

## A Response to “The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*”\*

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An arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment: October 23, 1990. It’s a bright clear day, unseasonably warm. It’s a Tuesday [...]. The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead (RB 4).

This quote is from Margaret Atwood’s 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* in which there is a character, Zenia, that mysteriously comes back from the world of the dead to that of the living. Burkhard Niederhoff makes very interesting and appropriate references to various returns from the dead in Atwood’s narrative prose, including *The Tent*. Regarding her poetry, he notes a stubborn refusal “to be buried” in *The Animals in that Country* (1968) as well as Moodie’s last meditations from underground, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*’s final poem (1970).

The starting point of his discussion are three texts by Atwood, one work of fiction, namely *Surfacing* (1972), and two books of criticism, *Survival*, published in the same significant year, and a much later text, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). Niederhoff proposes a daring pair: *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* (1996). Two works which have hardly ever been discussed together. The two novels belong in fact to very different periods within the Atwood canon, besides the span of more than twenty years that separates them. There

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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>>.

are, however, interesting similarities as well as crucial differences between them that Niederhoff quite accurately points out.

Given the prominence of the supernatural and ghostly presences in Niederhoff's essay, it is important to focus for a moment on the novel I quoted above that, strangely enough, is not mentioned, namely *The Robber Bride* (1993). In this novel, Zenia's return from the underworld is a pregnant part of the plot. She suddenly bursts on the scene into the streets of Toronto while the women whose lives she tried to destroy—Roz, Tony and Charis—are having their usual monthly lunch at the Toxique in downtown Toronto.

In *Survival* Atwood has noted with dismay that women in Canadian literature have generally been limited to the role of ice women, earth mothers, or whores—all of whom have natural, rather than supernatural, powers (cf. *Survival* 199-206). Canadians, in general have been denied supernatural representation. In "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction" (1977), included in her collection of essays, *Second Words*, Atwood observes that "magic and monsters don't usually get associated with Canadian literature [...]. Supernaturalism is not typical of Canadian prose fiction; the mainstream [...] has been solidly social-realistic. When people in Canadian fiction die, which they do fairly often, they usually stay buried" (230). In addition, Canada has traditionally been portrayed as "a dull place, devoid of romantic interest and rhetorical excess, with not enough blood spilled on the soil to make it fertile, and above all, ghostless" (231).

Donna Potts has in various ways underlined that, in *The Robber Bride*, "[t]hroughout the text, Atwood's many references to witches, vampires, monsters, and ghosts also affirm the presence of the supernatural in Canada" (Potts 283). If we consider this in the light of a Canadian literary tradition that Atwood herself tried to define, the ghostly, flickering presence of Zenia acquires further significance. As early as in *Survival* Atwood had repeatedly emphasized the urgency "to explore the possibilities" of a given tradition or pattern (174): "A

tradition doesn't necessarily exist to bury you: it can also be used as material for new departures" (246).

The wicked and 'monstrous' Zenia returns unannounced into the world of the living, much to the bewilderment of the three protagonists. It is only at the very end of the novel that she definitively dies, this time with her ashes dispersed by Tony, Charis and Roz over Lake Ontario. Then again the figure of Zenia herself could be a trick of the imagination, a ghost, a spirit: "The story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless, a rumor only [...]. Even the name Zenia may not exist, as Tony knows from looking" (RB 457). As Coral Howells has remarked, Zenia could be seen as the Undead, if possible Dracula's daughter, "operating on the border between the real and the supernatural," a shape shifter very difficult to interpret, "maybe nothing but a simulacrum or a magic mirror" ("Despite the Propaganda" 259).

Zenia, however, could also be seen as the Other Woman in the sense that she stands for the otherness that Tony, Roz and Charis are not able to acknowledge, but that nonetheless happens to be needed for their self-definition. When confronted with Zenia, their own life is sooner or later significantly diminished, as colonial subjects (Zenia apparently has European roots) and as women, incapable to keep their men safe from harm:

Tony's own little history has dwindled considerably. Beside Zenia's, it seems no more than an incident, minor, grey, suburban; a sedate parochial anecdote; a footnote. Whereas Zenia's life sparkles—no, it glares, in the lurid although uncertain light cast by large and portentous world events. (RB 165)

Seemingly Zenia has a plethora of identities, and throughout the novel it will be unattainable to attribute a set identity to her. As the military historian Tony realizes, she knows very little about Zenia: "so much has been erased [...] that Tony isn't sure any longer which of Zenia's accounts of herself was true" (RB 3). Similarly, it is almost impossible to determine what eventually happens to Zenia. "At the end of the novel, all three women reject her and she commits suicide. Or was she murdered? And will she stay dead? We do not really know, for there are [...] limits to the truth-telling of any autobiograph-

ical account" ("Despite the Propaganda" 148). There are limits indeed also to the 'truths' of history: so much depends on who does the chronicle. Here the historian Tony, who is well aware that "[h]istory is a construct" (RB 4) reflects on her own power and authority to make Zenia history:

