Connotations
Vol. 19.1-3 (2009/2010)

Should We Believe Her? Margaret Atwood and Uncertainty: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff[*]

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Burkhard Niederhoff's analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and *Alias Grace* (1996) speaks cogently of the Canadian author's fondness for ghosts, her interest in the notion of survival, and her approaches to memory and the kinds of 'truth' that memory affords. In what follows here I consider these issues in relation to the technique of 'uncertainty' that features in Atwood's work. Although I agree with much of what Niederhoff has to say about the two texts, I contest his acceptance of the "hypnosis scene" in *Alias Grace* "at face value" (76), and embellish my own 1998 argument for an "elusive narrative" (14) in this novel and in Atwood's work more generally. I question Niederhoff's assertion that "not knowing the truth […] makes Grace free" (87). Could it be, rather, a determination not to reveal the truth that secures her release from prison, or is there, ultimately, no way of making a definitive statement on the matter? Taking words that Atwood has used in her evaluation of Grace as storyteller—"would we […] believe her?"[1]—I rephrase the question to ask if we should believe Atwood, and conclude that we should not, nor would this "trickster creator"[2] expect us to.

[*]Reference: Burkhard Niederhoff, "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 60-91.

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

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Ghosts and uncertainty

Atwood has expressed admiration for "ghost stor[ies]" by other writers, praising Toni Morrison (and Emily Brontë) for "magnificent practicality" in the conjuring of the spirits of the dead (*Curious Pursuits* 80). In *Beloved*, Atwood asserts, Morrison's "main characters […] believe in ghosts, so it's merely natural for […] one to be there" (80):

> In this book, the other world exists and magic works, and the prose is up to it. If you believe page one—and Ms Morrison's verbal authority compels belief—you're hooked on the rest of the book. (84)

Ghostly presences of various kinds thread their way through Atwood's writing, but whether or not any of the other "characters" believe in them is debatable. In *Surfacing* the unnamed narrator is visited by her dead parents in different forms at different times, thus posing, as Niederhoff has noted particularly in relation to the father, "interpretive problems" (69). Does the "other world" have a place in this novel as Atwood claims it does for Morrison's *Beloved*? Do the parents actually inhabit such a world or are we to read them as existing only in the mind of the narrator? Or are these "trickster" familiars that defy categorization by either the narrator or the reader of the novel alike? Perhaps it is this lack of certainty that keeps our attention.

Atwood's ghosts can be narrators themselves, like the speaker of the poem "This Is a Photograph of Me" (1966). This narrator claims to be "in the lake, in the centre / of the picture, just under the surface" and that "if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me" (*Circle Game* 3). As readers we are challenged to accept that we can both hear the voice of the drowned speaker and see a physical form under the water in the grainy photograph evoked by the text. But there are many uncertainties: the print is "smeared" and its lines are "blurred"; there is something that might be "like a branch," but perhaps is not one; and if we accept that it is a branch it could be either "balsam or spruce." The slope of the bank "ought to be […] gentle," implying that it is not; and even though the speaker states

firmly that "I am in the lake," it is still "difficult to say where [...] or how large or small I am." To what extent can we be certain of the 'ghost' speaker or of our own status as observers as we rise to the challenge of examining the photograph? Only one thing is certain here and that is that we cannot take the photograph "at face value," it is much more complex than that.[3]

The ghosts that figure in *Alias Grace* are of a different order again, and while Atwood's "verbal authority," like Morrison's, "compels" us to believe page one of the first chapter of this novel, where Grace sees peonies growing "[o]ut of the gravel" (5) of the prison yard, we are taken in the direction of uncertainty from the next page, when an apparently down-to-earth Grace realises that these particular peonies are blooming in the wrong season and that they are, disturbingly, "made of cloth" (6). The ghost of Nancy Montgomery kneels and smiles, and the yard becomes a cellar from which Grace cannot escape. We might want to believe, initially, that the ghost of Nancy is real because Grace might "believe" in her. Or is this an illusion brought on by the hardships of prison life acting upon her guilty (or innocent) memories to present distortions of the past? But can we be certain of any of these possibilities or, indeed, of any others that we might invent? Grace announces that she has told us what she "told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (6). Is it just a "story" and possibly fabricated? Is it a confession? Is it evidence of her innocence or guilt, or could it be used as a defence on the grounds that she was a person of 'unsound mind'? Regardless of any conjectures we have at this point of the novel, we are, as Atwood says of Morrison's readers, "hooked on the rest of the book" by the tantalising uncertainties that the first two pages have proposed.

