

*Piecing Together the Patchwork Quilt: Margaret Atwood's Stories of Possession,  
Creativity, and Murder in "The Journals of Susanna Moodie, Lady Oracle", and  
"Alias Grace"*

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Margaret Atwood is part of a long tradition of writing that situates the author in the realm of god or creator, and connects the artistic process to a source of inspiration, whether god or demon, that fills the author at the moment of writing with the breath of life, first word, or the creating logos. Atwood, in her typically ironic voice, tells the story of her first creative production:

I was scuttling along in my furtive way, suspecting no ill, when a large and invisible thumb descended from the sky and pressed down on the top of my head. A poem formed. It was quite a gloomy poem: the poems of the young usually are. It was a gift, this poem – a gift from an anonymous donor, and, as such, both exciting and sinister at the same time. (Atwood qtd. in Cooke 1998, p.18)

However seriously readers or critics take Atwood's story of her own nascence as a poet, this quote underlines one of the tropes of creativity that will possess Atwood throughout her career as a poet and writer: she links herself as an artist to the Romantic tradition of otherworldly inspiration, or the idea of the artist as a vessel that becomes possessed in the moment of creation or artistic inspiration.

During her years of graduate study at Harvard University, Atwood focussed her academic interests on the nineteenth century. The Romantic poets of this period become increasingly important influences on Atwood's descriptions of the process of artistic creation and indeed in the identity of the poet/creator. In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, a lecture series at Cambridge University that later became the Cambridge University Press 2002 text, Atwood discusses Keats' claim that the author is the most unpoetical of all creatures because of the author's ability to take on the shape and colour of whatever the author is creating at the moment of inspiration. Keats' discussion of the poet in the moment of creation is clearly a historical precedent to Atwood's claim of her own transformation through the imagination at the moment of creation:

My transition from not being a writer to being one was instantaneous, like the change from docile bank clerk to fanged monster in "B" movies. Anyone looking might have thought I'd been exposed to some chemical or cosmic ray of the kind that causes rats to become gigantic or men to become invisible. (2002, p.14)

Developing on this theme of other-worldly inspiration and instantaneous transformation, Atwood offers the following possibilities as reasons for why she writes: "Because I was driven to it by some force outside my control. Because I was possessed. Because an angel dictated to me. Because I fell into the embrace of the Muse" (2002, p. xxi). Later in the same discussion, feeling that she had failed to answer the question of why authors write, Atwood addresses how the process of writing feels. Atwood gives the following examples of other authors' responses to this question:

One said it was like walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside; another said it was like groping through a tunnel; another said it was like being in a cave [...] another said it was like being in an empty room which was nevertheless filled with unspoken words, with a sort of whispering; another said it was like grappling with an unseen being or entity; another said it was like sitting in an empty theatre before a play or film had started, waiting for the characters to appear. (2002, p.xxii-xxiii)

Indeed, there seems to be little emphasis placed on the conscious mental powers of the author exerted in the moment of creation, and rather, as I will suggest in particular in the case of Atwood, an emphasis is placed upon the power of the logos, or the possessing word or spirit from the realm of the imagination or possibly, as this text itself suggests, a negotiation with the dead.

Atwood traces this tradition of creative possession back to the early nineteenth-century Romantic poets, but also to the medical-psychological writers of the nineteenth century. This was a time when possession was more widely discussed as both a part of the poetic process and also a spiritual and a medical-psychological condition. Indeed, Atwood draws on historical and psychological texts that trace the birth of modern psychiatry back to its roots in earlier discourses of animal magnetism, somnambulism, hypnotism, and the earliest cases of multiple or split-consciousness. Atwood's 1996 discussion of possession within the historical novel of *Alias Grace* cites among her sources two psychological texts, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* and *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, both of which offer in-depth discussions of possession, hypnosis, somnambulism, automatic writing, exorcism, and spiritualism—all of which figure darkly in the story of Grace Marks, and indeed make earlier and more cursory appearances in Atwood's poetry and fiction. Adam Crabtree, in *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*, posits that animal magnetism was “an operation by which a person is rendered possessed by a demon by means of certain gestures, by a look, or even by the will alone” (1993, p.184). Henri F. Ellenberger, in *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, claims that possession is widespread and almost universally described as follows: “an individual suddenly seems to lose his identity to become another person. His physiognomy changes and shows a striking resemblance to the individual of whom he is, supposedly, the incarnation” (1970, p.13). Both Crabtree and Ellenberger trace the history of possession and hypnotism from early case studies of possession and spiritual or psychological cure.

