

Ghosts, Knowledge and Truth in Atwood: A Reader's Guide to Six Responses*

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I have been delighted and enlightened by the six responses to "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*." The aim of the present reply is to assist readers in finding their way around my essay and the various comments and criticisms contained in the responses. Thus I will first summarize how the responses relate to my argument (contradiction, extension, elaboration, ...) and what their principal claims are. Then I will conclude with some remarks in defence of my views.

My essay may be summed up as follows. There are several ghosts in *Surfacing*, most notably the narrator's parents and her child, whom she imagines to be living with her divorced husband. The narrator needs to confront these ghosts and to recover the painful knowledge associated with them before she can be restored from her death-in-life

*Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91; Janice Fiamengo, "Truths of Storytelling: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 53-67; Eleonora Rao, "A Response to 'The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 68-78; Margaret Rogerson, "Should We Believe Her? Margaret Atwood and Uncertainty: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 79-91; Fiona Tolan, "The Psychoanalytic Theme in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 92-106; Sharon R. Wilson, "A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff's 'The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*,'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 107-18; Lorraine York, "Surfacing from Six Feet Under: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 119-25.

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

state. *Alias Grace* shares many characteristics with the earlier novel: the detective plot, the traumatising of the narrator, the impact of this traumatising on her memory, the presence of ghosts, and the ambivalent nature of these ghosts, who haunt the protagonists but also help them to survive. Despite the many similarities, there is one crucial difference between the two novels. Whereas in *Surfacing* recovering the knowledge of one's past has a salutary effect, the survival of the protagonist in *Alias Grace* depends on the repression of such self-knowledge. It is not knowing the truth that makes Grace free.

While the writers of the responses have paid me very handsome compliments, none of them has extended her politeness so far as to actually agree with me on an important point. My reading of *Alias Grace* takes the hypnosis scene in chapter 48 at face value: Grace is possessed by the ghost of her friend Mary Whitney, who behaves like an alter in a case of dissociative identity disorder (or multiple personality); it is this being who seizes control of her body from time to time and who also participated in the murder of Nancy Montgomery. Thus there is a solution to the detective plot. While Grace herself remains ignorant of this solution, the reader is in the know. Many critics see this solution as merely one hypothesis among many others. On this view, the difference between *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* consists in a shift to postmodern scepticism and uncertainty: *Alias Grace* is a work of historiographical metafiction that emphasizes the unknowability of history and offers many different versions of the past without privileging any one of them.¹ Margaret Rogerson devotes her response to a defence of this view against my reading. She points out that the credentials of the professional in charge of the hypnosis, Dr DuPont alias Jeremiah the peddler, do not inspire much confidence, and she argues that, in *Alias Grace* as well as in other works, Atwood plays the role of a narrative trickster who uses "the technique of uncertainty [and] challenges readers to come to conclusions but also problematizes whatever they invent" (90).

Like Rogerson, Janice Fiamengo reads *Alias Grace* along sceptical lines, arguing that "[t]he ambiguities of the hypnotism scene [...] are

inextricable from the narrative playfulness and skepticism that characterize the novel as a whole" (55). However, Fiamengo interestingly differs from Rogerson and from many other critics in that she takes a surprisingly dim view of this playful scepticism. In her comparison of the two novels, she expresses a clear preference for the earlier one. *Surfacing*, she argues, is an original and unorthodox novel out of step with the cultural fashions of its day. It undermines Canadian anti-Americanism by revealing the similarities between Canada and America, it is critical of sexual liberation and of abortion, and it explores difficult moral and religious themes such as evil, sin and redemption. *Alias Grace*, on the other hand, conforms to the *zeitgeist* of the mid-90s, for instance in its use of repressed memory syndrome, in its endorsement of female discursive empowerment, and in its somewhat simplistic and unfavourable portrayal of the Victorian male elite. Furthermore, Fiamengo makes a distinction between two types of ambiguity that also works in favour of the earlier novel. While *Surfacing* is a work rich in meaning, suggesting a broad spectrum of diverse readings, *Alias Grace* is merely a clever puzzle with several mutually exclusive solutions.