When she reflected on her "Search for *Alias Grace*," Atwood remarked on the necessity of "ghosts" for the construction of a sense of a Canadian past (217). Quoting "Earle Birney's famous poem that concludes, 'It's only by the lack of ghosts we're haunted,'" she laments the "anaemic view" of the past "handed" to young Canadians of her generation, commenting that had she known then that "our

dull Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, had *believed* that the spirit of his mother was inhabiting his dog, which he always consulted on public policy" (218; my emphasis), her enthusiasm for Canadian history would have increased considerably. In *Alias Grace* we encounter a spirit world that is by no means as cut and dried as Mackenzie King's because we are not sure who, if anyone, believes in it. In the incident that Niederhoff reads "at face value," Grace undergoes a "neuro-hypnotic sleep" (396) and a voice that appears to be coming from her, but is a "new, thin voice," declares that the "kerchief killed" Nancy Montgomery and that "[h]ands held it" (401)—but it does not say whose hands. The implication is that the spirit of Mary Whitney, Grace's friend, who died early from a botched abortion, "borrowed" (402) Grace's body, her "fleshly garment" (403), for the occasion and did the deed. The voice claims that the speaker is not Grace:

> I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it! (401)

It also denies being James McDermott, Grace's supposed accomplice and lover, or Nancy Montgomery, the victim (402), but we might well hesitate to believe that Grace is an alias of Mary at this point:

> "I am not Grace," says the voice, *more tentatively*. (403; my emphasis)

The 'spirit' voice is *tentative*, and the reader's conclusions could well be equally uncertain; Atwood's "verbal authority" makes it so.

Survival and Atwood's sense of closure

Atwood's focus on the topic of survival can be seen to be increasing with her two most recent novels, both exercises in speculative fiction that tackle the question of the viability of humankind, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Sharon Wilson has suggested that Atwood exhibits a growing pessimism (187), although even this is problematic if we accept Earl G. Ingersoll's contention that "the ending of *Oryx and Crake* may be contaminated with a[n] […] 'optimism'

for which readers may have difficulty finding any firm basis" (173). Both novels are open-ended, but at the same time invite readers to be puzzled at the moment of closure, as Ursula Le Guin has indicated in her review of *The Year of the Flood*:

> I found the final sentences [...] unexpected, not the seemingly inevitable brutal end or dying fall, nor yet a deus-ex-machina salvation, but a surprise, a mystery.

This "mystery" ending is typical of Atwood, and readers are left with an impossible choice between despair and hope, neither of which might be completely appropriate, although survival is, almost by definition, uncertain, and so puzzlement might be the only closure possible.

It is not only the survival of humankind that comes to Atwood's attention, other species come in for consideration too, as in her 'flash fiction' tale "Thylacine Ragout" (2004; first printed in *Bottle* 31-34, reprinted in *The Tent* 73-75). Atwood dates the beginning of her work on *Oryx and Crake* to her visit to Australia in 2001 ("Perfect Storms"), and it is possible that the idea for "Thylacine Ragout" was also suggested at that time. The thylacine is the Tasmanian tiger, a carnivorous marsupial that joined the ranks of the extinct when the last known representative of its kind died in 1936. The genetic engineering of such creatures as the 'liobams' (lion+lamb) in *The Year of the Flood* or the 'rakunks' (racoon+skunk) of *Oryx and Crake* has nothing on the thylacine of Atwood's "Ragout." Since 1999 there has been talk of cloning a thylacine from specimens preserved in the Australian Museum in Sydney. This controversial project was abandoned by the Museum in 2005, although its first champion, Professor Mike Archer, former Director of the Museum and now Dean of Science at the University of New South Wales, still lists it on his website as an "unusual project" in which he is involved.[4] Despite opposition—and sometimes derision—the idea of being able to reverse the process of extinction is an exciting one.