In the collection *Murder in the Dark* Atwood describes a game whereby “you can say: the murderer is the writer” (1983, p.38), connecting creativity to murder as surely as she had earlier suggested the source of creativity to be otherworldly, or perhaps, as in the case of *Alias Grace*, the spiritual possession of the author/murderer figure. Indeed, in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Atwood quotes from A.M. Klein's “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” connecting what she has earlier described as the transforming power of the imagination to the criminal and murdering aspect of the creative figure:

It is possible that he is dead, and not discovered.  
It is possible that he can be found some place  
In a narrow closet, like a corpse in a detective story,  
Standing, his eyes staring, and ready to fall on his face. (A.M. Klein  
qtd. in Atwood 2002, p.17)

A.M. Klein is in fact discussing the corpse of the Canadian writer, in an extended metaphor that questions the lack of Canadian writers, but here he links this absence to murder and death, just as Atwood connects the author and the murderer in the earlier quotation. Likewise, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood connects one of the earliest writers of Canadian tradition, Susanna Moodie, to a tradition whereby the

creator/writer/planter, when they create actually sow the seeds of death and murder. In the story of the land, the land and animals are murdered, just as the characters of the work are murdered by the author in *Alias Grace*, and the creation or birthing of the text necessitates the murder or death of the author. Thus, the theory of creativity I am outlining originates in the phenomena of possession and leads to murder.

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Atwood writes: "I take this picture of myself / and with my sewing scissors / cut out the face. / Now it is more accurate: / where my eyes were, / every- / thing appears" (1970, p.7). Margaret Atwood here as in *Alias Grace* links the nineteenth-century Canadian woman artist's creativity to the work of sewing, an activity that facilitated the telling of stories and particularly the narrating of a woman's own experience. Like Grimm's bride in "The Robber Bridegroom" the female story-teller of this long-poem will use her dreams to narrate her artistic process which involves both possession and murder. In the first poem of this sequence, the sewing scissors, associated with female creativity and story-telling, are violently employed to facilitate personal creative possession which renders the female subject able to reflect or become possessed by the poetic story of the wilderness, animals, and later the cultivated fields of the homestead. While the woman first uses the sewing scissors to facilitate a personal transformation, so that as an artist her eyes reflect the stories of the land, the possession of the poems that follow involve an aggressive taking over of the artist. In "The Planters," the many transformers and writers on the landscape cannot escape possession by the agents of this transformation. Indeed if they "open their eyes even for a moment / to these trees, to this particular sun / they would be surrounded, stormed, broken / in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark / side of light / as I am" (Atwood 1970, p.17). The suggestion by Atwood's Susanna Moodie is that she has already been possessed and that the other writers of the landscape will likewise be possessed by and through their open eyes. Indeed, possession here appears active, dark, and unavoidable in the process of creation. The poem that follows, "The Wereman," suggests again a possession through the eyes, in this case the eyes of animals replacing the eyes possessed by land and trees and darkness. "He may change me also / with the fox eye, the owl / eye, the eightfold / eye of the spider" (Atwood 1970, p.19). Finally Atwood describes the process of waking to another self as waking from a long sleep, this being characteristic of a form of somnambulism and possession that figures more prominently in the story of Grace Marks. Again, focussing on the outward change in appearance as reflected in a mirror, the subject of "Looking in a Mirror" sees that her "possessed" form has changed even its outward appearance and has taken on the characteristics of the trees. This description of the somnambulist-like waking of the artist and the transformation of her primary physical characteristics can most clearly be associated with the nineteenth-century medical discourse of possession: "It was as if I woke / after a sleep of seven years / to find stiff lace, religious / black rotted / off by earth and the strong waters / and instead my skin thickened / with bark and the white hairs of roots" (Atwood 1970, p.24). Further, Atwood figures possession as a kind of erasure in "Departure from the Bush" where the "I, who had been erased / by fire, was crept in / upon by green," allowing for a further possession to take place, "In time the animals / arrived to inhabit me" (1970, p.26). Finally, with the story-teller possessed, the creative product of the narrative and the poetry eventually leads the story-teller to murder, the blood staining her hands and the narrative embedded in the language of hypnotic dream images. In "Dream 1: The Bush Garden" Susanna Moodie says: "When I bent / to pick, my hands / came away red and wet / In the dream I said / I

