

# The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*

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## 1. Introduction

1972 was Margaret Atwood's *annus mirabilis*. In one and the same year, she published *Surfacing*, a powerful and disturbing novel that has become a classic of twentieth-century fiction, and *Survival*, an engaging study of the characteristic themes of Canadian literature that has established itself as a major critical text on works written north of the 49th parallel. The title of this study points to what, according to Atwood, her compatriots are most likely to write about: surviving the hardship of a barren land and an inhospitable climate, surviving a crisis or a disaster, or surviving, in a psychological or cultural sense, different kinds of victimisation or colonisation (41).

Whether survival really constitutes the central theme of Canadian literature is a question that need not detain us here. What is more important in the present context is the fact that it plays a prominent part in Atwood's own writings. She readily admits as much in the introduction to *Survival*, in which she states that "several [...] of the patterns I've found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work" (20). Thus one of Atwood's central concerns is close to the restoration from death, the theme of the conference at which a preliminary version of this paper was presented.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, to survive does not literally mean to be restored from death, but it means to be restored from a near-death experience or from a situation which can be metaphorically described as death-in-life.

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Thirty years after *Survival*, Atwood published another book of popular literary criticism, *Negotiating with the Dead*, in which she moves even closer to the restoration-from-death topic. Commenting on the chapter title that is also the title of the book, she argues:

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. (156)

Again, this sweeping generalisation is based just as much on Atwood's own work as on literature in general. A cursory perusal of her writings yields a long list of people returning from the underworld. An early poem from *The Animals in that Country* (1968), "The revenant," describes "the skull's noplacé, where in me / refusing to be buried, cured, / the trite dead walk" (52); in the final poem of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), the eponymous heroine returns to twentieth-century Toronto long after her death; in *Surfacing* (1972), the protagonist encounters the ghosts of her parents; *Lady Oracle* (1976) begins with the words, "I planned my death carefully" (7), and is about a woman who stages her own death to cut herself loose from her old life and begin a new one; *Cat's Eye* (1988) features a protagonist who portrays herself as a vampire (233) and interprets Halloween as an event "when the spirits of the dead will come back to the living, dressed as ballerinas and Coke bottles and spacemen and Mickey Mice, and the living will give them candy to keep them from turning vicious" (387); in "Death by Landscape," a story from *Wilderness Tips* (1991), the narrator is troubled by the continuing presence of a childhood friend who disappeared on a canoe trip; in *Alias Grace* (1996), the dead return to the living to haunt or even possess them; in *The Penelopiad* (2004), Penelope talks to us from Hades. Atwood's two most recent books, both published in 2006, also include negotiations with the dead. In "The Entities," one of the short stories in *Moral Disorder*, a landlady relocates the ghost of a recently deceased tenant, who was

also the first wife of her husband; and “Nightingale,” one of the miscellaneous short pieces in *The Tent*, contains a dialogue between the ghost of Procne and Philomela, who may or may not be a ghost herself.

This essay will deal with *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, two novels whose representation of the return of the dead is particularly challenging. After a reading of the former I will present a discussion of the latter, in which I will focus on the surprising number of similarities between the two. However, there is also a crucial difference in the way the two novels represent a secret or repressed knowledge that is associated with the return of the dead. The roles that this knowledge plays in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* could not be more different, as I will argue in the final part of this paper.

A last introductory point concerns the conference topic, “Restored from Death,” which needs to be emended for the purposes of this essay. When the dead appear to the living, they are obviously restored from death, but often their appearance is just as much about being restored *to* death as *from* it. A case in point is the very first revenant of Western Literature, the spirit of Patroclus, who appears in the 23rd canto of the *Iliad*. He returns to his friend Achilles to ask him for a proper burial:

Sleeping so? Thou hast forgotten me,  
Achilles. Never was I uncared for  
in life but am in death. Accord me burial  
in all haste: let me pass the gates of Death.  
Shades that are images of used-up men  
motion me away, will not receive me  
among their hosts beyond the river. I wander  
about the wide gates and the hall of Death.  
Give me your hand. I sorrow.  
When thou shalt have allotted me my fire  
I will not fare here from the dark again. (398)

In his encounter with Achilles, Patroclus is temporarily restored from death, but what he is negotiating for is a restoration to death. Caught in the no-man’s-land between the dead and the living, he is waiting to

be buried in the proper fashion, which will allow him to pass the gates of the underworld and to find his place in the "hall of Death," never to "fare [...] from the dark again."

Admittedly, Atwood's novels are a far cry from Homer's epics. In the *Iliad*, the ghost is real, not a figment of Achilles's imagination. Furthermore, conducting him to his eternal rest does not pose any knotty psychological problems; it is a matter of performing the traditional burial rites. In Atwood's fiction, the spirits of the departed are much more intricately entangled with the souls of the living to whom they return. Moreover, there are no rites and formulas for dealing with them—to negotiate with the dead means to embark on a perilous journey of (self-)discovery. However, in these negotiations there is, just as in the *Iliad*, a connection between a restoration *from* death and a restoration *to* death. When the negotiations between the living and the dead are successful, both of them can exist more peacefully in their respective worlds.

## 2. A Reading of *Surfacing*

The narrator-protagonist of *Surfacing* is a Canadian woman whose name is never revealed, an absence that hints at serious problems of identity and of communication.<sup>2</sup> She illustrates books for a living and shares a flat with her lover Joe, a sculptor and pottery teacher. She is also, or so we are told in the first chapters, recently divorced and the mother of a child, who lives with her former husband. The setting is the wilderness of northern Quebec, where the narrator's family spent their summers when she was a child, leading a rather isolated life on an island in a lake. The plot consists of the narrator's search for her father, who has been living in the family's cabin on the island. When he is reported missing and believed to have drowned, the narrator travels north with Joe and two friends to spend some time in the family's cabin and to look for her father. Unlike everybody else, she is convinced that he is still alive.

On her arrival at the island, the narrator recalls the death of her brother:

The dock slants [...]; it's been repaired so much all the materials are different, but it's the same dock my brother fell off the time he drowned. [...]

My mother [...] ran to the dock, he wasn't there, she went out to the end of it and looked down. My brother was under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth.

