

## Surfacing from Six Feet Under: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff\*

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Early in his paper on the return of the dead in two novels by Margaret Atwood, Burkhard Niederhoff wisely steers clear of the old Canadian national thematic chestnut, survival. "Whether survival really constitutes the central theme of Canadian literature," he writes, "is a question that need not detain us here" (60). What he redirects our attention to, instead, is the way in which one type of survival—or, more specifically, persistence—recurs in Atwood's fictional, poetic, and non-fictional oeuvre: the return of the dead from the underworld. The two novels that Niederhoff carefully examines, *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*, date from 1972 and 1996 respectively, but the fascination with voyages from Hades persists in Atwood's thought, as witnessed in her 2000 Empson Lectures at Cambridge, published in 2002 as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. The title neatly encapsulates Atwood's thesis: that writing is a species of unworldly congress with the departed; a means of making the irretrievable potentially retrievable through the invigoration of texts by readers. Niederhoff goes further, though, than a simple tracing of this motif through two works by Atwood: in my response to his further analysis, I will, first of all, think about the application of his interpretation to other works, ponder his major insights, and suggest an additional critical framework, that of the postcolonial gothic, through which we might understand the implications of these ghostly encounters. Travellers from the under-

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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>>.

world may bring us the sort of difficult knowledge that embraces possibility as well as trauma and loss, and so the ghostly recall of the past does not need to leave us, Orpheus-like, grieving over the loss of Eurydice. Such forms of difficult knowledge may be housed not only in the psyche but in national acts of recalling, such as the Canadian government's June 2008 apology to First Nations for the treatment of children in residential schools; though survival may not be the litmus test of literary Canadianness, its difficult lessons are intertwined with our acts of collective historical recall.

First of all, the sign of a convincing reading of selected texts by one author is its capacity to illuminate others. And this is certainly the case with Niederhoff's reading of the Atwoodian revenants of *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*. Both of these novels are resolutely serious in tone, notwithstanding the eruption, from time to time, of Atwood's characteristically wry epigrammatic wit. But what if we apply this study to a comic novel such as *Lady Oracle*? The analysis holds, and it has the potential to deepen our reading of Atwood's comedy. As Niederhoff recalls, the peddler Jeremiah in *Alias Grace* tells Grace that she is "one of us," "presumably implying that she has a special telepathic gift," and later he suggests "that she join him, earning a living as a traveling clairvoyant and communicating hidden knowledge to their clients" (Niederhoff 84-85). In the world of *Alias Grace*, this episode prefigures the complex knowledge that Grace holds as one who has travelled to the underworld (of loss, murder, trauma) and brings back into (semi)consciousness during her hypnosis. But in a comic register, we have Joan Foster, twenty years earlier, being told repeatedly by the spiritualist Leda Spratt that she has "great powers" and should use rather than deny them (*Lady Oracle* 206). Indeed, much of the novel has to do with ghostly visitors—Joan's dead mother, her Aunt Lou, and everyone she leaves behind when she fakes her suicide and removes secretly to Italy; at one point, she has a Felliniesque vision of all of them randomly congregated upon a beach, smiling and waving to her (9). This tableau, which insouciantly mixes the dead and the living neatly encapsulates Niederhoff's perception that "in Atwood's fiction,

the spirits of the departed are much more intricately entangled with the souls of the living to whom they return" (63). When Joan, the living revenant, finally emerges from her underworld, she enacts a reverse baptism of sorts, using a Cinzano bottle to brain the reporter who was nosing around her apartment (*Lady Oracle* 344). But rather than offering a comforting resolution of Joan's duplicitous, multiple selves, Atwood places in its stead a wry recognition of the mixed bag of personal history: "It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (345). This ending, of course, prefigures the later, 'serious' novel's revelation of Grace's alternate selves, interpreted by many critics as multiple personality disorder, but it does no more to resolve them into one compliant identity than the ending of *Alias Grace* does.

One of Niederhoff's major points is that Atwood's revenants are not only restored from death into the realm of life; like many of their classical literary precedents, they are also restored to death: "restoration to death and restoration from death are connected" (67). The revenant appears amongst the living often to signal a need to be put to rest; clearly, the Styx is a two-way river. This perception fills many texts, and one might equally look back to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as Niederhoff does, or forward to contemporary popular cultural texts. One of the most compelling of these, in recent years, was HBO's television series *Six Feet Under*, which ran for five seasons from 2001 through 2005. This dramatic series traces the various entanglements and personal traumas of the Fisher family, owners and operators of a funeral home in Los Angeles, beginning with the Christmas Eve death of the family patriarch, Nathaniel Fisher, Sr. He continues to make his presence felt in the family, to put it lightly, far into the series, appearing in nineteen of the sixty-three episodes. On the first anniversary of Nathaniel Sr.'s death, each family member resurrects their father as a revenant, remembering, with complex mixtures of tenderness, shame and mourning, the last conversation they had with him, as a means of both calling him back to life and consigning him to his death.