The remaining four responses elaborate on my argument or extend it to other works by Atwood (while being in greater or lesser agreement with its assumptions). Eleonora Rao discusses the return of the dead in connection with Zenia in *The Robber Bride* (1993). She points out the cultural nationalism underpinning Zenia and other revenants created by Atwood; these are meant to compensate for the absence of mythical depth, for the famous lack of ghosts that Canada is said to be haunted by. Rao also claims that both in *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* female identity remains unknowable and elusive, thus arguing along the lines of postmodern uncertainty also followed by Rogerson and Fiamengo. Lorraine York shows that the return of the dead also occurs, in a comic fashion, in *Lady Oracle* (1976). She suggests an additional theoretical framework for Atwood's revenants, that of the postcolonial Gothic (which remains, however, a little vague to my mind), and she interestingly extends the scope of the discussion to

prophecy, i.e. to a problematic and dangerous knowledge of the future. Sharon Wilson explores the return of the dead and related motifs in "Isis in Darkness," "The Bog Man" and "Death by Landscape," three short stories from *Wilderness Tips* (1991), drawing on her research on myth and fairy tales in contemporary writing in general and in Atwood in particular. She portrays Atwood as a parodic postmodernist, pointing out the presence of traditional myths like the Osiris story as well as the ironic inflections with which such myths are retold.

Fiona Tolan focuses on the remarks that I make about psychoanalysis in connection with the different roles of knowledge in the two novels. *Surfacing*, I argue, is in broad agreement with the Freudian assumption that the recovery of repressed memory and painful knowledge is a precondition of mental health, while *Alias Grace* is critical of this assumption and of psychoanalysis in general. Tolan puts the implied evolutionary thesis about Atwood's changing attitude to psychoanalysis to the test by analyzing Freudian themes in *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). She argues that, even in her later novels, Atwood has greater sympathy for psychoanalysis than I give her credit for. There is a critique in these novels not of psychoanalysis as such but of the (male) therapist and his desire to extract knowledge from a (female) patient. "[R]ather than indicating a lost faith in 'the liberating power of true knowledge' [Niederhoff 87], these novels might be better read as resisting the psychoanalytic impulse to reveal and expose, asserting instead the protagonist's agency and ownership of the truth" (104).

In her readings of the three novels, Tolan draws some illuminating parallels, in particular with *Alias Grace*. Jimmy's request, in *Oryx and Crake*, that the enigmatic Oryx tell him about the sexual exploitation she has suffered is similar to Simon's talking cure with Grace, and Oryx's refusal to tell her story resembles the gaps and omissions in Grace's narrative. The most pertinent parallel is probably the one between Grace and Charis in *The Robber Bride*, who also responds to sexual abuse by a dissociation of identity. On the crucial question of

Grace's knowledge or ignorance of her involvement in the murders, the comparison with Charis leads Tolan to the following conclusion (which I find ingenious but too paradoxical to stomach): "[R]ather than choosing between knowing and not knowing, Charis is always cognisant of the truth, but equally asserts her authority over it. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood affords her protagonist an agency similar to Charis's: that is, Grace both knows and chooses not to know" (102).

By way of conclusion, I would like to say a few words in defence of my own reading, in particular in defence of my dissent from the sceptical interpretations of *Alias Grace*. The hypnosis scene is of crucial importance here: do we accept the solution suggested by this scene or do we consider it to be just another instance of the proliferation of stories, of different versions of the unknowable past? Admittedly, the presence of Jeremiah complicates matters. On a previous occasion, he offers Grace a partnership and a career change from servant to travelling clairvoyant; the implication is that they would put on a well-paid act for happily deceived audiences (267-68). When Grace encounters Jeremiah alias Dr DuPont again at the prison governor's house, she reminds us of his gifts as a magician: "I could have laughed with glee; for Jeremiah had done a conjuring trick, as surely as if he'd pulled a coin from my ear [...] just as he used to do such tricks in full view, with everyone looking on" (306). After these feelings of glee, however, Grace experiences other emotions: "But then I recalled that he'd once travelled around as a Mesmerist, and done medical clairvoyance at fairs, *and really did know the arts of such things*, and might put me into a trance. And that brought me up short, and gave me pause to consider" (306; my italics). On an earlier occasion, Jeremiah tells Grace, "You are one of us," suggesting that she has a telepathic talent and a secret knowledge, not that she is a good actress (155).

