

Margaret Atwood: Twenty-Five years of Gothic Tales

Dr. Behzad Pourgharib

Assistant Professor of English

English Department

Golestan University, Golestan, Iran

Nothing is more difficult than to understand the dead, I've found: but nothing is more dangerous than to ignore

them. (*The Blind Assassin* 508).

It may seem paradoxical that with all Margaret Atwood's sex experiments with different narrative genres and her emphasis on women's fictive autobiographies ('life writing') that her novels have always contained prolonged negotiations with the dead. For her female protagonists, the personal quests have been haunted by ghostly voices and by efforts to unearth secrets repressed in their private lives or hidden in the collective social memory, while the novelist herself has returned again and again to traditional generic forms like Gothic romances, women's popular romances, dystopias, historical novels (to name but a few), renovating old genres but always acknowledging those traditional frames of reference. Not ignoring the dead while writing about the living – indeed, looking into the past in order to understand the present – has been one of the most significant characteristics of Atwood's novel writing career. Those imperatives would seem to be at the basis of the creative process for Atwood and for her heroines, and in this essay I shall focus on the ways that Atwood has resurrected and refashioned Gothic conventions over the past twenty-five years in four novels: *Lady Oracle* (1976) *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Looking into the changes over this period, we may observe Atwood's shape-shifting capacities as she reworks the favorite techniques and motifs of Gothic haunting to construct postmodern contemporary texts which engage with shifts in cultural mythology, especially in relation to questions of femininity and feminism, but also in relation to shifts in Canada's myths of nationhood and identity.

To describe the paradigmatic female Gothic plot as 'a narrative of disclosure and reparation' where 'the weight of the past... may be escaped only when its secrets are brought to light through the process of discovering connections between past and present' (Williams 171) serves to highlight important elements of history and the uncanny which characterize the genre. To define contemporary Gothic (often called neo-Gothic) by its emphasis on female subjective experience, characterized by 'excess' and by women's desire for 'escape' points to the central thematic of Gothic fiction and to its transgressive narrative structures (Becker 21-39). Both these definitions however are in danger of neglecting the dimension of ironic humor which distinguishes Atwood's Gothic tales and ferocious delight with which her duplicitous storytellers conduct their negotiations, not only with the dead but also with the living. (These include the characters within the text and also the readers who are outside the action but very much within

the text, for Atwood never forgets that ‘the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist’ (Atwood, 1982: 334-57). Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, Iris Chase Griffen in *The Blind Assassin*, and Atwood herself are all identified as sibyls, witches, liars, supreme plotters; by the end (with the exception of Joan) they have disappeared – into death or into the text – and only their voices remain.

Gothic fiction is obsessed with secrets, with what is buried or hidden or unspeakable. It would be only half true to say it is obsessed with death; rather, it is haunted by the fear of the undead, a dread that what seems to be dead and buried might not be dead at all, but always ready to spring out, or to speak out, in some monstrous and unpredictable form. Gothic motifs might be summed up as figuring ‘the unspeakable and ‘live burial’ (Sedgwick 4.5), or as imaging something which is ‘deeply familiar but which has become alienated through repression’ (Freud 363). Gothic might be said to inhabit the borderline territory of the Uncanny where what is familiar threatens to collapse into unfamiliar spaces or black holes, generating a high level of anxiety and suspense. Unsurprisingly, as several recent commentators have suggested, the scariest Gothic place is the home, which becomes an ‘unhomely’ haunted house as the separation between inside/outside is eroded (Becker 19-20; Bhabha 9-18). If the domestic place of home, which replaces the traditional Gothic castle or ruined abbey, is the dominant architectural metaphor in contemporary Gothic fiction, then the split self with its dark doubles is the pervasive bodily image for psychic repression and alienation. The ghosts figure the secret life of memory, and life writing with its retrospective emphasis produces haunted texts, in a process which Terry Castle has aptly called ‘the spectralization of the other’ for the dead continue to have a subjective reality (Castle 125). This collapsing of boundaries between what is real and what is imagined would account for the Gothic fascination with transgression as these fictions negotiate border crossings between dreams and waking, sanity and madness, life and death, in narratives which shift continually between realism, fantasy and nightmare. It is to this territory of Gothic romance that Atwood always returns, from her early water color paintings of the late 1960s where similar knights in armor with hidden faces peer at damsels dressed in red, right up to the present.