It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar. (26)

A foetus in her amniotic fluid, a being emerging or surfacing into life, looks at a child in another kind of fluid, sinking away from life. This is a pregnant moment, in more than one sense. However, its full significance cannot be discerned at this point; it unfolds in a series of revelations that occur later in the novel. One of these revelations is that the brother did not die:

This was where he drowned, he got saved only by accident; if there had been a wind she wouldn't have heard him. She leaned over and reached down and grabbed him by the hair, hauled him up and poured the water out of him. [...] If it had happened to me I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that. (68)

Literally speaking, the child is only rescued from the danger of dying, but in terms of the narrative representation he is restored from death; we have been told, in so many words, that he drowned. This is not the only inconsistency in the narrative; it is riddled with distortions and misdirections, especially when it comes to the narrator's memories of her past. All of these distortions are highly significant. When the narrator has a child die only to resurrect him afterwards, this says a lot about her past and about her future, as we learn later on.

A second revelation occurs in the course of the narrator's search for her father. When she realizes that he discovered rock paintings created by First Nations artists, she looks for the paintings herself. At one point, she dives into the lake, believing the paintings to be on the submerged part of a steep rock face. What she discovers in the depths

of the lake, however, is not what she was looking for: "It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (136). The shape of the "dead thing" is highly ambiguous; it could be the corpse of her drowned father, as George Woodcock surmises (35). But the thoughts of the narrator move in the opposite direction; what comes to her mind is not a missing father but a lost child:

[A]t first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise.

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it.

[...] That was wrong, I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished. (137)

The narrator's child does not live with its father; it was aborted. Nor was the father the narrator's husband, as we learn a little later. He was a middle-aged, married man who had an affair with the narrator, a student of his, and persuaded her to have an abortion. This is an anagnorisis for the reader but also for the narrator. She has fabricated a false past to protect herself from the traumatic truth. This pseudo-past is so deeply embedded in the narrator's mind that even here, in the climactic scene of anagnorisis and self-discovery, the truth does not flash upon her in one instant. She recognizes it only gradually, working her way down through a series of memories in which the truth is half veiled and half visible, until she finally arrives at a recollection of the abortion.

This anagnorisis allows the reader to see the full significance of the passage about the drowning of the brother (26), which contains one of the narrator's characteristically distorted memories that both conceal and reveal the truth. What it tells us about the narrator's brother is obviously false, but then it is not really about her brother. It is about her child, whose abortion is hinted at through the combination of a foetus in its mother's womb and of a child drowning. The motif of an animal in a jar, present both in the early passage and in the anagnorisis, evokes the idea of doctors and scientists killing animals to preserve them in alcohol (killed animals such as fish, frogs or herons are repeatedly used as symbols of the aborted child in *Surfacing*). The fact that the foetus and the animal look through their respective containers (the mother's belly and the jar) expresses the narrator's feeling of guilt, an irrational but all too understandable fear that her unborn child was conscious of what she did to it.

The narrator's later memory, in which the drowned brother is resurrected (68), reveals wishful thinking of a retrospective kind; it shows what the narrator would like to have done with her child. But it also proves to be prophetic; it anticipates a later scene in which she has sexual intercourse with Joe to become pregnant:

"I love you," he says into the side of my neck, catechism. Teeth grinding, he's holding back, he wants it to be like the city, baroque scrollwork, intricate as a computer, but I'm impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry.

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long. (155-56)

This passage is of particular importance. It contains the title word "surfacing" which, apart from the title itself, is used only at this point,<sup>3</sup> where it refers to a restoration from death. The narrator thinks of the conception as a resurrection of the aborted foetus. Later on she similarly thinks about the embryo's growth as a kind of return journey from Hades: "My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; *I ferry it secure between death and life*" (162; my italics). This resurrection can occur only after the narra-

tor has acknowledged the death of the aborted child and her responsibility for it. The ghost of this child, who has led an uncanny and ghoulish life in the narrator's distorted memories, must be laid to rest before it can be reborn. In other words, restoration to death and restoration from death are connected, as in the case of Patroclus. This connection will become even more evident in the subsequent paragraphs, which are about the ghosts of the narrator's parents.

The narrator's sexual intercourse with her lover marks the beginning of a strange ordeal that is like a rite of passage or like a reversion to the state of an animal. The narrator separates herself from her lover and her friends. She leaves the cabin and sleeps in a kind of lair; she sheds her clothes and takes a baptismal bath in the lake. She destroys crockery, books, a samsonite case, and other trappings of civilization. All this time, she becomes increasingly aware of the presence of her parents, who return from the dead to be close to their daughter. The entire ordeal, including the presence of the parental ghosts, is best understood as a response to the insanity of the character's city life. This covert insanity is now transformed into an overt insanity, a cathartic experience that makes it possible for the narrator to overcome her alienation from her child, from her parents, and from herself.

The main reason for the parents' return to their daughter seems to be her need to compensate for the long period of separation and estrangement between them. The narrator's friends have "disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to" (11). It seems that the narrator has similarly disowned her parents; visiting her terminally ill mother in hospital, she tells her that she will not attend her funeral (16). We also hear that her parents did not attend her wedding, learning of it later through a postcard (17), and that they never forgave her for divorcing her husband and leaving her child (23). Of course, these memories are fabrications, but what they say about the estrangement between the narrator and her parents is only too true. She sums up this estrangement between herself and her parents and the need for a reconnection as follows: "I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs"

(171). Just as the narrator remembered and resurrected her lost child, she now remembers and resurrects her parents, who have been similarly lost to her.

Entering the place of her father and mother, however, is not easy. As a result of the estrangement between the narrator and her parents, the relationship between them has ceased to evolve long before their deaths:

They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier. All I would have to do was come back when I was ready but I kept putting it off, there would be too many explanations.

(3)

The narrator's relationship with her parents is in a state of arrested development; it was frozen a long time ago. This may also be the reason why she refuses to attend her mother's funeral and why she is so stubbornly convinced that her father is still alive (a conviction that resembles her delusion that she has a child that lives with her divorced husband). If you deny your parents the "right to get old," you are even less prepared to accept their death.

Once the narrator has entered her ordeal and begun to re-establish the relationship with her parents, she must pick it up at the point at which it ceased to develop, when she was still a child or teenager, and she must live through the lost stages of this relationship in a time-lapse fashion. Characteristically, she begins by calling out to her parents, as a lonely and frightened child would do (166). After this, she is still like a child in experiencing them as powerful authorities; they are like nature spirits or gods who provide their daughter with support and guidance, setting the rules for her ordeal: the places she is permitted to be, the food she is allowed to eat. The return of the parents culminates in two separate encounters. If it is true that the daughter has to renew a relationship arrested in the past and to recapture the lost stages of this relationship, then the face-to-face encounters mark

the point at which she comes of age. Here the parents no longer set the rules. They do not talk to or interact with their daughter; instead they perform actions in which they reveal something important and essential about themselves. What their daughter receives in these encounters is not an explicit lesson but an implicit message which she has to decipher on her own.

