

A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff's "The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*"^{*1}

SHARON R. WILSON

Atwood's non-fiction work, *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), underlines many of the concerns of her fiction. Her chapter's 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). Atwood's characters are shown to be on such a trip; like many of us, they search the past and the dead for answers that will heal the wounds of life and fill the black holes of their identities in both present and future. Generally in Atwood's texts, encountering or speaking to the dead, the presumed dead, or a supposed revenant involves a mythic journey and descent to the Underworld (cf. Thompson folk motif F81). In Atwood's novels we see the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* seeking her parents and her lost identity by symbolically transforming into an animal and diving into the past. In Burkhard Niederhoff's reading, Grace in *Alias Grace* searches for the dead Mary's part of herself (cf. Niederhoff 78) and for the meaning of the red peonies that are stained with blood. Toni and her friends in *The Robber Bride* quest for the supposed revenant Zenia and the Zenia parts of themselves, and Iris of *The Blind Assassin* struggles to release herself from the finished Laura plot. Even Offred of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jimmy of *Oryx and Crake*, and Toby and Ren of *The Year of the*

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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>>.

Flood continuously search the past and 'talk' to their presumed dead, hoping to understand the dystopian present. Atwood's poetry and neglected short fiction similarly explore this and related themes and motifs: the quest, the journey to and from the Underworld, the descent into darkness and the past, struggle for survival, civilization vs. wilderness, the encounter with mythological or folkloric entities, desire for transformation, the destruction and reconstruction of the self, and the recurrence of images of the moon, pieces, and magic. In keeping with Atwood's ironic and parodic postmodernist stance (Wilson, *Myths* 4-6), the journey in her short fiction is not simply a traditional mythic one, but displays both traditional and parodic mythic elements. Although our readings of the texts and of the roles of knowledge, parody, and postmodernism in Atwood differ,² Niederhoff focuses on the role of traditional myth in Atwood's works:

[O]ne of Atwood's central concerns is [...] restoration from death [...]. 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. (60)

Niederhoff agrees that the narrator of *Surfacing*, Grace of *Alias Grace*, and characters in the short stories "Death By Landscape" (*Wilderness Tips*), "The Entities" (*Moral Disorder*), "Nightingale" (*The Tent*), and many of Atwood's other characters are obsessed with ghosts and people returning from the underworld (61).

Although few critics discuss "Isis in Darkness" from Atwood's short fiction collection *Wilderness Tips* (1991), this short story again presents a character obsessed with a dead person. Richard's quest to uncover some meaning in the fragments of Selena's life is both traditional and ironic. Although she barely mentions "Isis in Darkness," Pamela Bromberg's "'Back from the Dead': Journeys to the Underworld in *Wilderness Tips*" argues that "*Wilderness Tips* is a collection of descent stories" and that, except for "Hack Wednesday," [...] the protagonist journeys into the past, [...] bringing them back to fleeting life through memory and storytelling, life that must always be 'lost again' when

the story ends." In "Isis in Darkness," however, she suggests that the protagonist is able to leave the past behind by becoming its archeologist (257-59). Arnold Davidson also sees patterns of interconnection in the stories of *Wilderness Tips* but reads them differently. The stories are about civilization versus wilderness, and many present "countering versions of the narratives they purport to relate[, illustrating] decentering and ironic postmodernism" characteristic of both feminist and Canadian fiction (185). Like "Death By Landscape," "Isis in Darkness" uses metafictional mirroring to link pulp romance to writing; Davidson suggests that Richard is engaging in sentimental romance rather than genuine writing. In other words, his writing about Selena resembles the "True Trash" of this volume's first story (Davidson 185). Carol Beran sees all these stories as about a stranger in an enclosed world, challenging readers to transform themselves into creative non-victims. Examining gender and power politics, Beran states: "Here, the man seems to have the power to create meaning" (77); yet Beran finds Richard ineffective in trying to construct Selena from his note cards. Few critics note that Classical, First People's, and Canadian myths, such as the frozen north, bushing, and Canadian or Toronto provinciality, are also evident in these stories. In addition to mythic patterns, *Wilderness Tips* embeds fairy-tale intertexts including "The Frog King," "Fitcher's Bird," "The Girl Without Hands," and "The Red Shoes" and folklore motifs such as a magic ball of hair and magic hairball used for bewitching, magic results produced by wishing, resuscitation by wishing, mutilation by punishment, and self-mutilation (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale* 378n27). Like Atwood's other works, *Wilderness Tips* has more toads than princes and some parodic Sleeping Beauties and Rapunzels. It presents characters who are missing parts of themselves, who want to be transformed and rescued by others, and who make others into godmothers or Supermen.