We might see *Surfacing* as a ghost story set in the Canadian wilderness, while *The Handmaid’s Tale* has traditional Gothic motifs as well, in classic female fears of imprisonment and sexual violence, and in *Cat’s Eye* the protagonist Elaine Risley searches incessantly for Cordelia, her vanished childhood playmate and tormentor, replaying in memory their game ‘Lie down, you’re dead!’, trying to resurrect the absent other, her doppelganger. There are very repetitive patterns here, which after all is what help us to recognize a literary genre. The same old stories are being retold in new contexts as Atwood challenges traditional generic limits: ‘We’re going to turn it upside down, we’re going to move it so it includes something which isn’t supposed to be there, we’re going to surprise the reader’ (Ingersoll 193).

Atwood surprises the reader by turning Gothic upside down in four different ways with her refashioning, crossing traditional Gothic with satiric versions of women’s popular romance in *Lady Oracle*, with fairy tales and contemporary social history in *The Robber Bride*, with

nineteenth century historical fiction and Victorian melodrama in *Alias Grace*, and in *The Blind Assassin* appropriating a dazzling range of discourses from twentieth century social history, science fiction, modernist female romance and American detective pulp fiction of the 1930s and 40s.

Lady Oracle

Lady Oracle, which opens with a voice speaking from beyond the grave would at first appear to be a traditional Gothic text, though as we read the opening paragraph it transforms itself into a Gothic parody. We discover that the speaker is not dead after all:

I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it ... I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe like a Quaker church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen ... The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it. (*Lady Oracle* 7)

This is a fictive autobiography told by a woman called Joan Foster, who is a novelist and a poet, and she tells her life story in different versions under different names. Of course, her stories never quite fit together, for there are always multiple images of herself being projected. Not only does Joan write Gothic romances but she also tries quite disastrously to construct her real life like a Gothic plot with herself as the victim. Indeed this novel opens not in Canada but in Italy, the classic territory of Redcliffean Gothic romance. Her elaborately contrived plot does not work, and the main interest lies in tracing the many ways that Joan's anxieties and fantasies are figured out in her Gothic bodice rippers, which are not escape fantasies as she claims, but rather her own complex negotiations with her personal past and with the memory of her dead mother.

However, before going any further into Joan's Gothic plots, we need to look at the novel title, to see what it tells us about Joan as a woman writer who faces the challenge of finding a voice to speak for herself. And what does she say when she does find her voice? The most significant thing about an oracle is that it is a voice which comes out of a woman's body, associated with hidden knowledge, danger and death, but it is not her own voice. Thinking of the Delphic Oracle, it is the voice of the god Apollo or earlier the voice of the Earth Goddess speaking through the body of the priestess who is herself in a trance. The role of the prophetess or the storyteller is in danger of being reduced to the role of hysteric. Joan presents herself as uncomfortably close to this model, for she refuses to take responsibility for what she writes. The very name *Lady Oracle* is not her choice; it is given to her by her male publisher.