The narrator discovers her mother feeding jays, with the birds so little afraid of her that "one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (176); this also happened when the mother was alive (101). Given the symbolism of animals in *Surfacing*, in particular their association with children, the feeding of the birds suggests the mother's life-sustaining role. The daughter now wishes to accept this role, after rejecting it when she aborted her child. Throughout the novel she has tried to emulate her mother's feat of making the birds sit on her body, without any success so far (87, 142, 158). But now it seems that she can finally follow in her mother's footsteps. At the end of the encounter she takes the position of the latter, who seems to have turned into one of the jays, peering down at her. This transformation of parent into bird fits in with a reference elsewhere to "countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor" (122).

The appearance of the father poses greater interpretive problems as it is more complex and more shifting: "How many shapes can he take" (181). Like his wife, he turns into an animal at the end of the encounter; he is transformed into a fish or rather an "antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit" (181). When the narrator first discovers him, he is looking at the fenced-in garden, evidently realizing the limitations of his rationalist attitude:

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations [...].

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone. (180-81)

As I have noted, the ghost of the father does not give his daughter any explicit lesson; he is, rather, learning his own lesson. She perceives

him in a process of self-discovery and change, which she is, for other reasons and in other ways, even more in need of than he is.

To experience the final stage in her relationship with her parents, the narrator has to acknowledge their “right to get old,” their decline and their death. This is probably the most important stage; the daughter calls her parents back to life primarily to take leave of them. Restoration from death and restoration to death go hand in hand. Thus the return of the parents is reminiscent of the return of Patroclus in the 23rd canto of the *Iliad*; it is about the need for a burial—with the difference that in *Surfacing* this need seems to be felt much more strongly by the living than by the dead.<sup>4</sup> Even before her ordeal, this need is on the narrator’s mind. She is haunted by the memory of a dead heron that she found hanging from a tree, gratuitously killed by some tourists: “In my head when I closed my eyes the shape of the heron dangled, upside down. I should have buried it” (112). She also regrets her decision not to attend her mother’s funeral—to be more precise, she wishes she had given her a more appropriate burial:

The reason they invented coffins, to lock the dead in, preserve them, they put makeup on them; they didn’t want them spreading or changing into anything else. The stone with the name and the date was on them to weight them down. She would have hated it, that box, she would have tried to get out; I ought to have stolen her out of that room and brought her here and let her go away by herself into the forest, she would have died anyway but quicker, lucidly, not in that glass case. (144)

A little later, she weeps, for the first time, in a fit of rage rather than of sadness, and she accuses her parents of leaving her behind and neglecting her (166). This rage is part of the mourning that the narrator has suppressed so far.

Another reason why the narrator has to find a way of resurrecting and burying her parents is a religious need that Atwood also posits in an interview given shortly after the publication of *Surfacing*:

Everybody has gods or a god, and it’s what you pay attention to or what you worship. And they can be imported ones or they can be intrinsic ones, indigenous ones, and what we tend to have done in this country is to use im-

ported gods like imported everything else. [...] Christianity in this country is an imported religion. [...] I think that the authentic religion that was here has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way. (Gibson 30-31)

The need for religion that Atwood speaks about in this passage is also evident in *Surfacing* in an exchange between the narrator and her mother. After hearing how her brother fell off the dock and was rescued by her mother in the nick of time, she wants to find out what happens to people after they die:

I asked our mother where he would have gone if she hadn't saved him. She said she didn't know. My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell. "Would he be in the graveyard?" I said. [...]

"Nobody knows," she said. She was making a pie crust and she gave me a piece of the dough to distract me. My father would have said Yes; he said you died when your brain died. I wonder if he still believes that. (68-69)

Like Atwood herself, the parents have rejected the orthodox Christian answers, but they do not offer new ones that would satisfy their child's need for explanations. Nor do they satisfy the adult narrator. The sentence, "I wonder if he still believes that," expresses her doubts about her father's answer not only as to its explicit content, but also with respect to the implied assumption that he is still around, believing or not believing in the views that he held when alive. Elsewhere the narrator makes a similar comment, which also shows that her father's attitude to religion left his daughter unsatisfied. Ironically, the man who does not believe in gods is turned into a god himself:

He said Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition, and a superstition was a thing that didn't exist. If you tell your children God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god, but what happens when they find out you are human after all, you have to grow old and die? (98)

The narrator's parents have to undergo two basic transformations. First, they have to become gods, giving their daughter guidance, power, and the kind of religious experience that Atwood envisions in the interview, i.e. a religious experience that is an authentic reflection

of one's environment. But then they have to turn human, thus enabling their daughter to witness their decline and to accept their death—in other words, to mourn and to bury them.

All of these transformations have indeed occurred by the end of the narrator's ordeal as is shown in the following passage, which describes the departure of the parents:

During the night I have a dream about them, the way they were when they were alive and becoming older; they are in a boat, the green canoe, heading out of the bay.

When I wake in the morning I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them. The rules are over. [...]

No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same place. They'll never appear to me again [...]

No total salvation, resurrection, Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for. (182-84)

The narrator's relationship with her parents, which was arrested in the past, has now evolved and caught up with the present—just as her relationship with her unborn child has. She had to accept the death of this child before she could resurrect it, and she had to resurrect her parents before she could accept their death.

The narrator's realization that her parents will no longer haunt her signals a change to a more ordinary frame of mind. She re-enters the cabin to eat food from a can and she puts on her clothes. She also realizes that she will go back to the city. This return to common sense raises the question whether the ghosts have an objective existence, or whether they only appear in their daughter's mind. In the interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood states her preference for the "Henry James kind of [ghost story], in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off" (Gibson 29). It is certainly possible to explain the ghosts in *Surfacing* along these lines.<sup>5</sup> During the encounters with their daughter, they are doing precisely, as we have seen, what she would like or will have to do herself. When the narrator walks to the place where she saw her father's ghost, she

realizes that the footprints left behind by him are in fact her own (181). After the end of her ordeal, she thinks that her parents have "receded, back to the past, inside the skull" (183). However, despite all of this evidence, it would be reductive to say that the ghosts are merely figments of the narrator's diseased imagination. It is one of Atwood's achievements in *Surfacing* that her storytelling does not privilege any particular frame of mind. She skilfully modulates from the stunted sensibility and distorted memory of the first chapters to the magical or mythical imagination of the ordeal and finally to a mood of clarity and common sense, rendering each of these phases with equal persuasiveness. This means that throughout the ordeal the ghosts are as fully alive and present to the narrator and the reader as to anyone who has a mythical world view and believes in the spiritual presence of his or her ancestors.

