about McDermott's stated intention to murder Nancy Montgomery. Grace does not express guilt or self-reproach, or even much regret; and her most characteristic emotion is a kind of suppressed pleasure in Dr. Jordan's visits. Overall, her lack of curiosity or anxiety about her past, while necessary for the narrative mystery to be maintained, makes it difficult for the reader to respond to her as a fully realized character.

Alias Grace is a historical novel that stresses, in postmodern style, the mystery of past events. In a lecture at the University of Ottawa in 1996, Atwood noted of her historical research that "There is—as I increasingly came to discover—no more reason to trust something written down on paper then than there is now" (*In Search* 32), and she claimed to have been naïve in once believing that "'non-fiction' meant 'true'" (30)—with the implication that she has abandoned such a belief. With numerous nods in the direction of historiographic metafiction, *Alias Grace* conducts a dazzling experiment in narrative reconstruction, choosing a mysterious murder case in which an abundance of newspaper reports and first-person accounts swirl around a blank center rich in storytelling possibilities; it is precisely the withholding of Grace's inner self, her constant depiction of her life as a narrative made by others according to their desires (cf. *Alias* 27) that makes possible the sleight-of-hand Atwood handles so superbly, in which every historical document is exposed as arbitrary or partial, and the first-person narrative purporting to solve the mystery is riddled with gaps, ambiguities, and inconclusive references to "what has been written down" (22). And for all its undoubted accomplishments and narrative heft (it is a longer novel than *Surfacing*), it seems a slighter

artistic achievement, perhaps precisely because of its orientation to the truths of history. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to defend this judgement.

As a novel about a woman's search for truth, *Surfacing* supports an abundance of diverse, even contradictory, interpretations while never seeming simply evasive. Many scholars, recognizing the quest archetype that structures the narrative, have sought to explain precisely what truth the narrator has found by her journey's end—whether of human frailty (Campbell), female power (Grace), animal nature (Baer), or shamanic vision (Ross). Such critics tend to see the narrator as having gained an understanding of herself and her society that may be sufficient—and is certainly necessary—to change her life for the better. Other critics find the ending's emphasis on mortality (Schaeffer), cultural fragmentation (Guédon), and irony (Lecker) far less hopeful. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, for example, argues that the truth confronted by the narrator is the “unacceptable fact” (319) of mortality and the related fact that human beings are killers only imperfectly redeemed by love. Such an understanding leaves the narrator wiser but no better equipped than before to live in the modern world. Debates about the novel's meaning not only indicate the many interpretations it can sustain but also suggest its broadly religious dimension: its interest in whether and how truth can be found in a culture that “refuse[s] to worship” and “consumes but does not give thanks” (*Surfacing* 150).

In *Alias Grace* too, divergent readings are certainly possible—are of the essence—but in their mutual exclusivity, they offer merely a number of possible solutions to the novel's narrative puzzle. Grace may be a schizophrenic victim unaware of her alternate personality, and therefore “neither conscious at the time of the murder [...] nor responsible for her actions therein” (*Alias* 433), or a deceptive sociopath who is “devoid of moral faculties” (435). Or she may be a girl who has struggled to survive against the odds, using the resources available—violence, sexuality, story-telling—to keep herself from harm. She cannot be all three. Potential evidence for the various interpretations

is supplied but never confirmed, and Grace's words about herself and the murders are maddeningly inconclusive, providing sources of readerly pleasure that do not, however, help us with the larger questions about historical knowledge or moral judgement raised by the novel. These larger questions are, as I discuss below, already decided—and reductively so—from the first pages.

In pursuing its large questions, *Surfacing* is a counter-intuitive novel unafraid to challenge contemporary orthodoxies. Although generations of feminist readers have insisted that it is not an anti-abortion novel (with some going so far as to dismiss the abortion as “real or imagined or simply a lie” [Rigney 161]), it is a novel in which a woman's decision to kill her unborn child is presented as both a sign of her emotional immaturity and a cause of lasting psychological turmoil. At a time of flourishing nationalism and anti-Americanism—Al Purdy's insouciant *The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* was published just a few years earlier—the novel declares Canada and the United States far more alike than different: cultures of technology and death that “had turned against the gods” (165) in valuing only “the conquest of human and non-human nature” (Grant 57). And at a time when the feminist movement was asserting the centrality of self-determination and sexual liberation for women, the novel suggests that such freedom, symbolized most memorably by the image of genitals “detached like two kitchen appliances and copulat[ing] in mid-air” (*Surfacing* 162), carried with it new sources of alienation and unhappiness, particularly for women. Concerned less with male chauvinism or American imperialism than with the universal problem of “original sin” (Gibson 13),² the novel insists that neither reason nor any of the available routes to secular virtue (organic farming, avant-garde filmmaking, free love) will be adequate counters to human depravity, which the narrator comes to suspect is “in us too, [...] innate” (142). On a number of levels, then, the novel articulates unpalatable truths.