In "Isis in Darkness," the unreliable narrator, Richard, sees Selena as a muse, an Isis, "The Egyptian Queen of Heaven and Earth" that is the subject of her poems and later, of the story he begins to write about

her. Both characters are on quests: he for her and, in his eyes, she for him: he expects her to emerge from an underground tunnel to the Mount Pleasant Cemetery and his epic situation. Even Mary Jo, the woman Richard later marries, is on a quest for herself. He thinks that Selena is simultaneously gathering pieces of the murdered and dismembered body of her lover, whom he ironically hopes to become, of her own body, and of the physical universe. As a parodic Osiris, the great cult god of Egypt who ruled over crops and later death and resurrection, Richard is symbolically in pieces and attempting to become whole through words.

In this story, Richard, whose "head is on the block" in his university job (82), presents Selena as the mythic Creator Goddess who could transform him and his dismembered world. Identified with Athena and Demeter, Isis is represented with a solar disk and cow's horns and is an earth and fertility goddess, the faithful wife of her brother and husband Osiris, and a personification of the throne. Her scarab earrings suggest resurrection (cf. Leach and Fried 976), but ironically not for either herself or Richard. In some versions of the myth, it is Isis whose head is cut off by her son Horus (also decapitated) and replaced with a cow's head by Thoth (Leach and Fried 529). Although Selena changes her name from overly prosaic Marjorie, a name Richard struggles to forget, her new name associates her with Selene, the ancient Greek moon goddess (Diana) that sleeps beside Endymion and whom he loves in his eternal sleep. Keats's "Endymion" is about the poet pursuing ideal perfection through his senses (Harvey 271). Selene is also the daughter or sister of Helios, the sun god, and Selene is the place where souls of the dead go (Leach and Fried 980). Thus, Selena represents this story's quest for the dead. To Richard, however, she also represents transformation, identity, and words.

It is Richard who projects various mythologies onto Selena to dichotomize her and Mary Jo, the cataloguing librarian he marries. In Richard's dichotomy, Mary Jo represents Toronto with its "white-bread ghetto," "cage-like desks," (60) and "pressure-cooked and strangled" (62) aspiring poets wanting to escape the "lumpen bour-

geoisie and the shackles of respectable wage-earning" (62) in the "academic salt mines" (67). Mary Jo is normal, "corned beef, cottage cheese, cod-liver oil, [...] milk" (70). With her he is comfortable being numb. Selena represents sometimes ludicrously naive imagination: creation myths about white-hot hatching eggs, arrival by Chinese golden birds, the mythic sleep-walker, *Aida* annihilation in a dark crypt, dragonfly costumes created from table cloths, and Richard's free verse anti-sonnets. She represents the group's confusion of sex and violence with art, loss, and all that is not Toronto even though she, too, feels trapped there. Nevertheless, she also represents the "real poem," which drops Richard through space and peels him open.

Even while Selena is still alive, Richard takes a mythic ferry to what he thinks of as an Underworld. They have lemonade communion with their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while he fantasizes about burning "in divine conflagration" (72). But Selena warns him that "the light only shines for some, [...]. And even for them it's not all the time" (73). For years he works on an esoteric thesis and articles, reads dead poets, does not write poetry, and, even though he recognizes that his own poetry was no good, dreams of Selena as a goddess who represents "something of his own that he had lost" (74).

When Richard sees Selena for the next to the last time, she appears to be battered, and what she really seeks might be only a safe place to spend the night, which he and Mary Jo deny. On the last time, he hardly recognizes her; she has become "a short, thickish woman in a black trenchcoat" (80). Her face is blank, he has called her the wrong name, and she says she hates poetry: "It's just this. This is all there is. This stupid city." "We just changed, that's all, [...]. We got older" (81).

Although Richard no longer sees himself as capable of playing "a blue-eyed god with burning wings" (82) in the main story and remembers that Mary Jo sees him as slug-colored, he finally makes a realization somewhat similar to that of Toni in *The Robber Bride* and of other Atwood writer creators: he could be an archeologist; he could shape the past and determine meaning. But can he do so on note cards? Not for the first time, Atwood appears to be parodying her

own work. Is he still what one reader of his book *Spiritual Carnality* described as “*fatuously romantic*” (80; emphasis in original)? In this anti-tale as in other works,³ Atwood’s text moves from amputation, including loss of senses and identity, to metamorphosis (Wilson, *Atwood’s Fairy-Tales, passim*), but the transformation Richard seeks starts aging and becomes decay. Even though Selena is dead, ironically Richard feels that now he will exist for her and that he will be created by her. Although this Isis is shattered, he will be “groping for the shape of the past” (83) and play a reversed gendered Isis by striving to put her pieces back together in the darkness. No matter how many times he shuffles his filing cards and begins again, however, he remains in the dark, fitting pieces together.