should have known / anything planted here / would come up blood” (Atwood 1970, p.34). The result of the creative urge to plant is blood rather than life. In the dream that follows, “Dream 2: Brian The Still-Hunter,” the hunter becomes possessed by the animals that he must kill, he says: “I feel / my skin grow fur” (Atwood 1970, p.36). Increasingly the poems turn to death culminating in “The Double Voice” where “Two voices / took turns using my eyes / One had manners, / painted in watercolours, / used hushed tones when speaking” while “The other voice / had other knowledge: / that men sweat / always and drink often / that pigs are pigs / but must be eaten / anyway, that unborn babies / fester like wounds in the body” (Atwood 1970, p.42). One sees through eyes “the rituals of seasons and rivers” while “the other found a dead dog / jubilant with maggots” (Atwood 1970, p.42). This double-consciousness or possession of the eyes and the voice represents both aspects of the artistic process: creativity and death. Moodie herself becomes possessed of the land and the animals of the land, and the telling of her story is by and through the double-voice of the possessed artist. The result is the poetic rendering of the artist’s experience through possession by the land and animals, ending with the bloody hands of the artist reaching into the “murdered” landscape.

The theme of possession and indeed murder are both important in the re-working of the gothic novel and, as in *Alias Grace*, the nineteenth-century gothic-sensationalist novel. In Atwood’s gothic novel, *Lady Oracle*, Joan, ex-fat ballerina and brownie and writer of pulpy women’s romance novels, attempts automatic writing unsuccessfully as a child and again while acting out a scene for one of her romance novels, putting herself into a trance with the aid of a gothic mirror and candles. The result is the sense of someone standing behind her and a few almost unintelligible scribbles. However, over time these “experiments with Automatic Writing” (Atwood 1976, p.237) become *Lady Oracle* and Joan herself is acknowledged to be a celebrated author. Her description of the process of automatic writing is as follows:

You know, you sit in front of a mirror, with a paper and pencil and a lighted candle, and then....Well, these words would sort of be given to me. I mean, I’d find them written down, without having done it myself, if you know what I mean. So after that...well, that’s how it happened.  
(Atwood 1976, p. 237)

Joan merely places herself in a trance and becomes a vessel for the spirit, or in other words, becomes possessed by a spirit that writes through her what will become a celebrated collection of poetry. This creative work of the possessing spirit eventually leads to the planned death or murder of the leading character in Joan’s life, herself. *Lady Oracle* begins with “I planned my death carefully; unlike my life” (Atwood 1976, p.7). The author of *Lady Oracle* plays a game with the readers of her fictive fiction, a game that is very like the one that Atwood describes in *Murder in the Dark*. The author creates as the result of possession, and the result of the creative act of the author is actually the death of the author. Whether this is Atwood being ‘tongue in cheek,’ critiquing the ‘death of the author,’ or whether this is the logical leap or murder that follows the act of possessed creativity, is perhaps answered best by Atwood herself. Atwood says in *Me, She and It*, “Why do authors wish to pretend they don’t exist? It’s a way of skinning out, of avoiding truth and consequences. They’d like to deny the crime, although their fingerprints are all over the martini glasses, not to mention the hacksaw blade and the victim’s neck” (Atwood 1995, p.17). Atwood reshapes this question of authorial murder in *Negotiating with the Dead* asking the question in terms of moral responsibility “if a writer murders