When she becomes a celebrity, she begins to feel certain paranoia about her media persona. She starts to feel like one of her own tormented Gothic victims:

It was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences, my dark twin, mirror reflection. She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her. (250-51)

This double identity is a threat, but it also provides Joan with a kind of escape, for she cannot be defined by any statements made in her name, and her identity is always changing. Is she Lady Oracle the poetess? Is she Lousia Delacourt (Joan has appropriated her dead aunts name) the Gothic novelist? She is also Joan Foster (the name given by her mother), but whether she is named after Saint Joan or the American film actress Joan Crawford she is not sure. In fact, these assumed names which can be put on and off like costumes constitute nothing less than a set of aliases for a woman who has a very insecure sense of her own identity. Joan is a very slippery subject who writes costume Gothic because she is afraid: afraid of the past (imaged by the ghost of the Fat Lady in Pink who walks the tightrope) and of her mother (who always seemed to the child like a triple headed monster in her dressing table mirror), she is afraid of her father (who had worked for the French Resistance during the war and who Joan thinks may have murdered her mother), she is afraid of losing her husband's respect, and she is also afraid of being found out! As Joan asserts, 'I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me' (216). Even her staged death and escape to Italy does not free her, and increasingly her writing begins to look like another failed escape attempt.

Joan is trying to figure out her own life through her Gothic plots, and in the end she has to walk right into one of her stories to find out who she is. Going into the Gothic maze, Joan has to confront four of her fictional heroines who all claim to be the one character, just as she has to confront her mother's ghost and just as she has to confront the villain reaching for her throat who turns out to be – unsurprisingly – the figure of her husband. This scenario of Gothic violence exists only in the world of Joan's imagination and is interrupted when she is terrified by hearing real footsteps. Has her husband come all the way to Italy to get her? Or is it a murderer? And are they the same thing? Once translated into the realistic genre, such terror becomes comic, for the man whom Joan fears has come for her life is a reporter who has only come to get her life story, which is the novel we have just been reading. She decides to give up on Gothic and to write science fiction instead, on the (erroneous) premise that 'the future is better for you.'

The Robber Bride

Lady Oracle is a Gothic entertainment, a Canadian's romance with Europe which she fancies as an exotic and sinister escape from her home territory of Toronto. Twenty years later, with *The Robber Bride*, Atwood is writing about a very different Toronto, a multicultural city of the 1990s in an urban postcolonial Canada which is no longer isolated but part of the globalized community – much more interesting and rather more threatening. *The Robber Bride* is a mutant

form of Gothic romance, caught in that 'postmodern paradox of complicity and critique' which Linda Hutcheon describes as characteristic of Atwoods fiction (Hutcheon 146). The Gothic plot is turned upside down here for the novel is structured around the adventures not of a villain but a villainess who may or may not be died, who seems to be a figure out of nightmare, and who transgresses the borderlines between realism and fantasy. This is the Demonic Women of the title, Zenia, the Robber Bride herself, who has come all the way from central Europe to torment innocent Canadians. If it were possible, Zenia could be Dracula's daughter, for this is a story about the Un-Dead, with all the trappings of magic mirrors, shape changers, split selves and dark doubles, transgressions and betrayals, with the final defeat of the villainess when her body is burned up and her ashes scattered over the deepest part of the Lake Ontario. The novel is like a fairy tale, but it is also like history, giving us a combination of different kinds of evidence: social documentary, private memory narratives and imaginative reconstruction. (Atwood is very keen on probing the secrets hidden within history, as shall be seen in *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*).

Who is Zenia? She is there in the title of the novel, and it is her story which focuses the narrative. How does this traditional Gothic villainess survive as such a powerful force in a novel about contemporary Toronto? I think that Atwood has taken on Dr. Frankenstein's rule here, reassembling parts of old legends and fairy tales together with late twentieth century neuroses, to create her female monster who strides through three Canadian women's stories wreaking havoc on their lives in this neo-Gothic tale which combines social history, detective thriller, and the family romance plot.