In addition to the narrator's child and her parents, there is another character who returns from death. This is the narrator herself, by far the most frightening ghost in *Surfacing*, an example of death in life if ever there was one. Before the changes brought about by her ordeal, she has lost many of the gifts that define a full human life. She does not dream (37); nor does she weep (166). She is incapable of loving (36, 156), claiming that this is due to her divorce, which was like an amputation (36)—of course, she was not divorced in the literal sense, but, like other distorted memories, this is metaphorically true. Her feelings are either missing (22, 99) or strangely disconnected from events and experiences (24). When Joe shows his suffering in one of the frustrating exchanges about their relationship, her response speaks volumes about her withered emotional life: "His face contorted, it was pain: *I envied him*" (101; my italics). One of her friends describes the narrator as "inhuman" (148), and the narrator herself suspects that she might no longer be truly alive. Turning the pages of the family photo album, she tries to find the point at which she died, and she concludes that she is like a head without a body (101-02).

The anagnorisis and the ensuing ordeal restore the narrator from her death in life. After diving at the rock face, she regains her capacity

to feel: "feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (140). She also weeps (166), dreams (182) and even talks about her love for Joe (186). Where all of this will lead, to motherhood and a renewed relationship with Joe (whom earlier she resolved to leave) or to pain and failure, is not clear. The ending, like many another ending in Atwood, remains open. But some sort of change, some sort of movement from death to life, has certainly occurred. This is also suggested by a passage in which the narrator comments on the news that her father's corpse has been found. Whereas her friends think she should feel grief and misery, she is almost elated: "They're avoiding me, they find me inappropriate; they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (153). These words refer to the child to be conceived, to the parents' return from the underworld, and most of all to the narrator's own restoration from death.

### 3. A Reading of *Alias Grace*

*Alias Grace*, published in 1996, is a historical novel based on one of the famous murder cases of nineteenth-century Canada. In the summer of 1843, Thomas Kinnear, a gentleman farmer, and Nancy Montgomery, who was both his housekeeper and his mistress, were murdered in a small town near Toronto. Kinnear had two other servants, James McDermott and Grace Marks, who were charged with the murders and found guilty. McDermott went to the gallows, while Grace Marks's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. It has always remained a moot question if or to what extent Grace Marks was involved in the murders. In McDermott's eyes, she was the chief culprit: she had promised to sleep with him if he killed the housekeeper, and she had even helped to strangle her. Grace's motive, according to McDermott, was jealousy. She envied the housekeeper for the privileges which she enjoyed as Kinnear's mistress.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the historical gap between the settings of the two novels, *Alias Grace* resembles *Surfacing* in a surprising number of ways. The narrative structure of the two works, for instance, is highly similar. Both are detective novels that contain a major anagnorisis scene towards the end. In *Surfacing*, the initial mystery or question is what happened to the father, and the narrator herself plays the part of the detective. In *Alias Grace*, we want to find out whether Grace was involved in the murders; the part of the detective is played by Simon Jordan, a young doctor and a specialist on amnesia, who investigates Grace's case. The anagnorisis in the earlier novel is the narrator's regaining of her true memories when she sees the ambiguous corpse-or foetus-like shape in the water. The corresponding anagnorisis in the later novel occurs when Grace is hypnotised, with rather surprising results, which will be discussed below.

The two novels are also similar in that the protagonist is heavily traumatised by experiencing (*Surfacing*) or witnessing (*Alias Grace*) an abortion. When Grace is working for a wealthy family in Toronto, she becomes very close to a fellow servant, Mary Whitney. Mary has an affair with one of her employer's sons, who makes the usual promises while enjoying her favours. On Mary's becoming pregnant, however, he pays her off and puts an end to the relationship. Faced with the prospect of losing her job and ending up as a prostitute, Mary has an abortion and bleeds to death in the bed she shares with Grace, an event that Grace sums up in the words, "And so the happiest time of my life was over and gone" (180). While playing a pivotal role in the novel, the seduction of Mary is only one instance of a more general pattern of sexual exploitation. As a young and attractive servant and as a prisoner later on, Grace is regarded as fair game by employers, strangers and prison guards. She is subjected to an endless round of innuendo and harassment throughout the novel. It also seems that Grace was abused by her own father; this is never explicitly referred to, but indicated by various hints and clues.<sup>7</sup> Another traumatic event, which is not itself a form a sexual exploitation but closely connected to it, is the death of Grace's mother. This occurs in the crowded hold of a

ship in which emigrants are ferried across the Atlantic like cattle. Grace's father, who has frequently beaten his wife and has driven his family into poverty, is at least partially responsible for this death, and entirely accountable for its squalid circumstances.

Grace also resembles the protagonist of *Surfacing* in that her mind, in particular her memory, is profoundly affected by the traumatic events she has experienced. While the narrator of *Surfacing* fabricates a false past to protect herself against the real one, Grace's response to trauma is amnesia. Instead of false recollections, she has none at all when it comes to certain events in her life, including the abuse by her father or some crucial hours on the days of the murders. In fact, she is a case of multiple personality disorder, having developed a second consciousness, a so-called alter, with a different character and a separate memory, which is not accessible to Grace herself. This alter is first revealed in the anagnorisis of the hypnosis scene when it talks through Grace's mouth while she herself is fast asleep. The presence of the alter inside Grace also accords with the intimations of child abuse, which is believed to be the most common cause of multiple personality disorder,<sup>8</sup> and it explains her involvement in the murders. The Grace Marks that we witness throughout the novel is no angel, but given the hardship, the brutality and the losses she has experienced, she comes across as a remarkably honest, sane and considerate human being—the last person we would suspect of the murders of which she has been convicted. However, the popular theory of her involvement in these murders proves to be roughly true, with the qualification that it is the alter, who, unbeknownst to Grace, incites McDermott to kill the housekeeper and helps to strangle her.