“The Bog Man” and “Death By Landscape”

Both “The Bog Man” and “Death By Landscape,” also from *Wilderness Tips*, feature mythological quests for someone dead and in the past who presumably could offer meaning. Like “Isis in Darkness,” both have self-conscious, unreliable centers of consciousness intent on discovering and telling a story, and both use subtle parody of the story-telling process. Interestingly, the stories are placed one after the other in the volume, following “Isis in Darkness.” In “The Bog Man,” Orkney crop circles, standing-stone ring sites, and the bog are the sacred sites. The mythological person is the bog man, and a blood-thirsty nature goddess such as Nerthus is responsible for his demise. In “Death By Landscape,” the mythological figures are Manitou, the name of the camp where Lois and her US friend, Lucy, go, and the Canadian wilderness itself, which apparently kills Lucy, whom Lois searches for in art—both the Group of Seven paintings in her apartment and the story she struggles to tell.

“The Bog Man” was originally a part of Atwood’s projected novel, “Destroying Angels,” that she worked on before starting *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Margaret Atwood Papers Box 106). By the second sentence

of her story, Julie in "The Bog Man" is already revising and contradicting herself about her breakup with the married Connor in the bog rather than the swamp, a word she prefers. Although she revises to say that the break-up was in a pub, we discover later that they actually break up at a Toronto phone booth. As one editor suggested, these changes indicate that one theme in the story is revision.⁴ Although Connor is this story's literal archeologist, the narrator Julie appears to be on the same kind of quest. The story continually shifts focus, from Connor, to the well-preserved bog man, to Julie's naivety as she attempts to throw off socialized baggage and molding (e.g. "female domestic virtues") over the twenty-five or so years from the bog man episode. At the beginning, Julie, who fancies herself a pirate, wears rebellious black. She needs to worship someone, so she mythologizes, seeing Connor as a saint in a medieval painting surrounded by "a total-body halo" (89). Choosing self-sacrifice, she asks only that Connor continue to be superhuman. To her, even his wife becomes a monster with four heads and sixteen arms and legs. Connor thinks that the stone circles were sites of blood sacrifice, and Julie identifies with such "authentic" rituals probably performed by her Scottish ancestors. Crossing on a ferry to the bog, Connor shifts to study the Bog Man, whose skin and hair were preserved by the bog water so that he looks alive. After a procession for Nerthus or Terra Mater, a northern Teutonic fertility goddess, the goddess's slaves were drowned in the sacred lake (Leach and Fried 788). His feet were accidentally cut off when he was dug out. But the red-haired Connor (also extremely interested in self-sacrifice) cannot compare to the two-thousand-year-old, red-haired bog man, who was apparently strangled as a sacrifice to the Great Goddess. Recognizing that she finally prefers the Bog Man to Connor or the Norwegian scientist, Julie dreams of him climbing into her window, "a shape of baffled longing" (101). Eventually, when Julie becomes aware that she no longer wants Connor and that she has apparently transformed him into a shorter and saggier man, she sees him as an "ogre" and misses her "mistaken adoration" (105).

Thus, in one sense, Julie's story becomes a comic commentary on her own stupidity. In another, however, since Connor becomes "flatter and more leathery" and more dead, the "story is now like an artifact from a vanished civilization, the customs of which have become obscure" (106), so she appears to be another archeologist investigating the past. Conner is now an ironic Bog Man, who had been described as leathery and whose face was somewhat sunken in, and all that is left of Julie's days of piracy are starfish earrings. She is no goddess, and the magic of the Bog Man seems distant and lost in the past. She continuously reinvents the past, but again, the promised transformation is aging and death. If Connor is more dead in recent versions of Julie's story, she "is almost old" (106).