Zenia is the focus for all these women's stories: she is necessary to them whether she is alive or dead. She has three different versions of her life story which she tells each of the three friends in order to gain their trust, and then she robs them of their money and their men. At least this is what her friends say, for Zenia never tells her own story in her own voice. She is a very transgressive figure with shifting life stories which seem to reflect the desires and fears of each woman. Is she real or imaginary? The answer is that she is both, for Zenia is the archetypal nomad, migrating from one story to another, operating on the borders between the real and the supernatural, so that all three protagonists see very different versions of Zenia in her recurring appearances in their lives between the 1960s and the early 1990s, and we as readers can never decide how to interpret this shape – shifting figure with her multiple identities. Maybe she is nothing but a mirror image or a magic mirror like the one in the Snow White fairy tale, which makes visible something which is 'deeply familiar but which has become alienated through repression' as Freud would remind us. Zenia is threatening not because she is European (though her immigrant status highlights her dimensions of otherness) but because her appearance is associated with the uncanny: she represents the return of the repressed for these three women. She is their dark double, appealing directly to their unspoken fears and desires, just as she reflects fantasies of femininity from which women suffer as well as men:

You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. The Zenias of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies, they've done it themselves. They've slipped sideways into dreams, the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of a different kind (392).

Atwood is echoing Simone de Beauvoir here; she is also challenging feminist thinking about gender identities and relations between the sexes, drawing attention to the ways that fantasizing affects women's concepts of themselves. She is always the Other Woman, representing the otherness within themselves which these women cannot acknowledge but which is necessary for self-definition. Atwood is using the Gothic villainess to highlight the way fantasy works, as fantasies of desirable femininity come back to haunt these middle-aged middle class women in Toronto in the 1990s – one a successful business woman, one a professor of military history, and one a New Age shop assistant. These are the women's social identities, but their life histories reveal that all three of them are split subjects who have cast off the traumatic memories of unhappy childhoods and who have reinvented themselves even to the extent of changing their names, to fit the adult versions of their personalities. But as Atwood remarked at the beginning of *Cat's Eye*, 'Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away' (*Cat's Eye* 3). Identity is always multiple, a dynamic construct of remembering and forgetting, where what is lodged in the unconscious might under certain circumstances rise through dreams to the level of consciousness. Again this is form of negotiating with the dead, as the protagonists confront ghostly selves who may turn out not to be dead at all. Though all three women are beset by insecurities, the knowledge of the shadow selves within subjective identity is most keenly realized by Charis. She has survived a childhood of physical and sexual abuse and has carefully reconstructed her fragile identity as a peace-loving New Age mystic by metaphorically dumping her old damaged self into the lake:

Still inside her head, she walked to the shore of Lake Ontario and sank the leather bag into the water. That was the end of Karen. Karen was gone. But the lake was inside Charis really, so that's where Karen was too. Down deep. (265)

Through Zenia's interventions in their lives these women are forced to recognize that their repressed 'dead' selves are too dangerous to be ignored, and that like the Robber Bride herself they have to be engaged with in order to make space for personal development. This psychic drama is a 'raw war' – remembering Tony's Freudian slip in her first conversation with Zenia (129) which she later recognizes as the decisive moment in their friendship, when Tony revealed to Zenia her own vulnerability.

Zenia is linked to a marauder, a guerilla fighter, a vampire, and a rattlesnake. As a betrayer and a death dealer, she is a very dangerous presence and she has to be destroyed again

and again. In the end, all three women reject her and she commits suicide. Or was she murdered by Charis's dark undead twin Karen? Might Zenia have died anyway from a complication of disorders, ranging from cancer to drugs to AIDS, all of these possibilities continue to circulate around Zenia's drowned body.