While the present reading takes the hypnosis scene at face value, other readings assume that it is—or might be—an act, and that the solution suggested by the scene, i.e. the existence of an alter, amounts to nothing more than a rather dubious hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> However, it is highly unlikely that Grace is putting on a performance. Her behaviour during the scene is not at all in her interest. The personality talking from her mouth insults the committee lobbying for Grace to be par-

done, and it more or less admits to taking part in the strangling of Nancy. Would a planned performance not be a little less self-damaging? The disagreement about the hypnosis scene is related to a more general disagreement. The critics who suspect Grace of putting on an act tend to read *Alias Grace* as historiographic metafiction of a highly sceptical kind; in their view, it is a novel that offers many different versions of the past without privileging any one of them.<sup>10</sup> The focus of these readings is epistemological; they argue that *Alias Grace* is about the impossibility of knowing the truth. The focus of the present reading is pragmatic; in my view, the novel is about the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on people's lives (as will be shown in the fourth and final part of this essay).

The traumatic events experienced by Grace give birth to ghosts who return from the dead to visit her, which creates a further parallel to *Surfacing*. In her waking life as well as in her dreams, Grace is haunted by a vision of the dying Nancy, a vision that is presented in the very first chapter, as a kind of epigraph to the novel (5-6). The memory of Grace's mother is similarly disquieting and uncanny. After her mother's death, a fellow passenger by the name of Mrs. Phelan makes a remark that sticks in Grace's mind. "Mrs. Phelan also said that we had not opened the window to let out the soul, as was the custom; but perhaps it would not be counted against my poor mother, as there were no windows in the bottom of the ship and therefore none to be opened" (120). This statement induces Grace to believe that the ghost of her mother is trapped in the hold of the ship, travelling back and forth across the Atlantic without any possibility of escape (122). After listening to Grace's narrative of her mother's death, the doctor has a nightmare in which he experiences "[h]is father, in the sinuous process of coming back to life" (140). On a more humorous note, there is also, at the house of the prison governor, "on Thursdays the Spiritualist Circle, for tea and conversing with the dead, which is a comfort to the Governor's wife because of her departed infant son" (22). The most important person to return from the dead is the woman who talks through Grace's mouth when she is hypnotised. This being

claims to be her friend Mary, the fellow servant who died after the abortion.

Instead of analysing this “Mary” in the language of psychology, using such nineteenth-century terms as *double consciousness* or such twentieth-century ones as *multiple personality disorder* and *alter*, one might also consider “Mary” a ghost that returns from the dead to possess the body of her friend. The idea of possession is suggested by the events immediately after Mary’s death when Grace hears her friend’s voice saying, “*Let me in*” (178). Remembering the death of her mother and the remark made by the fellow passenger, Grace believes that she must have misheard the words, *Let me out*; therefore she hastily opens a window to allow Mary’s soul to escape. But it seems that the words were indeed, *Let me in*, and that her friend’s spirit has entered her body. This is also indicated by a dream that Grace has on the eve of the murders. In this dream, Mary appears to her, holding a glass with a firefly in it:

“[T]hen she took her hand from the top of the glass, and the firefly came out and darted about the room; and I knew that this was her soul, and it was trying to find its way out, but the window was shut; and then I could not see where it was gone. Then I woke up, with the tears of sadness running down my face, because Mary was lost to me once more.” (312-13)

The reason why Grace cannot discover where the firefly or soul has gone is that it has sought refuge inside her.

The difference between reading *Alias Grace* as a psychological study of multiple personality disorder or as a Gothic fiction about the possession by a ghost<sup>11</sup> does not greatly matter in the present context as both imply a restoration from death. If Mary’s soul enters Grace’s body after her demise, we are dealing with a clear-cut example of this theme. If the person inside Grace is an alter modelled on Mary, the latter is still restored from death, albeit in a more tenuous and indirect fashion. What is particularly interesting in each case is the way in which the person inside Grace affects her life and her well-being. Here, again, I discern a similarity with *Surfacing*. In this novel, the parents’ return from death may be uncanny and bewildering, but it is

ultimately helpful and cathartic, enabling their daughter to overcome her inertia and alienation. In *Alias Grace*, the spirit of Mary also supports Grace. We should not see the ghostly presence inside Grace in exclusively negative terms: as a demon to be exorcised, a disorder to be cured. We should also see it as a survival strategy. The person talking through Grace's mouth during the hypnosis scene quite literally defends and protects Grace when she tells the audience that Grace is not guilty of the murders because she knew nothing about them (402). This person also enables Grace to insulate her mind against the memory of traumatic experiences, and provides her with an outlet for her feelings of jealousy and rage, primarily against Nancy, that Grace more or less represses in her own person. Moreover, the Mary inside Grace turns the tables on the male victimizers with the help of her host's body. In the hypnosis scene, she describes how she used her sexuality to wield power over the men around her:

"I would meet him [McDermott] outside, in the yard, in my nightdress, in the moonlight. I'd press up against him, I'd let him kiss me, and touch me as well [...]. But that was all, Doctor. That was all I'd let him do. I had him on a string, and Mr. Kinnear as well. I had the two of them dancing to my tune!" (400)

If Grace's accommodation of the Mary inside her is a survival strategy, a way of coping with trauma and exploitation, it is, admittedly, a rather desperate and also an unconscious one. Grace can maintain her own sanity and identity only at the cost of splitting in two, of relegating some of her memories and actions to a second person, who turns out to be a murderer. This person, intruding ghost or self-created alter, is "alias Grace"; she is the same woman as Grace Marks in the sense that she shares some of the experiences and motives of the latter, and she is a different person in the sense that Grace Marks is not aware of her. I will return to this crucial point, which distinguishes *Alias Grace* from *Surfacing*, in the final part of this essay.

The various ghosts that haunt or possess the living in *Alias Grace* represent only one version of the restoration-from-death theme. A more optimistic version of this theme is the return to a lost paradise.