In "Death By Landscape," Lois is also caught in a continuous retelling and reinvention of the story of her friend's disappearance. She, too, is a kind of archeologist digging up the past. Mythically, again Lois seems to dive back to when she was 13 at Camp Manitou, hoping this time to see more than she did before, to find meaning in clues and in the story itself. The name "Manitou," important in Algonquian and other first people's languages and cultures, generally suggests supernatural power of particular beings who could be culture heroes, a house or heaven after death, gentle or evil, and who might live below or above earth (Leach and Fried 674). Thus, the name of the camp contributes to the mystery surrounding Lucy's disappearance, which seems supernatural since we cannot know whether she had an accident, committed suicide, chose to leave, encountered malice, or transformed into a tree. It also highlights the camp's theft and perversion of First People's culture and the irony of Lois's collusion with Cappie's "Indian" face paint and made-up language. Read as a ghost story, "Death By Landscape" could suggest that the landscape and its earlier inhabitants and deities eradicate a non-Canadian tourist and take back their own. Read in the tradition of Atwood's *Survival* (1972) and Canada's many "survival" stories in which people do not survive, such as Grove's "Snow," Roberts's "Strayed," Ross's "The Painted Door," and Joyce Marshall's "The Old Woman" (see Weaver). It can

also suggest the land's revenge on the careless and unaware. After all, the title of the story is "Death By Landscape." Even the name of the place where Lucy disappears, Lookout Point, conveys not only that it has a view but that one should look out or be careful. These campers, who have as mascot a moulting moose head named Monty Manitou, are ignorant and lack reverence for Nature, the land, and people who have lived there. But "landscape" does not equate to "land." Although Lois had initially referred to her paintings as landscapes, she later explains that they are not landscapes "[b]ecause there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense" (128). Whereas she had referred to the "background" of loon sounds before Lucy disappeared, the paintings have an infinite regress of foreground (121). Thus, it appears that Lucy substitutes human construction (both the paintings and her anthropomorphism of Nature) for "reality," much as, on close inspection, the unaccredited Wilderness cover for the first Doubleday edition appears to be a photograph of embroidered fabric rather than trees.⁵

Of the three narrators we have been examining, Lois especially seems to be living what Burkhard Niederhoff calls "death-in-life" (60). She can hardly remember what her husband looked like or the births of her two children, and even after he dies and her children are grown up, she feels as if someone is looking out of her wilderness paintings, she is living two lives, and she is listening for another voice (128). She thinks these paintings depict a "tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds [...] only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock" (128-29).

Ironically, by the end Lois is one of the few Atwood narrators who apparently manages to bring the person she is obsessed with back from the dead: because Lucy could not be found in the outside world, in which Lois has little interest anyway, Lois finds her in her apartment, "in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive" (129). So, in her eyes,

her quest for the dead and the past is successful. To her readers, however, she herself seems to disappear, into the maze of trees in her apartment, so that, in a way, she and her "twin" Lucy change places and reverse the myth: if Lucy is alive only in a simulation of the wilderness within the city, Lois vanishes through a door that is no exit and which seems to offer death rather than treasure.

In the *Wilderness Tips* stories we have examined, the three narrators' mythological quests have questionable results. Richard, Julie, and Lois all persevere in their quests and, to varying degrees, gain some self-insight. They are not heroic, however, and seem self-sacrificial. Richard's archeological role is mainly passive: "he will be created by her [Selena]"; he has a calling but he thinks of it as a "fate." His vision is still weak (82). Lois sacrifices herself to her quest for a person to whom she feels inferior. Hardly leaving her apartment, certainly never to visit the wilderness, she finally vanishes into her story of the past. Julie, however, recognizes that she has been "seen" enough in her relationship with Connor and that she has been self-deceived. Her story becomes less a mystery story about men and more and more about herself rather than the "dead" past she has been seeking. It is still, however, herself in the past, and she needs to re-create story and self again and again. Because "Isis in Darkness," "The Bog Man," and "Death By Landscape" all to some extent parody mythological quests, they are anti-myths and anti-tales. Nevertheless, all three possess a depth and resonance that connect to and remythify the stories' mythological patterns.

University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, CO

NOTES

¹This is the revised version of a paper presented at the International Short Story Conference, York University, June 16-19, 2010.

²Niederhoff continually refers to the unreliable narrator's fetus as a child in *Surfacing*, and he assumes that Grace has split or multiple personalities when she

pretends to be hypnotized by her peddler friend, Jerome DuPont, who poses as a psychiatrist (see Wilson, "Quilting"). The theme of the search for the dead should also be explored in Atwood's little discussed short fiction.

³An anti-tale is a parody of a "straight" or traditional tale.

⁴In correspondence with Atwood concerning publication of "The Bog Man" in *Playboy*, Alice Turner refers to this theme when advising that the frame of the story is too long so that the reader is "bonked on the head" with details, such as Julie's "pirate" characteristics, which Atwood says she would "fight to retain" (Atwood Papers, Correspondence with *Playboy*, *Wilderness Tips* Box 109).

⁵The jacket design is by Whitney Cookman. The 1991 McClelland and Stewart edition, however, features a painting by Frida Kahlo of a deer with Kahlo's face who has been hit with arrows. The forest does have background.

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