In contrast, *Alias Grace* takes up a range of fairly uncontroversial positions. Its focus on the suffering of the poor, its attack on the male

medical establishment—especially the attempt to control women's bodies and desires—and its sympathetic though uncommitted interest in repressed memory syndrome³ all fit comfortably into both feminist-academic and popular conceptions. Even the novel's declared skepticism about knowing the past, amidst a plethora of material detail and vivid scenes, coexists not uncomfortably (if illogically) with a commitment to certain ideological truths. Atwood's feminist-influenced postmodernism tends to reserve its scorn for the 'master' narratives of history (elite men's accounts, medical or state documents), while affirming as true those stories and perspectives it finds more congenial.

In particular, Grace's first-person story of survival (as distinct from her narrative for Dr. Jordan) is rhetorically shielded from the critical scrutiny to which many of the other narratives are exposed. "People dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong," she observes of the black-coated doctors and psychiatrists who examined her in the Asylum (32). The comment reveals her contempt for their power, which she perceives to be based on status rather than ability, and readers are encouraged to conclude that she has been treated in a disrespectful, probably abusive, manner by such men. To further puncture the moral and scientific authority of the male medical profession, Grace adds irreverently: "Also they never fart" (32). Whether or not such comments have any historical basis in the records of impoverished immigrant women in Upper Canada (which seems unlikely), the ribald and iconoclastic voice, not unlike Atwood's own in her poetry, carries a ring of truth.

In other words, while readers know that Atwood is writing fiction, we are encouraged to believe that she reveals an essential historical reality, a truth deeper than fact: the ever-present threat of sexual violence against which the lower-class woman fought for her survival. Nothing in the novel mitigates or complicates the portrait. The predatory behaviour of Grace's doctors is paralleled in the verbal harassment Grace endures in her walks from the Penitentiary to the Governor's House with two prison keepers who taunt her sexually. She

parries their insults, having become accustomed, through her brutal father and exploitative employers, to men's ways. When Dr. Jordan begins his visits, she knows he must want something from her, and indeed he is little different from the other men she has learned to mistrust: while priding himself on his dedication to the science of mental disorder, he becomes erotically attracted to Grace, fantasizing about her and condemning himself with puerile self-justifications: "He means her well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue, surely he does" (322). Male violence frames the novel's window onto the past.

Largely unquestioned are the assumptions and approved narratives of Atwood's own historical moment: that memories of trauma are likely to be repressed or forgotten (despite significant evidence to the contrary⁴); that sexual morality is a cultural construct perpetuated only for repressive ends (Grace's first observation in the novel—of ladies' wire crinolines, which are "like birdcages" [22]—satirizes the cultural prohibition on the display of women's legs [cf. 22]); that freedom involves self-empowerment through resistance to social roles. Other potential narratives of the past drop away: the religious faith that propelled the Reverend Verringer and others to campaign for Grace's pardon receives no serious attention, portrayed merely as a mask for social climbing or sexual prurience. The institutions established by helping organizations for unwed mothers and abandoned children, which might have provided an alternative to abortion or starvation for Mary, are not depicted. No serious attempt is made to portray the cultural, political, spiritual, and religious currents that caused people to gather in darkened rooms to commune with the dead, to commit their lives to the study of psychiatric disorders, or to campaign for prison reform.

Is it unfair to make such a criticism? Atwood has frankly declared that "*Alias Grace*, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, is, of course, a very contemporary book" (*In Search* 36-37), and it is especially contemporary, even predictable, in its focus on the voice of a marginalized woman, her knowledge, her resistance: "There is a good

deal that can be seen slantwise, especially by the ladies" (229), Grace relates, in a narrative allusion to Emily Dickinson.⁵ Grace's comment highlights, in a manner now compellingly familiar, or tiresome, the feminist perspective on women's response to Victorian strictures: "They can also see through veils, and window curtains, and over the tops of fans; and it is a good thing they can see in this way, or they would never see much of anything" (229). Where scholars have debated the novel's representations, the debate is about the extent to which Atwood validates the woman's story. Herb Wyile, for example, has commended the novel for extending agency to Grace "through her skillful, compelling, and ultimately ambiguous narrative" (80); Renée Hulan finds that in emphasizing the powerlessness of women of her class, it does not adequately recognize their struggle (452-53). But no one has questioned the novel's depiction of pervasive male violence as one of the few objective facts of the past, in relation to which the killing of Thomas Kinnear may be seen as a legitimate act of social protest: "So that's one less of them" (*Alias* 64).⁶

While seeming to assert the provisionality and "pluralism" (Wilson 133) of historical truth, then, the novel is certain of at least one thing. Its position on history parallels Grace's statement about the Bible. She thinks, with prescient skepticism, that the Bible "*may* have been thought out by God [emphasis mine] but [...] was written down by men. And like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong" (459). Like much else in the novel, the statement withholds as much as it reveals, causing readers to wonder which part of the "main story" the newspapers got right, yet few readers will doubt that the novel's "main story" is its "tale of patriarchal abuse and upper-class privilege" (Wyile 74). Ironically, then, the novel *is* about the past and its truths.