So now Zenia is History. No [...]. She will only be history if Tony chooses to shape her into history. At the moment she is formless, a broken mosaic; the fragments of her are in Tony's hands, because she is dead, and all of the dead are in the hands of the living. (RB 457)

The dead return in other forms, she thinks, because we will them to. (RB 464)

As in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, trauma is deeply at work in *The Robber Bride*, since the three protagonists have had to negotiate or suppress traumatic memories of childhood; they have all at a certain point in their lives reinvented themselves, even with new names (Rao, "Home and Nation"). It is Zenia who forces them to confront their dead or repressed selves. As Howells notes: "We may ask: Are they negotiating with the dead (as Zenia is supposed to be) or are they negotiating with ghostly selves who may turn out not to be dead at all?" ("Despite the Propaganda" 260).

Identity here is neither whole nor consistent; it is ungraspable and elusive. The most one can expect from identity in these texts is a negotiation, more or less acceptable, with alterity. As Howells has commented with reference to *Cat's Eye* (1988)—but it could also be said of other of Atwood's novels (cf. Rao, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*" 1994)—cross-generic narration goes hand in hand with splintered, multiple "transitional" (CE 5) identities: "There is no unified textual identity" for the protagonist Elaine, "nor does this novel itself have a unified generic identity" (Howells, "Transgressing Genre" 147; Rao *Strategies for Identity*).

It is well known that in Atwood's texts genre limits collapse, and as a result the novels constantly play with generic boundaries and conventions: dystopia, Künstlerroman, fictional autobiography, gothic romance, historical novel and so on. Niederhoff's reading highlights a

generic trait common to both *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, namely the detective novel—or rather a postmodern re-appropriation of its generic rules. The construction of genre, however, parallels the construction of gender in Atwood. A very recent study by Reingard Nischik focuses precisely on how “genre and gender [...] intertwine in a combination of complicity and critique” in Atwood’s oeuvre, where, to put it simply, there is a “foregrounding of gender in a specific generic format” (Nischik 4-5; see also Rao “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*”; *Strategies for Identity*). This topic, however, goes beyond the scope of Niederhoff’s excellent article.

Among the crucial issues in Niederhoff’s reading are the questions of knowledge and rationality. Niederhoff locates *Surfacing* within the culture of Enlightenment in that here Atwood gives a salvific role to knowledge; he attributes, and rightly so, great importance to the beneficial role that the process of self-knowledge and self-discovery have in the novel (81). Certainly for the narrator there is a kind of restoration from death, a sort of rebirth, as Niederhoff underscores (73-74); at the same time though, the ending is ‘open’ as it is often the case in Atwood, and many questions are left unanswered.

What makes *Surfacing* very different from the later novel *Alias Grace* is precisely the role and importance attributed to ‘truth’ and knowledge. This is a very relevant point in Niederhoff’s argument that highlights the distance between these two novels. There is a consistent body of criticism that reads *Alias Grace* as a “historiographic metafiction,” following Linda Hutcheon’s renowned definition (*The Canadian Postmodern; A Poetics of Postmodernism*). According to this critical view the novel provides numerous versions of the past; these are arranged in a paratactic mode, so that the text does not privilege any of them. As Niederhoff interestingly puts it, the “focus of these readings is epistemological; they argue that *Alias Grace* is about the impossibility of knowing the truth” (77). On the other hand, the reading he proposes emphasizes, and convincingly so, “the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on people’s lives” (77).

Shortly after the publication of this historical novel Atwood gave a lecture in Ottawa in which she contextualized her interest in Grace Mark's case and in enigmas within the Canadian literary tradition. Atwood is very attentive to the role of history in relation to the present, in a very postmodern fashion. In her talk "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction" (1998) she stresses that history matters a great deal to the contemporary writer: "The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it. [...] Whatever we write will be contemporary" (229; 210). Here Atwood approaches again the lack of a Canadian literary tradition; this time, though, the emphasis is on the lack of history, of "the absence of anything you could dignify by the name of history—by which was meant interesting and copious bloodshed on our own turf" (217). History in Canada "either didn't exist [...] or if ours it was boring," as in Earle Birney's renowned poem that concludes: "It's only by the lack of ghosts we're haunted" (217). Nonetheless it is not only lack that Atwood looks into; she is also evidently interested in the (false) innocence of English Canadian colonial past and in the challenge of inheritance, in a manner similar to what Joy Kogawa did for the twentieth century in her novel *Obasan* (1983). Atwood digs into the past to find that it is not at all innocent. As she explains: "The lure of the Canadian past, for the writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable—the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" ("In Search of" 218). Of course she is not alone in this enterprise, as many other contemporary writers have been concerned in what could be called the "re-visioning" of Canadian history and character in the attempt to reveal to Canadians a different, new, more accurate version of the Canadian collective past.