It would seem that Zenia has finally gone and that her story can now be turned into history, 'because she is dead, and all of the dead are in the hands of the living' (461). However, even as the last part of her story is told, Zenia's fragmented body is being transformed, so that the 'broken mosaic' re-emerges at the end as a beautiful Cretan statuette: a 'woman with her glazed pottery face' who 'does nothing but smile' (470). The enigma of Zenia (Who was she? Was she entirely destructive, or was she also instructive, and possibly courageous as well?) cannot be solved, any more than the enigmas of history. The memory of Zenia like the collective memory of history is already there, waiting to be pieced together and reinterpreted by the living in their negotiations with the dead. She remains un-dead like the vampire of the old Gothic tales, as she continues to derive her existence from the neuroses and desires of others. She is always the face in the magic mirror, reminding women not only of what they lack or have forgotten but also of what they need most:

The story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless, a rumour only, drifting from mouth to mouth and changing as it goes. As with any magician, you saw what she wanted you to see; or else you saw what you yourself wanted to see. She did it with mirrors. The mirror was whoever was watching, but there was nothing behind the two-dimensional image but a thin layer of mercury (461).

The riddling questions remain: 'Was she in any way like us? Thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way round: Are we in any way like her?' (470)

Alias Grace

These same questions might also be asked of *Alias Grace*, Atwood's Gothic novel about nineteenth century English-Canadian history. She turns back to a celebrated criminal case for this is the story of Grace Marks, the sixteen-year-old Irish servant girl who, with her fellow servant James Mac Dermott, was accused of murdering their employer Thomas Kinnear and his Canadian housekeeper Nancy Montgomery (who was also his mistress) at Kinnear's farm outside Toronto in 1843. Grace was not hanged for the murders though Mac Dermott was. Instead, she was imprisoned in Kingston Penitentiary and incarcerated for a period in Toronto Lunatic Asylum; she was finally pardoned in 1872. Grace Marks left Canada and went to live in the United States, where possibly she married and changed her name. At this point she disappears from official records.

The crucial question is: Was Grace Innocent, or was she guilty? She steadfastly claimed that she could not remember what happened on the day of the murders, so to this day the case is open to speculation. Why would Atwood choose to write about a story like that? She has given

us a persuasive answer: '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.' (Atwood 1977: 19)

Looking into the story, we see how it contains all the classic Gothic ingredients: unspeakable secrets, murder, sex and violence, criminality, and a heroine who may be criminally insane or a split personality or a hysteric, or maybe even innocent. The fascination of such a heroine as Grace is intimately bound up with nineteenth century anxieties about women's true nature: are they angels or are they lying devils? And which is grace? Victorian ideals of femininity were linked to domesticity and asexuality; but what happens when a figure like Grace Marks challenges those ideals by supposedly engaging in forbidden sexuality (possibly with her employer or with her fellow servant) and in violent crime? Grace's story fascinated late nineteenth century readers, as Atwood tells us in her afterword: 'The Kinnear-Montgomery murders took place on July 23, 1843, and were extensively reported not only in Canadian newspapers but in those of the United States and Britain. The details were sensational' (*Alias Grace* 5.37). Her story clearly fascinates Atwood, who has written two earlier versions of it: *The Servant Girl* (1974) for CBC Radio, and an unpublished play *Grace* (1978-79). We might say that she is still trying to 'understand the dead' just the three protagonists in *The Robber Bride* continue to try to understand Zenia long after her death by telling stories about her.

In *Alias Grace* it is Grace who tells the story while she is still in prison to a young American psychiatric doctor from Massachusetts, Dr. Simon Jordan. He is engaged in the study of early versions of psychotherapy and traumatic nervous disorders. It is Grace's voice, disembodied and out of context which startles the reader's attention in the polyphony of voices with which the novel begins. The reader is quite bewildered by the broken pieces of contradictory historical evidence which are offered in the opening pages: newspaper reports of the trial, an extract from Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*, snatches of poetry, a page from the Kingston Penitentiary's Punishment Book, and among them Grace's Gothic nightmare of Nancy Montgomery's murder;

Then up ahead I see Nancy, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes. Around her neck is a white cotton handkerchief printed with blue flowers, love-in-a-mist, it's mine ... and then Nancy smiles, only the mouth, her eyes are hidden by the blood and hair, and then she scatters into patches of colour, a drift of red cloth petals across the stones. (6)