This is suggested by Grace's name, which, although historically given, is turned into a telling one by Atwood. At one point, Grace speculates that her name was inspired by the hymn, "Amazing Grace" (379), and the ballad in chapter 2, which tells Grace's story from a popular and sensational point of view, concludes with the idea of Grace's salvation:

And she will be as white as snow,  
And into Heaven will pass,  
And she will dwell in Paradise,  
In Paradise at last. (15)

The final passage of the book echoes these ideas in a more indirect and symbolic fashion. For the first time in her life, Grace is making a quilt for herself, the pattern being "The Tree of Paradise." In this quilt, she intends to include three patches from garments worn by Nancy, Mary and herself respectively:

I will embroider around each one of them with red featherstitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern.  
And so we will all be together. (460)

The patchwork structure of the quilt recalls the co-existence of different personalities in Grace. But it also envisions a change for the better, a reconciliation of sorts. The blending of the three pieces of cloth into a work of art, and the companionship of the three women, who will "all be together" rather than at enmity with each other, is of a more peaceful nature, more fully and truly a restoration from death than the uncanny and disturbing way in which Grace's mind has been haunted and possessed by the ghosts of Nancy and Mary throughout the novel.

#### 4. The Different Roles of Knowledge in the Two Novels

In *Alias Grace*, Reverend Verringer, the leader of the group that lobbies for Grace to be pardoned, refers to a well-known verse from the Gospel of John: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make

you free" (John 8:32; *Alias Grace* 80). While drawing his quotation from the Bible, as one might expect a clergyman to do, Verringer here articulates a view that was also expressed, in more secular terms, by the writers of the Enlightenment. "*Sapere aude*," writes Immanuel Kant in his famous essay, "Was ist Aufklärung?"<sup>12</sup> If one dares to know the truth about the world and oneself, one will ultimately enjoy a better life. The belief in the beneficial results of true knowledge has been an ingredient in many post-Enlightenment philosophies and theories, for instance in psychoanalysis. If a patient wishes to be cured, she has to face up to the truth about herself, in particular to the traumatic elements of this truth. The layers of deceit and disguise that censorship and repression have left in her mind have to be stripped away; what lies hidden deep down in the unconscious has to be raised to the light of the conscious. Although this process may seem perilous and painful in the short term and is resisted by powerful forces in the psyche of the patient, it is salutary in the long run. "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you healthy," is the promise of psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup>

In her early works, Atwood fully endorses the principle of *sapere aude*, echoing the revolutionary and optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the late 60s and early 70s, which, in its various political philosophies aiming at liberation and emancipation, was affiliated with the Enlightenment. In *Survival*, Atwood writes, "[A]cknowledging the truth of your situation is always preferable to concealing it" (75). This view is also implicit in the way she presents her well-known "victim positions," i.e. the attitudes that one can take to being a victim:

*Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.*

[...]

*Position Two:*

*To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology [...] or any other large general powerful idea.*

[...]

*Position Three:*

*To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. (46-48)*

There is a clear ranking in terms of value: position three is better than two, two better than one. What distinguishes the more advanced positions is a greater awareness of the truth. Position one consists in a complete refusal to see things as they are; position two reaches partial awareness; position three amounts to complete awareness. It entails a recognition of one's victim status and a realistic appraisal of the causes of this status. The assumption is, of course, that this complete knowledge provides a starting point for working one's way out of the victim position.

Atwood's views on knowledge are relevant in the present context because literary ghosts are often associated with dangerous and disturbing knowledge about the past. Hamlet's father, for instance, tells his son about the fratricide that caused his death. The ghost of Banquo, who appears to Macbeth, embodies the latter's guilt, i.e. his disquieting knowledge of his responsibility for the murder of Banquo. In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the ghost of Alfonso reminds Manfred not of the latter's own crimes but of those committed by his ancestor. As these examples show, the dangerous knowledge communicated or embodied by the ghost is usually secret; in more recent works such as *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* it may even be repressed and unconscious, thus rendering the appearance of the ghost a return of the repressed.

To deal with a ghost according to the principles of the Enlightenment requires a full recovery of the secret or repressed knowledge; the ghost can only be laid to rest if the living explore their biographies and their souls, facing up to what they have not been able to acknowledge previously. In *Surfacing*, published in the same year as *Survival* (1972), Atwood has the narrator deal with the ghosts of her past in exactly this way. The novel is based on the firm belief that "acknowledging the truth of your situation is always preferable to concealing it." Moreover, in its general outlines the narrator's development resembles a psychoanalytic cure. She has lost her mental equilibrium because she has experienced a traumatic event, of which she is not aware, however, having banned the direct recollection of it to her

unconscious. Thus she has to work her way down through the disguises and distortions in her mind until she arrives at the true memory, a process that is certainly bewildering and distressing in the short term but may prove to be salutary in the long run. Only after recovering her past, after facing up to the truth about herself, does she have a chance to heal. This belief in the beneficial effects of true knowledge also characterizes the following passage, in which the narrator comments on the place where she experienced her anagnorisis:

The map crosses and the drawings made sense now: at the beginning he [the narrator's father] must have been only locating the rock paintings, deducing them, tracing and photographing them, a retirement hobby; but then he found out about them. The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth. (139)

The sacred power of the place, the "salvation" that it offers, is linked quite explicitly to "learn[ing] the truth."<sup>14</sup>

Some of the characters in *Alias Grace* argue along similar lines as the narrator of *Surfacing*. As we have seen, Reverend Verringer quotes the Gospel of John to the effect that the truth will make us free. In his lecture, Simon alludes to the Enlightenment notion of the beneficial progress of science: "The nineteenth century, he concluded, would be to the study of Mind what the eighteenth had been to the study of Matter—an Age of Enlightenment. He was proud to be part of such a major advance in knowledge, if only in a very small and humble way" (300). Early on in the novel, Grace similarly thinks that "science is making such progress, and what with modern inventions and the Crystal Palace and world knowledge assembled, who knows where we will all be in a hundred years" (27). After telling Simon what little she knows of the murders, she concludes, "'It would be a great relief to me, to know the whole truth at last'" (320).