In the novel *Grace Marks*, when in prison, relates her story to a young American doctor, Simon Jordan, who is keen on contemporary theories about mental disorders. He tries with all his might to bring back Grace's memories of the day of the killing, in the hope of healing Grace's supposedly disturbed psyche, which has suffered from deep trauma and loss of memory, and thus reveal her innocence or guilt.

He struggles to decipher what Grace is “truly” saying or not saying, while, on the other hand, Grace attempts to understand what he wants to hear, and at the same time she tries to decide what she herself does or does not wish to reveal. Dr Jordan obsessively pursues his prying into the truth: “I approach her mind as if it is a locked box, to which I must find the right key; but so far, I must admit, I have not got very far with it” (132). He never will in fact, as Grace very skillfully puts on a show, a shadow self, a double, and her story-telling characteristically does not unveil neither herself nor the events of that crucial day. She reiterates this in her mind more than once: “There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again” (26). “So I stopped telling them anything” (32); and again, during a session with Dr Jordan: “Now it is his turn to know nothing” (40). One could say in fact that Grace’s ‘tale’ “serves less as a confession and more as a way of keeping secrets” (Howells, “Despite the Propaganda” 265) as Niederhoff has shown with plenty of textual references.

What does not emerge fully in Niederhoff’s essay, perhaps because it is not the focus of his argument, are the negative aspects of Dr Jordan, his obsession for Grace and the fact that his interest in her is not solely medical. In the “closeness of the sewing room” with Grace Dr Jordan can smell her skin: “He tries to pay no attention, but her scent is a distracting undercurrent. She smells like smoke; smoke, and laundry soap, [...] and she smells of the skin itself, with its undertone of dampness, fullness, ripeness [...]. He wonders how often the female prisoners are allowed to bathe. [...] He is in the presence of a female animal” (AG 90). Dr Jordan is hardly aware that Grace has turned out to be the object of his fantasies: “He senses an answering alertness along his own skin, a sensation as of bristles lifting” (90). He is attracted by her to the point of having a sordid relationship with his landlady, who becomes Grace’s surrogate. Should the reader prove some sympathy towards him the text reminds us that “he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside [...] he is one of the dark trio—the doctor, the judge, the executioner” (82).

Grace finds herself with a plethora of identities attributed to her, Scheherazade being one of them. The focus on fiction-making in *Alias Grace* is paramount, as it is made clear in the "Author's Afterword" and elsewhere: "In my fiction, Grace [...]—whatever else she is—is a story-teller" ("In Search of" 227). This is further underscored by the fact that Grace herself highlights her story-telling skills as she begins by saying "This is what I told Dr Jordan."

Niederhoff has elsewhere noted that Grace metamorphoses not only in the press but also in the eyes of Dr Jordan: from a "nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon" (AG 54) to an altogether "different woman—straighter, taller, more self possessed" (59). He thus underscores Grace's duplicity or rather the very many versions of Grace which to a great extent echo contemporary notions of femininity (cf. Niederhoff, "How to Do Things with History"). Grace was at the same time an unwilling victim, a temptress, the real murderer, a female fiend, a slut. To quote Howells again: "Grace is victim and suffering saint, she is whore, madwoman, murderess, Dr Jordan's muse, and Scheherazade. With so many aliases, who is the true Grace Marks? Indeed the title signals a disturbing absence of the original behind the name" ("Transgressing Genre" 152). To be sure, what is behind a name? Or, more precisely, what is hiding behind the mask that time and again Grace puts on for Dr Jordan? "I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practiced" (AG 38).

Here it is not the disguise, the veil that masks a truth, a false veil or lack of it, which is to have a crucial role. The value rests in the veil itself or in the mask that has nothing behind or in front of it, a veil strained across nothing. Grace's 'veil' seemingly unveiled suggests no presentation. As Atwood has pointed out in the "Author's Afterword": "The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma" (463).

Identity here pertains to the realm of fiction and of imagination. Identities are constructed and are always fictive. In addition, one could say that not only is identity a construction and a fiction: it is represented as nothing more than a fictive entity or an illusion with



no substance behind it. In the final analysis identities are aliases, fictions (cf. Wilson 134; Derrida).

Niederhoff maintains, and rightly so, that *Alias Grace* stands against psychoanalysis or rather against Freud's notion that to reach the truth inside the subject will heal the neurosis. Within this theoretical framework, self-knowledge is still attainable and it is, albeit moderately I think, of some benefit in *Surfacing*. In *Alias Grace* quite the opposite works: truth and/or self-knowledge are of no consequence if not utterly inadequate, even dangerous. As Foucault reminds us, "truth is no longer able to save the subject."<sup>1</sup>

The mystery, the inscrutability of Grace cannot in any way be solved or revealed to us. It would be very naïve indeed to want it disclosed, as Atwood's lyric persona reminds us in her 1981 poetry collection, *True Stories*:

Don't ask for the true story;  
Why do you need it?  
It's not what I set out with  
Or what I carry. [...]

The true story is vicious  
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you  
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story. (9-11)

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>My translation of “la vérité n’est pas capable de sauver le sujet” (Foucault 20).

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