This shocking image of a female victim whose body is bruised, broken and bleeding is reported by Grace as a recurrent nightmare. It makes the reader wonder right from the start about how innocent Grace is to dream a thing like that. Is this the Gothic return of the repressed where traumatic memory resurfaces in uncanny repetition? Maybe; but the last sentence of this opening section makes us suspension, for Grace adds: 'This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story.' Is this just another tale that Grace has made up to please the doctor, who is trying to lead her toward remembering the event of the murders in order to restore her to psychic health and to solve the riddle of her guilt or innocence, possibly with the practical result of

gaining Grace's release from prison and making his own medical reputation. Do nightmares prove anything? The novel refuses to give a definite answer, and as Atwood said to me, 'I've put in everything I know, and Grace claimed not to remember.' Dr. Jordan is ultimately defeated in his quest for Grace's secret, just as Atwood fails to uncover that secret nearly one hundred and fifty years later.

Is Grace suffering from a split personality disorder? Or is hers a case of hysteria? Both these diagnoses were popular within the context of mid nineteenth century psychiatric medicine on which Atwood draws for her construction of identity here. Her Afterword cites some of the textbooks on the unconscious and dreams, on hypnotism and on spiritualism, which constitute her frame of reference (though of course she cannot avoid writing within her own contemporary post-Freudian frames of reference as well). Atwood's Gothic representation of the split self corresponds to Victorian theories of divided consciousness, a model of mind shared by the two doctors concerned with Grace's case. Dr. Jordan works via the association of ideas, whereas Dr. DuPont (of whom more later) works via a direct appeal to the unconscious through hypnotic trances, both of them being concerned with therapeutic cures designed to reclaim repressed memories and to heal the psyche. DuPont cites the medical authority of the Manchester physician James Braid who developed his new theory of Nero-hypnotism in the 1850s and was an important influence on Jean-Martin Charcot's work with hysterics in the Salpêtrière women's hospital in Paris from the 1860s. If Grace's nightmares do not prove anything, nor do her repeated assertions of traumatic memory loss. On the other hand, she may have been telling the truth, for she was prone to lapses of consciousness under shock and during her time in prison she was sufficiently unstable (and possibly mad) to be confined to the lunatic asylum for seven years. Again the questions arise: was she a consummate actress (as her enemies and her lawyer believed), was she innocent, or was she mad? In the novel, her comments on madness sound very like the paranoia described by Joan in *Lady Oracle*:

Gone mad is what they say, and sometimes run mad, as if mad is a direction... But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in. (37)

Grace is certainly haunted by ghosts – Nancy's and also the ghost of her best friend and fellow servant Mary Whitney, whose death from a bungled abortion caused Grace's first amnesiac attack. Grace asserts that on many occasions she was heard Mary's voice in her dreams, but whether she is saying 'Let me out' or 'Let me in' Grace cannot be sure. Again we see that Gothic transgression of boundaries between inside and outside, between the living and the dead, which is figured through the image of the dark double. Indeed, Mary apparently proves her undying friendship to Grace in what is surely the most bizarre scene in the novel, when Mary's voice speaks for Grace in the neuro-hypnotism episode (Chapter 48). In a scene which bears strong resemblances to nineteenth century melodrama, Grace is put into a hypnotic trance by Dr. DuPont, and at last she speaks out to an audience in the parlour of the prison governor's

wife; but she speaks in a voice which Dr. Jordan is sure is not her own; 'This voice cannot be grace's; yet in that case, whose voice is it?' (465)