The point of the hypnosis is not that Jeremiah is pulling a coin from Grace's ear or a made-up story from her mind but that, despite our anticipations of such trickery, it releases something that no one has planned or expected. The experiment turns into a mixture of hypnosis and séance, in which the dialogue with the voice of Mary Whitney is

orchestrated with knocks and raps that indicate the presence of other ghostly visitors. This is not the “fully scientific procedure” announced by Dr DuPont (396), who loses control of the proceedings and is as bewildered as the others. He has to ask Mrs Quenell for help (399), sounds “desperate” (402) and “shaken” (405) and admits to Simon and Reverend Verringer that he does not know what to make of the experiment (405). The behaviour of Grace alias Mary during the hypnosis also makes it difficult to believe that it might be an act. Elsewhere in the novel she is a modest, almost prudish person who apologizes to Simon for even mildly indecent language (116, 119, 158) and objects to the “filthy talk” of the prison guards (240). The voice in the hypnosis scene gives a “high, erotic moan” in front of an audience of gentlemen and gentlewomen, sneers at Simon’s sexual fantasies about the prison governor’s daughter who is sitting next to him, and refers to the latter as a “slut” with a “little furry mousehole” (400). Grace would have to be a superb actress indeed to do this in a convincing manner.

The solution of the hypnosis scene also makes sense of passages that would otherwise remain enigmatic, contradictory or pointless. It fits in with the hints at child abuse, which is considered the most common cause of dissociative identity disorder, and with the references to the ghosts of Mary and of Grace’s mother (see my original article 75-79). It also explains Grace’s periods of amnesia, the comments made by others about her strangeness or insanity (e.g. 278, 314), and James Walsh’s testimony against her at the trial, which conflicts with her own memories (360). Stephanie Lovelady points out another reason why it is unlikely that Grace is putting on an act in the hypnosis scene. Admittedly, Grace is not entirely truthful when she tells her story to Simon, occasionally withholding events or opinions. But the reader is privy to her thoughts and knows what she omits, and “even in her own interior monologue she [Grace] never admits to the murders or hints that she has any memory of them” (Lovelady 57).

The main argument against seeing the hypnosis scene as an act is the lack of a plausible motivation. If Grace and Jeremiah wanted to

put on a performance, they would not insult their audience in such a gross fashion, and they would come up with a story a little more likely to get Grace out of prison. The question of motivation is connected with the question of character, on which Fiamengo makes a pertinent point: "Grace may be a schizophrenic victim unaware of her alternate personality [...] or a deceptive sociopath [...]. Or she may be a girl who has struggled to survive against the odds, using the resources available [...]. She cannot be all three" (58). As Fiamengo sees similar amounts of evidence for all of these hypotheses, Grace to her is a cleverly constructed riddle rather than a reasonable likeness of a complex human being. Thus it becomes "difficult for the reader to respond to her [Grace] as a fully realized character" (57).