Atwood wrote in the "Author's Afterword" to *Alias Grace* that "the written accounts [of the murders] are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known'" (467). Such a mystery is ideal for a novelist, leaving her "free to invent" from the "mere hints and out-

right gaps in the records" (467). But Atwood has done more than this, for where the facts of the past do not fit her picture, she goes beyond playing with possibilities to invent history itself. When Dr. Jordan muses about the reasons why women become prostitutes, he contrasts his more humane understanding with the censorious determinism of contemporary social theory, which holds that "perverse lusts and [...] neurasthenic longings" drive "degenerate" women into the trade (365). Dr. Jordan's own view, based on interactions with prostitutes, is that "prostitutes are motivated less by depravity than by poverty" (365). The unwary reader will likely accept Atwood's portrayal as true: that condemnation of prostitutes as depraved degenerates was widespread and uncontested in the Victorian period.

As scholars of the period have shown, however, Dr. Jordan's progressive view was far from unique or even new. Victorian attitudes to prostitution ranged across a wide spectrum, and harsh stigmatization was certainly not absent, but the majority of commentators were sympathetic to women who sold their bodies out of economic need. In 1850, the commentator W. R. Greg published a review article on "Prostitution" in the *Westminster Review* that decisively rejected the notion that prostitutes were motivated by sexual desire; Greg asserted that poverty was "the prime determining cause" (Anderson 44). As Michael Mason notes in his comprehensive analysis of Victorian sexual attitudes, a majority of reformers of the 1840s—whether religious or secular—saw prostitution as primarily an economic issue (98) and employed a "rhetoric of non-condemnation" (99) to describe the women they sought to assist. Atwood's historical reconstruction thus depends upon an ahistorical—and comfortable—conception of the perfidies of the past, giving the lie to her claim that "when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it" (*In Search* 35). It is a minor slip, but it perhaps suggests the extent to which Atwood had pre-determined her historical account. Such is the power of our ideas about the past—in this case of the smug indifference of male religious and civic leaders—that they become for us as immutable as truth. *Alias Grace* suggests that correct belief is more important than historical truth. "The past

belongs to us," Atwood concluded her 1996 lecture, "because we are the ones who need it" (*In Search* 39).

Surfacing is concerned throughout with the distinction between truth and lies of various sorts, whether pernicious or merely comfortable. "If you tell your children that God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god," observes the narrator (112). The father's crusading rationalism has been its own kind of lie, damaging his daughter; his gift to her near the novel's end is the revelation that truth is to be found only "at the end, after the failure of logic" (156), and he dies seeking it. David is particularly repulsive and possibly unredeemable because his many clichés and slogans cover over the core "where he was true" (163). Through such references, the novel insists that the truth be pursued: the narrator will search for a form of survival that need not involve delusions of innocence.

In *Alias Grace*, story-telling itself seems to become the means to survival, independent of the truth about self or world. Mary Whitney's advice to Grace stands as the novel's final word on lying: "as Mary Whitney used to say, a little white lie such as the angels tell is a small price to pay for peace and quiet" (458). And Atwood's own words about Grace suggest that her situation authorizes a strategic rather than absolute fidelity to truthful words: Grace "is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives" (*In Search* 36). Thus *Alias Grace* accepts, as *Surfacing* adamantly did not, that the only morality is self-survival, a defensive posture based on apprehension of one's own vulnerability and others' culpability. In *Surfacing*, such self-protective fantasy is what the narrator must escape to become a full human being; in *Alias Grace*, a self-affirming story is all that can be hoped. The diminishment in Atwood's moral vision is striking.

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NOTES

¹For Jennifer Murray, the quilt is a metaphor for Grace's inability to find new ways of being and her unconscious, paralyzing incorporation into herself of others' identities (79-81). Gillian Siddall sees the quilt pattern as an "assertion of solidarity" that "highlights the point that the primary issue the novel addresses is not who committed the murders but the restrictive ways in which women's identities were constructed in Canada at the time" (99).

²Atwood mentioned in an interview that she was concerned with "original sin" in *Surfacing*, claiming that it was "too complicated to talk about" (Gibson 13).

³For Heidi Darroch, Atwood's decision to leave open the question of the truth of Grace's repressed memories "leads to ideological incoherence, particularly in light of the ferocity of contemporary debates surrounding the recall and narration of past acts of violence" (118). It is perhaps more accurate to say that Atwood's novel is uncommitted rather than incoherent on the question of whether memories can be repressed and recovered.

⁴Clinical evidence suggests that it is far more likely for the trauma sufferer to be unable to forget the trauma than to be unable to remember it. The objective reality of repressed memory is still debated though largely discredited. See Michael D. Yapko, *Suggestions of Abuse* (1994).

⁵Dickinson's poem begins "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—" (1).

⁶One version of this reading can be found in Coral Ann Howells' "Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*" (2004), in which Howells reads the neuro-hypnotism scene as staging a "reinterpretation" of Grace's crime as "neither sexual jealousy nor revenge, but a working-class woman's social anger and indignation at always being victimized." She suggest that we may read Atwood's voice behind the other possible voices of this scene: "the author speaking out for these marginalized women without a voice" (35).

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