However, Grace also has her sceptical moods, in which the prospect of knowing the whole truth does not appeal to her. When she learns that a doctor will hypnotise her to restore her memory, she is less than enthusiastic about it: "I told [the Governor's wife] I was not at all sure

I wanted to have it back" (382). Later on, she similarly states that she would never consult a medium to get in touch with the dead. "I don't go in for any of that, as you never know what might come out of it" (455). In the final chapter, she mentions that she might be pregnant (another similarity with the narrator of *Surfacing*) or that she might be dying of cancer like her mother. "It is strange to know you carry within yourself either a life or a death, but not to know which one. Though all could be resolved by consulting a doctor, I am most reluctant to take such a step; so I suppose time alone must tell" (459). Grace's preference for not knowing is all the more interesting as the enigmatic and ambiguous growth resembles the ghostly presence inside her, of whose very existence she is unaware. Other characters also make a case for ignorance. Thus a fellow passenger on the coach from Toronto to Richmond Hill advises Grace not to look back: "Never look behind you, said the dealer in farm implements. [...] Because the past is the past, he said, and regret is vain, let bygones be bygones. You know what became of Lot's wife, he went on. Turned to a pillar of salt she was" (204). Simon, of course, is generally in favour of restoring memory and acquiring knowledge. In a letter to a friend he writes about his research on Grace, "*Not to know* [...] is as bad as being haunted" (424). But occasionally he also realizes the blessings of ignorance. When he fantasizes about being married to Grace, he asks himself if he would really appreciate a full disclosure of her relationship with McDermott: "But what if, some evening in the lamplit parlour, she were to reveal more than he would care to know?" (388).

A powerful argument against knowledge is implied in the many references to the Fall. At their first meeting, Simon presents Grace with an apple, asking her what it makes her think of. On the one hand, this is the first of his many association exercises meant to awaken Grace's dormant memory. On the other hand, it is an allusion to the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Simon—who in the same scene also quotes a speech by the devil from the Book of Job (38)—is cast in the role of a tempter who offers dangerous knowledge.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, the pedlar Jeremiah tells Grace, "You are one of us" (155;

see Gen. 3:22), presumably implying that she has a special telepathic gift. Later he suggests to her that she join him, earning a living as a travelling clairvoyant and communicating hidden knowledge to their clients (268). Grace, however, cannot make up her mind to accompany him right away. Her response to Simon's offer of the apple is equally hesitant. Instead of eating the apple and agreeing to talk to him, she answers his offer with an ambiguous gesture:

He says, I give you my word that as long as you continue to talk with me, and do not lose control of yourself and become violent, you shall remain as you were. I have the Governor's promise.

I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits.

Finally I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead. (42)

Grace's gesture shows that this apple is about the head and about knowledge. Moreover it shows Grace's intense interest in this knowledge but also her reluctance to allow it into her mind.

What does all of this mean for Grace's knowledge of the murders? As I have argued above, Grace herself has no knowledge of them, just as she has no knowledge of the time after Mary's death or of the abuse by her own father. It is only as Mary Whitney, as a separate person with a distinct consciousness and a distinct memory, that she knows about them. Unlike the narrator of *Surfacing*, she is not the driving force behind the anagnorisis in her novel; she is not even present in the anagnorisis scene of *Alias Grace*. While another person is talking through her mouth, revealing the strange truth to Simon and others, Grace herself is far away in a dream, floating in the sea with her mother (403). Grace is unaware of the Mary Whitney inside her, and it is imperative that she, and others, remain so. If the discoveries of the hypnosis scene were generally known, Grace would never be pardoned (407), and if she herself were to find out, her mental balance would be in jeopardy. This is why, despite her evident sympathy for Simon and her enjoyment of their talks, she must resist his attempts to restore her memory:

Looked at objectively, what's been going on between them, despite her evident anxiety over the murders and her surface compliance, has been a contest of wills. She hasn't refused to talk—far from it. She's told him a great deal; but she's told him only what she's chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell; what she chooses perhaps not even to know. Knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed. But he'll pry it out of her yet. He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out? Up, out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea.

He wonders why he's thinking in such drastic terms. He means her well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue, surely he does.

But does she? If she has anything to hide, she may want to stay in the water, in the dark, in her element. She may be afraid she won't be able to breathe, otherwise. (322)

While *Surfacing* is about the necessity of surfacing, of emerging into the full light of knowledge, Grace must remain below the surface to survive. Ignorance means life to her.

This need for ignorance is one of the reasons why psychoanalysis, which provides a general model for interpreting the development of the narrator in *Surfacing*, is not an adequate model for understanding *Alias Grace*. Simon is in many ways like Freud: a doctor of the mind rather than the body who talks to his patient on a regular basis, takes an interest in her dreams and associations, and aims to unearth the traumatic memories buried in her unconscious. Nor is it a coincidence that the maid working at his lodging, Dora, shares her name with the protagonist of Freud's most famous case study.<sup>16</sup> Despite these allusions, *Alias Grace* is not a psychoanalytic novel but rather an attack on psychoanalysis. The tables are turned on the doctor. Instead of reading his patient's mind, he finds her reading his mind in the hypnosis scene (400). And rather than restoring her memory, he loses his own after receiving a head injury in the American Civil War (430).<sup>17</sup> It is not Simon's talking cure that leads to the discovery of the Mary inside Grace, but the hypnosis initiated by Jeremiah. There are several reasons for the breakdown of the psychoanalytic project, including a feminist critique of the masculine bias of this project,<sup>18</sup> but the most fundamental of these reasons seems to be that one of the major tenets of psychoanalysis, the belief in the curative powers of enhanced self-knowledge, does not apply in *Alias Grace*.

To sum up, Atwood is still very much concerned with survival and with victimisation in *Alias Grace*, just as in *Surfacing* and *Survival*. Grace is a survivor in many senses of the word, including the most literal one; she narrowly escapes being hanged. She is also a woman who attempts to abandon her role as victim and succeeds in doing so, to a limited extent at least, after a long and laborious struggle. But these concerns are divorced from the belief in the liberating power of true knowledge, from the Enlightenment legacy that is still apparent in her early works. The struggle for survival and against victimisation no longer involves the recognition of truth. On the contrary, it is not knowing the truth that makes Grace free.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I should like to thank Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker for organising this conference, and the participants for their responses to my talk. Thanks are also due to Pola Rudnik, Sven Wagner, Frank Kearful, Irena Struck, Alexa Keuneke and the *Connotations* readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps we are also supposed to think of Odysseus, who outwits the cyclops Polyphemus by telling him that his name is "Nobody." There is a further echo of the Polyphemus episode when the narrator escapes from her friends after destroying their film. Her lover Joe, who is like Polyphemus in that he has wielded the one-eyed camera, pursues her: "Joe [...] yells my name, furiously: *if he had a rock he would throw it*" (161; my italics). The narrator is also similar to Odysseus in that her story is about the difficult return to an island and to one's family after a long period of separation and alienation.