So, what is happening here? A traditional Gothic reading would see this as a case of spirit or demonic possession, while a nineteenth century medical reading would see it as symptomatic of 'double consciousness,' the voice of split personality. But there is also a third possibility, which Dr. Jordan wonders about: 'He may have been shown an illusion, which he cannot prove to have been one' (472). This interpretation would fit with Atwood's ironic deployment of Gothic conventions, and if we remember that Dr. DuPont is none other than Grace's old friend Jeremiah the peddler who has always been her protector, then we may agree with Simon that this is a theatrical performance. Jeremiah is a charlatan and a trickster, who succeeds in helping Grace to prove her innocence or at least to keep her secret. The voice is not Grace's, nor is it the voice of the dead Mary Whitney, and I shall leave my readers to divine whose voice it is from a close reading of the text. (The answer is in there). What this scene does offer is a dramatization of Atwood's Gothic construction of female subjectivity where the conscious self is displaced by its dark twin. There is a similar process enacted in *Lady Oracle* and also in *The Robber Bride*, where the voice of the other comes closest to figuring what is 'unspeakable' through a transgressive speech act.

Fascinatingly, Grace never speaks out herself about her part in the murders, though she does offer a version in another medium many years later when she is free and a married woman living on a farm in Ithaca, New York. Several critics have commented on Grace's skill at quilt making and on the quilt patterns which are such a distinctive feather of the novel (Vevaina 64-74 and Rogerson 5-22). Having always had to follow other people's patterns, grace is at last free to design her own quilt, which needless to say, has some significant variations from conventional patterns. Her Tree of Paradise design contains not only a serpent but she makes the quilt as a memorial to her two dead friends, Nancy Montgomery (whom she is supposed to have murdered) and Mary Whitney (her own 'alias'), piecing fragments of their clothes together with her own, 'And so we will all be together' – perhaps in Paradise at last, though who can say? Certainly the story does not tell, though Grace's pattern does suggest a fund of memory beyond amnesia, and she does say to herself very near the end, 'If I wish to commune with the dead, I can do it well enough on my own' (529).

The mystery of Grace remains. As Atwood has found, 'Nothing is more difficult than to understand the dead' for though 'the dead are in the hands of the living' (*The Robber Bride* 461) history is never self explanatory but there to be interpreted as we wish and according to contemporary psychological and ideological needs. The past does not yield up all its secrets and Grace is like Offred when her story is disinterred along after Gilead has fallen and she is dead, and Offred is in turn like Eurydice, the figure out of classical myth who 'slips from our grasp and flees' (*The Handmaid's Tale* 324).

The Blind Assassin

It is from Atwood's latest novel *The Blind Assassin* that the head quote for this essay is taken, for I believe that here Atwood leads her female protagonist further into the Gothic maze than ever before, just as the novelist represents negotiations with the dead more explicitly than she has ever done. This is again a Gothic version of Canadian history, a kind of sequel to *Alias Grace*, covering the history of English Canada from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century. Published at the beginning of the new millennium, it offers a retrospective view of some of Canada's major crises and its changing social and political ideologies over the past century. There would seem to be no necessity for making this into a Gothic tale, except that Atwood chooses to tell history through the genre of fictive autobiography. The story teller is an eighty-two year old woman, Mrs. Iris Chase Griffen, who was born in small town Ontario in 1916, the middle of the First World War, and who finishes writing her life story just before she dies in May 1999. It is Iris who is haunted by the past, and it is through her duplicitous telling that the uncanny voices of the dead speak out.

The first thing that strikes the reader is the title, which could be that of an eighteenth century Gothic novel or a nineteenth century melodrama or even a 1930s pulp fiction detective thriller on B-grade movie. Somebody gets killed, but the killer cannot see the victim and nobody sees the killer. The second striking thing is the death opening, spoken (or written) by Iris: Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine (1).