In Atwood's cynical take on the cloning project it actually works, and an animal that equates to "our idea" of a thylacine (32) is pro-

duced, only to be stolen by a "bent scientist" and sold to a "very rich person with refined tastes," who eats it "in the form of a ragout" (34). This unexpectedly horrific outcome of an apparently successful project is indeed pessimistic. But do all readers want to accept what this entails: the end of human decency, the end of hope? Does Atwood deliberately provoke conjectures about alternative, more positive endings? Is this what Atwood's challenge is to her readers: to tempt them with the anticipation of happy endings only to subvert them with her "verbal authority?"

Memory/Truth and Atwood's sense of closure

Niederhoff states that the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* has "characteristically distorted memories that both conceal and reveal the truth" (66), and that many of her memories are "fabrications" that, nonetheless, tell us something that is "only too true" (67). He thus acknowledges the place of uncertainty and, indeed, contradiction, in Atwood's narrative practice. But even as he affirms that the end of this novel, "like many another ending in Atwood, remains open" (74),[5] he, like many another reader of Atwood, affords the novel a form of closure—and certainty—himself, when he claims that there is a "child to be conceived," that the narrator's parents have "return[ed] from the underworld," and that the narrator herself has experienced a "restoration from death" (74). If this is, indeed, the form of the 'truth' that the narrator or the narrative is suggesting to us, should we, given the experience of reading this novel and Atwood's work more broadly, believe it? If we find the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* tricky on other occasions, why should we put any store in those certainties she might suggest to us at the end or feel that we can be confident in satisfactorily unravelling the left-over contradictions and ambiguities for ourselves?

In his reading of *Alias Grace* Niederhoff claims that "the novel is about the effects that knowing or not knowing the truth has on peo-

ple's lives" (77), that Grace has a "preference for not knowing" (84), and that "not knowing the truth makes [her] free" (87). Atwood's Grace Marks, he suggests, was technically guilty of the murder of Nancy Montgomery, although she was completely unaware of the fact and therefore worthy of her freedom after almost thirty years of imprisonment. This conclusion derives from his literal interpretation of the hypnosis experiment already mentioned above. The experiment is conducted by Dr. Jerome DuPont, alias Jeremiah the Peddler, alias "'Signor Geraldo Ponti'" (425), alias Mr. Gerald Bridges (456). Dr. DuPont's collection of aliases might be sufficient to make acceptance of the kind of truth that he is peddling problematic, and, indeed, the dubious demeanour of the eye-witnesses as they wait for the hypnosis session to begin might not convince us of their unambiguousness, thus rendering them no more trustworthy than "Dr. DuPont" himself:

> Mrs Quennell […] anticipates wonders, but will evidently not be surprised by them […]. The Governor's wife wears an expression of yearning piety, tempered with resignation […]. Reverend Verringer manages to look both benign and disapproving; there's a glinting around his eyes as if he's wearing spectacles, although he is not. Lydia […] [is] nervously twisting her handkerchief; but when her eyes meet Simon's, she smiles […]. Simon […] senses that his face is set in a sceptical and not very pleasant sneer; but that's a false face. (395)

Are any of these observers to be trusted? And can we conclude that Grace Marks really does not know the truth? Or is her eventual release into the community contingent on an accumulation of uncertainties like those occasioned through the experience of the hypnosis scene that leaves Simon Jordan, her attending doctor, unable to "state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him" (407)?

Finally, Reverend Verringer writes to gain the support of Dr. Bannerling for release of the prisoner on the grounds that she does not know the truth about the crimes in which she was involved. He bases the appeal on his interpretation of the hypnosis session that revealed, in his opinion, that Grace was the victim of "a distinct secondary

personality […] acting without the knowledge of the first" and that she had no memory of the murder of Nancy Montgomery, nor was she "responsible for her actions therein" (433). If Reverend Verringer believes in what he saw in the library of Mrs. Quennell's house, Dr. Bannerling most certainly does not, describing the event as "puerile antics" (434), "a solemn-sounding blind, behind which men of questionable antecedents and salacious natures might obtain power over young women of the same" (435). Which of them should the reader believe?