I am quoting this conclusion not because I agree with it but because it very clearly states a consequence of the sceptical reading. This consequence is a sacrifice of character, which not all of the critics who opt for this reading are as clearly aware of as Fiamengo. My own sense of Grace (and also of Simon Jordan and Rachel Humphrey) is different. The characterization of Grace has both depth and detail. The reader knows very much about her, including the clothes she is wearing, the work she is doing and the innermost thoughts that are going through her mind. The reader can also respond to and sympathize with her. In one of the most powerful chapters of the novel (little discussed by critics in pursuit of uncertainty), Grace tells Simon how her family crossed the Atlantic when she was twelve years old, how her mother died at sea under extremely squalid circumstances, and how she had to make arrangements for the burial as her father was too ill or too indifferent to do so. A telling detail is the choice of a sheet for her mother's body: "And then I began to worry terribly, because all we had was the three sheets" (12). Eventually Grace chooses an old rather than a new one, preferring the interest of the living to the honour of her mother, and feeling guilty about it afterwards. According to the sceptical view, the chapter is primarily about the narrator Grace who is playing with Simon and the reader, creating one of many images of herself. To my mind, we hear a compelling

story of suffering amidst unspeakable squalor, which creates a strong interest in the character Grace and adds crucial touches to our image of her. It shows her intense grief and despair but also her resilience and her sense of responsibility. Furthermore, it is a traumatic experience that anticipates her reaction to the similarly traumatic death of Mary Whitney. Grace is haunted by the idea that the ghost of her mother is trapped in the ship, and she reveals a peculiar tendency to mix up her own identity with that of the women close to her: "I felt as if it was me and not my mother that had died; and I sat as if paralyzed, and did not know what to do next" (120). The evidence in this chapter and in many others makes it difficult to think of Grace as a narrative gambler who keeps her cards close to her chest and plays them for purely strategic reasons.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the solution suggested by the hypnosis is by no means a neat and tidy one; it does not deprive the novel of all of its ambiguities. It rather shifts the focus of ambiguity and uncertainty from epistemology to psychology and ethics. Fiamengo points out that one cannot speak of the Grace of the final chapter as a fully healed and balanced person (56). There is an instability about her identity which is reminiscent of the classic treatments of the double theme. "Here then, as I lay down the pen and proceed to seal up my confession, I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end" (Stevenson 76). This is the final sentence of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, written by the doctor himself—or is it? Who precisely is the "I" who refers in such a distant fashion to "that unhappy Henry Jekyll"? Similarly, the plural pronoun in Grace's concluding words, "And so we will all be together," creates a final note of uncertainty about the precise nature of this coexistence. Have the ghosts of Mary and Nancy been laid to rest, or will they continue to haunt Grace?

The solution suggested by the hypnosis scene also poses an ethical problem. If we have no way of knowing whether Grace was involved at all in the murders, questions about her guilt or innocence remain rather hypothetical. If we accept the solution, however, these ques-

tions become much more insistent. “We cannot be mere patchworks!” exclaims Reverend Verringer after the hypnosis. “It is a horrifying thought, and one that, if true, would make a mockery of all notions of moral responsibility” (406). Fiamengo argues that *Alias Grace* focuses on rather safe and topical issues, while *Surfacing* explores more universal and difficult themes like sin, evil and redemption (59-60). But precisely these ethical and religious themes play a central role in *Alias Grace*. They are represented, for instance, in the quilt, a “Tree of Paradise,” which Grace is making in the final chapter, and they are also echoed in an important comment in the same chapter. Grace’s husband, Jamie Walsh, asks her for forgiveness, thus casting himself in the role of culpable agent and Grace in the role of innocent victim. Grace finds this too simplistic:

It is not the culprits who need to be forgiven; rather it is the victims, because they are the ones who cause all the trouble. [...]

I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it. For a long time I could not find it in me to pardon them. It would be much better if Mr Walsh would forgive me, rather than being so stubborn about it and wanting to have it the wrong way around. (457-58)

This comment is reminiscent of an often-quoted passage in the final chapter of *Surfacing*, in which the refusal to be a victim is also connected with an acceptance of responsibility. “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. 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” (185). Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Grace is not innocent because, in Atwood, victims are not entirely innocent. Nor is Grace entirely a victim—to what extent she is guilty, to what extent she can be considered an agent and a victimizer as well as a victim, is an open question that the reader is left to ponder at the end of the novel.

NOTE

¹For a list of critics holding this view, see notes 9 and 10 in my original essay; see also Sharon Wilson's article "Quilting as Narrative Art."

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