Here is another bruised and broken female body, in a curious reminder of the opening of *Alias Grace*. But who is responsible? To that there is no answer, though the mystery seizes the reader's attention. There are no less than three suicides in the first twenty pages – Iris's sister, Iris's husband, Iris's daughter. Is there any connection between these deaths? Iris did not see any of them; she is only the survivor who tells the story years later, when the dead are 'in the hands of the living.' Yet there is so much unexplained that we have the uneasy feeling that this is another of Atwood's Ontario Gothic mysteries. There is so much in this novel which is deliberately hidden (Laura's notebooks hidden in one of Iris's bedroom drawers, photographs hidden in old books, Iris's locked steamer trunk). Unlike Grace Marks, Iris is not in prison for murder; as a member of the old Anglo-Canadian Establishment and the widow of a prominent Ontario industrialist, she belongs to the class which is beyond reproach. The only sentence she awaits is death from old age and at the end of the novel she dies of a heart attack. It is against that final silencing that Iris writes her memoir, which she leaves as a legacy to her granddaughter Sabrina who is away traveling in India and who does not return till her grandmother is dead.

It is a very complicated plot, for there are really three stories here: there is Iris's memoir, which contains her sister Laura's posthumously published novel called the *Blind Assassin* – and which contains a pulp science fiction story about a *Blind Assassin* told by the anonymous woman's lover in that novel. It is like a box of magic tricks and we only discover the key to connections very near the end. I do not want to spoil Atwood's surprises to the reader by revealing what happens, but I will say that Iris's story is a very Gothic tale which is part

confession, part private memoir and part public memorial (like the War Memorials from the First World War which litter the novel). Filled with ghosts and ghostly voices, this novel is Iris's tour of the Underworld of classical mythology, her way of negotiating with the dead:

What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind. But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge. Lest we forget, Remember me. To you from failing hands we throw. Cries of the thirst ghosts. (508).

Iris also answers another question: Why write down all this personal and family history? She writes obsessively and her memoir is full of references not only to handwriting but also to writing hands – often surrealistically dismembered hands or moving fingers, endlessly tracing out the lines of the past. A dismembered hand appears in the crucial hidden photograph.

The photo has been cut; a third of it has been cut off. In the lower left corner there's a hand, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass. It's the left hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not the hand that will set things down. (517).

Indeed there are two versions of this photo, one of which Iris has and a different version which belonged to Laura. In the original photo there were the two sisters with the man they both loved sitting between them. Iris claims to be telling the truth about the scandals and guilty secrets within Canadian high society that she knew in the 1930s and 40s, and she certainly makes the reader think again about the myth of Canadian respectability. But is Iris a reliable narrator? Atwood's female narrators have never been good at telling the truth. Are there things which Iris has deliberately hidden from the reader? Do we ever find out who the Blind Assassin is? In many ways Iris's memoir begins to look, as self-consciously fabricated as Grace's Tree of Paradise quilt. By the time we (or Sabrina) read this, Iris too is a ghost, for the novel includes her obituary and she has become a disembodied Gothic voice, speaking from beyond the grave, from the written pages; 'But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be'. (521).

Iris has eluded the reader – like Grace Marks, or Zenia, or Joan Foster, or the Handmaid. Life stories like history represent 'the lure of the unmentionable,' for these novels are not written only to entertain but also to unhide what has been hidden or repressed, to expose cultural fictions and lies through the artifice of fiction writing. Something close to home that seems to be dead and buried might not be dead at all. I shall end with Atwood's advice to readers about stories and story telling, where the scariest thing about the truth is that it is infinitely elusive:

The true story lies / among the other stories....

The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue after all.

Why do you / need it? Don't ever ask for the true story (True Stories II)

Note:

1. This analysis of *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride* is a summary and development of material in my book, Margaret Atwood (Macmillan, 1996, 65-8). For another extended discussion of *Lady Oracle*, see Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, 199, 151-98).
2. For discussions of identity in *The Robber Bride* from a non-Gothic perspective, see Janet Beer, 'Doing It with Mirrors: History and Cultural Identity in *The Robber Bride*' and Mari Peepre, 'Searching for Zenia: Time, Space and the Mystery of *The Robber Bride*' in *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 13.2 (1998): 306-16 ad 317-26.

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