Grace Marks almost gives us an answer herself when she writes to Jeremiah the Peddler in his guise as the travelling showman, "Signor Geraldo Ponti, Master of Neuro-Hypnotism, Ventriloquist, and Mind-Reader Extraordinaire" (425-28). She says that she would very much like to see him again but does not want to give him away as "they would think you had tricked them, as what is done on a stage is not as acceptable, as the very same thing done in a library" (425). Typically, we are left with questions rather than answers. Who is Grace trying to protect, herself or Jeremiah? Was the hypnosis experiment a trick? I do not argue against Niederhoff by protesting categorically that Grace Marks does indeed know the truth; what I do want to stress is that we just do not know whether she knows it, whether she once knew it and has now forgotten it, or whether it has always been blocked from her memory—and that this is as it should be, at least in Atwood's terms.

Atwood herself points out that memories are not to be trusted: Susanna Moodie, who had personal contact with the historical Grace Marks, set out to write the story of the convicted woman "from memory" of her conversations with her, but, says Atwood laconically in her "Search for *Alias Grac*e," "her memory was no better than most" (226). The potency of memories of matters past is strongly expressed across the range of Atwood's writing, from her full length novels to *Payback*, her recent discussion of debt in which she points out that if you destroy the "written record […] a form of memory" you can erase the debt itself: "*If you can't prove it, I don't owe it*" (141-42). Without reliable memory there is uncertainty, and with uncertainty you can

escape from your responsibilities, financial and otherwise. Has Grace deliberately erased the memory and therefore the basis of proof?

Niederhoff has, rightly, characterised both *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* as "detective novels" (75), but he is not entirely correct in identifying the "detective" as the unnamed narrator in the earlier novel and as the doctor, Simon Jordan, in the later one. Although both of these figures have some of the characteristics of a detective, the real detective is the reader, who stands outside the work itself looking for clues in the complex web of detail and trying to distinguish truth from lies.

Atwood on storytelling—the "trickster creator"

When Atwood wrote *Alias Grace*, she informs us, 'Grace' herself became "a story-teller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold," and her story is dependent on "what she remembers; or is it what she *says* she remembers, which can be quite a different thing" (227; my emphasis):

> In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, "Now it all comes back to me"; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that, and if she did, would we—any longer—believe her? […] I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth—somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery—truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us. (228)

After the hypnosis experiment, Grace Marks continues as the main storyteller. Her auditor within the narrative is her husband, Jamie Walsh, whose youthful testimony had "turned the minds of judge and jury so much against [her]" (451). "Mr. Walsh," as Grace likes to call him, is now "of the opposite persuasion" and is "overcome with guilt" (451). Guilt—his and/or hers—brings them together as man and wife, and they sleep together under the patchwork 'Log Cabin' quilt, symbolic of heath and home. But the "quilt in the best room is a Wheel of Mystery" (454), and the mystery of the Montgomery/Kinnear murders remains unsolved. Jamie Walsh likes to hear "stories of torment and misery" (457) from his wife's colourful past:

> He listens […] like a child listening to a fairy tale […]. If I put in the chilblains and the shivering at night under the thin blanket […] he is in raptures; and if I add the improper behaviour of Dr. Bannerling towards me […] he is almost in ecstasies; but his favourite part of the story is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house […] looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes, with Nancy and Mr. Kinnear lying dead in the cellar, and me almost out of my wits with terror; and he blames himself that he wasn't there to rescue me. (456-57)

The need to listen and to be blamed is part of his sexual ritual, and he begs to be forgiven as he undoes Grace's nightgown; but, tantalisingly, she does not "feel quite right about it, forgiving him like that, because [she is] aware that in doing so [she is] telling a lie":

> Though I suppose it isn't the first lie I've told; but as Mary Whitney used to say, a little white lie such as the angels tell is a small price to pay for peace and quiet. (458)

Is the narrative full of lies? As Atwood puts it in her "Author's Afterword," the "true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma" (465). The novelist's technique of uncertainty ensures that the same can be said of the fictional Grace.