Niederhoff's analysis deepens with the awareness that this calling of the revenant both to life and to death is caught up with the fundamental question of knowledge. Typically, the revenant has or represents some form of knowledge; this is as true of the Greek epics as it is of my recent popular culture example of *Six Feet Under*. As Atwood writes in *Negotiating with the Dead*, King Saul, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Macbeth all turn to otherworldly realms in order to learn information about the future, though, as she acknowledges, in Macbeth's case, the request "backfires; [...] he learns all about the glorious future of somebody else's descendents" (169). Niederhoff compares the status of otherworldly knowledge in *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace* and comes to an intriguing conclusion: Atwood's position on enlightenment epistemologies has changed dramatically over those twenty-four years. Whereas, in *Surfacing*, the truth shall set the narrator free, in *Alias Grace*, it is a distinctly mixed blessing. Indeed, he argues that in *Alias Grace*, Atwood presents "[a] powerful argument against knowledge" (84). Grace has, in fact, no direct knowledge of the murders, and, in psychological terms, it is better for her that way. She has been shielded from the trauma that, in many ways, stands in for many other traumatic occurrences in her life: the death of her mother, possible sexual abuse at the hands of her father, and Mary Whitney's death from a botched abortion. Compare the seemingly bald language of empirical observation in Atwood's *Surfacing*: the unnamed narrator's confrontation of the mysteriously amoebic floating blob in the lake occasions her recognition—as Niederhoff says (cf. 65), her anagnorisis—of the source of her trauma, the abortion of her fetus. For this reason, Niederhoff observes, psychoanalytic paradigms, with their assumption that neuroses need to be spoken into consciousness through therapy, are appropriate to this novel. Niederhoff rightly associates this psychoanalytic scene of revelation and recognition with the empirical language of *Survival*, wherein the much-discussed 'victim positions' are, essentially, various states of denial or knowing. One climbs the vertical path from the former to the latter, throwing off

the shackles of ignorance. But in *Alias Grace*, all such epistemological bets are off.

This growing recognition of the difficulty of knowledge is one that is, I think, crucial to a reading of Atwood's developing vision. Increasingly, she comes to see prophecy as a risky business, and in this she has much of the literary tradition of revenant seers on her side. From Aeschylus to Christa Wolf, Cassandras rarely fare well in their projects of speaking truth to power. Even in a fairly early poem sequence, "Circe/Mud" from *You Are Happy* (1974), though, we can see the stirrings of this awareness of the seamier sides of otherworldly knowledge. Atwood's wisecracking prophet reminds Odysseus that "To know the future / there must be a death. / Hand me the axe" (*Selected Poems* 181). Clearly, prophecy does not come cheap.

I want to take this important insight about Atwood's epistemological shift and suggest other perspectives from which we can view the challenges of such difficult knowledges. Niederhoff helpfully sums up the conflicting critical positions on *Alias Grace* as 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" (78), but there is also the possibility of seeing her haunted existence through the growing critical interest in postcolonial revenants. Critical works such as Cynthia Sugars's "The Impossible Afterlife of George Cartwright: Settler Melancholy and Postcolonial Desire," Marlene Goldman and Joanne Saul's, "Talking With Ghosts: Haunting in Canadian Cultural Production," and Sugars's and Gerry Turcotte's collection of essays, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009) all fasten upon the revenant as the unsettling reminder of a troubled and exclusionary national past: a ghostly trace of colonialism. In this critical approach, though, the uncanny revenants are not necessarily or exclusively portents of pain and trauma; they can also provide the ground upon which alternate choices can be imagined. True, as Niederhoff points out, "literary ghosts are often associated with dangerous and disturbing knowledge about the past" (82). Protagonists can be unsure as to how to receive

these ghostly messengers; as Niederhoff recalls Grace Marks's reluctance to consult a medium: "I don't go in for any of that, as you never know what might come out of it" (455; qtd. Niederhoff 84). Again, in a comic register, I recall *Lady Oracle's* Aunt Lou and her similar reservations about Automatic writing experiments: "I didn't like that feeling of being, well, taken over. I felt I should leave it alone, and I would too if I were you, dear" (113). Like all such cautions in the Gothic mode, however ("Don't go near the maze, Miss, is my advice to you" [*Lady Oracle* 30]), this one is disregarded by the heroine.

Niederhoff's perception, that these ghostly insights are not exclusively negative, makes an argumentative move away from psychoanalysis and trauma theory, wherein psychosis or traumatic damage are certainly not conceived as salutary. See his description of Grace Marks's quilting of patches from garments by Nancy, Mary and herself as both a symbol of "the co-existence of different personalities in Grace" (psychosis) and a "change for the better, a reconciliation of sorts" (80). To extend the analysis, it may be comparable to that ethically challenging balance among three other women—Charis, Roz and Tony—and Atwood's ultimate in horrific revenants, Zenia. Thought to have been blown up in Beirut, she rises again to spread mayhem before she, too, is returned to death, but not before the three women she plagues are moved to acknowledge this thing of darkness as theirs.

The reverse may also be true: resurrections that appear to bring renewed opportunities are capable of a more sombre reading; in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Delacourt is surprised to learn that her mild-mannered anesthetist father has been known to revive those who have attempted suicide, and some of those who have so wanted to die are anything but pleased to be resurrected. One of them suddenly and violently shows up at the Delacourt house, pounding on their front door and vowing to kill Joan's father. "You'd be surprised how many of them are glad," he explains to Joan's mother in the aftermath of this upsetting incident. Clearly, though, what Joan calls this "resurrectionist

side of his personality" (73)—bringing the dead back to life—is not the uncomplicated good that many people would hold it to be.

The break with enlightenment epistemologies, which allows Atwood to perceive that not all knowledge is an uncomplicated good, can also inform readings of hurtful histories. The ghosts of the past, not only a personal but a national past, bring with them their painful traumas, to be sure, but also a ground from which to imagine alternative justices. As Atwood wrote in *Negotiating with the Dead*: "All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past" (178). This is, it seems to me, a crucial insight. In reading Atwood's texts for their complex hospitalities to messengers from the past who bring us their stories, as Burkhard Niederhoff instructs us to do, we find a promising means of reading not only her work but the work of many of her contemporaries who bear witness to difficult and painful truths about the past while not being "captured and held immobile" by them.

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