<sup>3</sup>The word *surface* is used elsewhere, both as verb (e.g. 37) and noun (e.g. 175). The concept of surfacing occurs as well, most importantly in the diving episode when the narrator emerges from the water after seeing the ambiguous shape (136). But the form *surfacing* is, to the best of my knowledge, only used in this passage.

<sup>4</sup>See also Janice Fiamengo, who describes the narrator's relationship with her parents as follows: "Conjuring up their ghosts helps her to accept their deaths and to appreciate that in life they were always and only human, rather than the inaccessible gods she imagined" (146). The subtitle of Fiamengo's essay is "Margaret Atwood's Texts of Mourning"; she discusses a number of novels, short

stories and poems as essentially elegiac works concerned with the memory of parents “shadowed by death” (148). It is interesting to see that Atwood’s most recent short story cycle, *Moral Disorder*, contains two additional texts of this kind, “The Labrador Fiasco” (about the protagonist’s father) and “The Boys at the Lab” (about the protagonist’s mother).

<sup>5</sup>As Keith Garebian does in his essay: “*Surfacing* reveals cumulatively that its ghosts are essentially projections of the protagonist’s troubled mind” (2).

<sup>6</sup>This is the version presented by Susanna Moodie in *Life in the Clearings* (152-71). Moodie’s account is cast in the form of a highly vivid first-person narrative, a confession made by McDermott on the eve of his execution. For Atwood’s review of the historical evidence, in particular of Moodie’s account, see her afterword to the novel and “In Search of *Alias Grace*” (1512-13). An independent assessment of the historical sources on the case of Grace Marks is given by Judith Knelman.

<sup>7</sup>One of these is an erotic dream in which Grace wonders whether the man embracing her from behind is Jeremiah the pedlar, McDermott, or Mr. Kinnear: “And then I felt it was not any of these three, but another man, someone I knew well and had long been familiar with, even as long ago as my childhood, but had since forgotten” (280).

<sup>8</sup>For a critical discussion of multiple personality disorder and its alleged cause, child abuse, see Ian Hacking’s *Rewriting the Soul*; this study is cited by Atwood in the “Acknowledgments” at the end of the novel. A less critical discussion of multiple personality disorder, also cited in the “Acknowledgments,” is given by Adam Crabtree. For a well-informed reading of *Alias Grace* in the light of contemporary discussions of multiple personality disorder and trauma therapy, see Darroch.

<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, Zimmermann 418, Rogerson 14, Rowland 251 and Bölling 118.

<sup>10</sup>See the studies mentioned in the preceding note as well as Michael and Szalay. A critique of the epistemological approach to *Alias Grace* is given by Niederhoff.

<sup>11</sup>See the inconclusive discussion of these alternatives in ch. 49, in which Simon, Jeremiah and Reverend Verringer review what they have just witnessed in the hypnosis session (405-07). Stephanie Lovelady also thinks that “‘Mary’ works as easily as a ghost as an alternate personality” (55-56); this view is supported by Rosario Arias Doblás (96).

<sup>12</sup>The Latin quotation is from Horace, *Epistles* 1.2.40. Admittedly, Kant’s focus is more on the activity of thinking for oneself than on the knowledge of truth as the result of this activity. But he, too, is convinced that the effect of the activity will be beneficial; he compares it to attaining one’s majority in his famous definition of enlightenment as “*Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit*” (55). See also Denis Diderot, who, in the entry on *encyclopédie* in the *Encyclopédie*, argues that knowledge leads to virtue and happiness: “En effet, le but d’une *Encyclopédie* est de rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre [...] afin que les travaux des siècles passés n’aient pas été des travaux inutiles

pour les siècles qui succéderont; que nos neveux, devenant plus instruits, deviennent en même temps plus vertueux et plus heureux" (415).

<sup>13</sup>In *Abriß der Psychoanalyse*, Sigmund Freud writes about the relationship between analyst and patient, "Unser Wissen soll sein Unwissen gutmachen, soll seinem Ich die Herrschaft über verlorene Bezirke des Seelenlebens wiedergeben" (*Werke* 17: 98). Later in the same work, he puts it even more succinctly, "Unser Weg, das geschwächte Ich zu stärken, geht von der Erweiterung seiner Selbsterkenntnis aus" (*Werke* 17: 103). See also Freud's often-quoted dictum, "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden" (*Studienausgabe* 1: 516), in his lectures on psychoanalysis.

<sup>14</sup>In the introduction to her book, *Reading the Gothic in Margaret Atwood's Novels*, Colette Tennant writes, "Atwood's didacticism leads her readers to a kind of emancipation through informed self-knowledge" (2). While this claim is certainly justified as far as *Surfacing* and *Survival* are concerned, it does not hold true for *Alias Grace*, as I will argue below. Tennant herself acknowledges as much when she writes, "It is difficult to fit *Alias Grace* neatly into this chapter since the entire novel is in some ways about how slippery memory is" (56).

<sup>15</sup>Ryan Miller reads *Alias Grace* in the light of Gnosticism, in which the story of the Fall is interpreted in an unorthodox manner: God is an evil patriarch jealously insisting on his privileges, and the serpent is a justified rebel offering valuable knowledge to Adam and Eve. While I find Miller's reading interesting and original, I do not consider the parallels with Gnosticism sufficiently strong to be persuaded by his argument.

<sup>16</sup>See *Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse* (*Studienausgabe* 6: 83-186).

<sup>17</sup>For various ways in which Grace turns the tables on Simon, see Morra (126-28), Niederhoff (76-80), Staels (432-36), and Zimmermann (390-400 and 411-12).

<sup>18</sup>This feminist critique of psychoanalysis in *Alias Grace* is thoroughly explored by Heidi Darroch: the novel challenges the assumption of the intellectual superiority of the male therapist over the female patient; it is also critical of the blindness of the male therapist to child abuse, which Freud at one point considered a cause of neuroses before he later rejected this view. It is also interesting that, in the "Acknowledgments," Atwood cites Adam Crabtree's *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*; this is a history of what Crabtree calls the "alternate-consciousness paradigm," a tradition in psychology and psychotherapy that started with Mesmer's animal magnetism, was temporarily eclipsed by Freudian psychoanalysis and re-emerged in the theory of multiple personality disorder. In focusing on child abuse, multiple personality disorder and alternate states of consciousness and memory inhabiting one body, Atwood privileges precisely the rival traditions to Freudian psychoanalysis.

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