Atwood has provided academic readers with a useful commentary on writing, her own and that of others, in three major critical works: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), and *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). We can also look elsewhere for less formal discussion of the writing process wherein she reveals herself as a "trickster creator." In her recent collection of short fiction, *The Tent* (2006), she not only engages with the issue of survival,[6] but also comments on storytelling in "Horatio's Version" (115-20), a retelling of the familiar story of Hamlet, and "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon" (85-92).

"Three Novels" takes us, supposedly, inside the head of a writer. This blatant discussion of the creative process almost dares us to link what is being said here with Atwood's own work. In the first novel that is not to be written (soon), "Worm Zero," the proposition is that

all worms of every kind, including earthworms, inexplicably die, thus leading to famine. This is a form of speculative fiction and might suggest the possibility of Atwoodian self-analysis. But this is countered by seemingly heavy-handed elements of chick-lit of the kind that her readers know this writer does not indulge in—or does she? The central characters, Chris and Amanda, "who've had great sex in Chapter One, or possibly Chapter Two" but now can't "renovate their kitchen and install a new round eco-friendly refrigerator" (86) are envisaged as taking two different approaches to the impending doom. Amanda, the optimist, tries to grow food at their summer cottage and takes solace in the cliché that "'[a]t least we're together'" (87). Chris is less hopeful and the fictional writer then wonders if he should yell "'Where are you, fucking worms, when we need you most?'"—or perhaps these should be Amanda's lines to "show that her character has developed" (88). But whoever utters "this cathartic, revealing, and somehow inspiriting yell," it marks the moment at which a worm appears "copulating with itself":

> It would sound a note of plangent hope. I always like to end on those. (88)

Is this a way of daring Atwood fans to identify a comment on her own writing? Is she just teasing, playing the "trickster creator"? Does her speculative fiction offer anything like "plangent hope," or is she just playing games with us? Are we doomed to be wrong no matter what decision we make?

The adventures of Chris and Amanda continue in "Sponge Death," where the writer would like the heroic Chris "to defeat the monstrous bath accessory and save the day […] for humanity" (89), but cannot in all conscience let that happen until convinced "that the human spirit has the wherewithal to go head to headless against this malevolent wad of cellulose" (88-89). This is another version of the writer as morally bound to believe that what is written is possible. Is this what Atwood herself believes—or not?

"Beetleplunge," the third iteration, takes several directions. In one version of the story "Chris and Amanda will end up […] in each

other's arms, exactly where we want them to be" (92), a perfect Mills and Boon ending, but not what we would expect of Atwood. But she goes on to change the title of the unwritten novel to "Brutal Purge," which is too brutal for the likes of Chris and Amanda "and if they stray into it by accident they won't come out of it alive" (92).

Atwood does indeed appear to be commenting on the process of writing a novel. But we wonder if she is talking about her own writing or if she is simply casting scorn on that of others. As in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, Atwood is a "trickster creator," who, using the technique of uncertainty, challenges readers to come to conclusions but also problematizes whatever they invent. It remains difficult to take what she tells us as storyteller "at face value," but that is part of her appeal.

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NOTES

[1]*In Search of* Alias Grace 228. Atwood spoke of the experience of writing this novel in the Charles R. Bronfman Lecture in Canadian Studies series at the University of Ottawa in 1996. The lecture has been reprinted in various places, including *The American Historical Review*, 103.5 (1998): 1503-16, and Atwood's *Curious Pursuits* 209-29.

[2]Sharon Wilson (186-87) uses this term to refer specifically to Grace Marks and to other Atwood narrators more generally.

[3]Branko Gorjup reads this poem as "a portrait of the artist as landscape" 134.

[4]<http://www.science.unsw.edu.au/marcher-profile>, accessed on 27 Aug. 2010. For a somewhat negative discussion of the cloning project see Allen Greer, "Cloning the Thylacine: Not Quite a Showpiece of Australian Science," *Quadrant* 53.7-8 (2009): 28-39.

[5]Open-endedness in Atwood is a frequent source of interest to literary scholars. Wilson, for example, refers to this feature in *Surfacing* 177, 180.

[6]See especially "Thylacine Ragout" and "The Animals Reject Their Names and Things Return to their Origins" (77-84).

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