someone in a book—if he has a character dedicate himself to the commission of the perfect murder as an aesthetic act, a work of art [...] then what is he guilty of, and how are we to judge the crime?” (2002, pp.102-103). However, the question mutates again in *Negotiating with the Dead*, albeit in a slightly less serious question of moral responsibility, the reader, and the author. Atwood writes:

There’s an epigram tacked to my office bulletin board, pinched from a magazine—“Wanting to meet an author because you like his work is like wanting to meet a duck because you like pate.” [...] In order for the pate to be made and then eaten, the duck must first be killed. And who is it that does the killing?” (2002, p.35)

These questions of the death or murder of the author or murder by the author, are questions that reappear in *Alias Grace*, albeit slightly enhanced by the historical celebrity status and spiritual possession of the ‘authoress/murderess’.

While both *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Lady Oracle* hint at the mythology of how a person becomes possessed, whether through the cutting out of the face or by inducing a trance with candles and mirrors, *Alias Grace* is more concerned with the story of possession, the folklore or mythology of possession repeating itself through the telling or re-telling of the history of Grace Marks. When Grace is telling her story to Dr. Jordan, she recounts the death of her mother, transmitting the little story of folklore or mythology that was passed on to her by the kindly Mrs. Phelan whom she shared biscuits with in the hold of the ship:

Mrs. Phelan also said that we had not opened the window to let out the soul, as was the custom; but perhaps it would not be counted against my poor mother, as there were no windows in the bottom of the ship and therefore none to be opened. And I had never heard of a custom like that. (Atwood 1996, p.120)

However, when the teapot falls and breaks, Grace recalls immediately the spirit of her mother: “I though it was my mother’s spirit, trapped in the bottom of the ship because we could not open a window, and angry at me because of the second-best sheet. And now she would be caught in there for ever and ever, down below in the hold” (Atwood 1996, p.122). This “custom” or bit of mythology or death ritual from the old world figures prominently into the unfolding story of Grace Marks, as the unopened window and the trapped spirit of her mother is re-called and re-told to Dr. Jordan. This custom is further remembered following the death of Grace’s friend Mary Whitney, Grace says, “then I heard her voice, as clear as anything, right in my ear, saying *Let me in*” (Atwood 1996, p.178). It is following this request by the voice and spirit of Mary Whitney that Grace again recalls the bit of folklore from the old world that she had learned at the death of her mother. Grace says, “Then I thought with a rush of fear, But I did not open the window. And I ran across the room and opened it, because I must have heard wrong and she was saying *Let me out*...I was hoping Mary’s soul would fly out the window now, and not stay inside, whispering things into my ear. But I wondered whether I was too late” (Atwood 1996, p.179). It is following the request of the spirit voice to “*Let me in*” (Atwood 1996, p.178) that Grace Marks has her first strange episode of not remembering. After sleeping for ten hours she says: “when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them” (Atwood 1996, p.180). Following another sleep, Grace is unable to remember the waking hours, ushering in the part of her life where possession and amnesia propel her story forward.

It becomes possible to suggest that the folklore account of trapped spirits and the first occurrence of amnesia mark the beginning of the story of the haunting of Grace Marks. It is also from this moment that we begin to witness the split-consciousness in the Grace Marks of the story. Even in the telling of her story she is constantly and incessantly repeating “as Mary Whitney used to say” (Atwood 1996, p.238) or thinking and saying what Mary Whitney would have thought or said. Further, although we have already heard the folkloric explanation for haunting, it is at this point that the nineteenth-century authority of the Bible is brought in to validate the story and the experience. Grace Marks questions the idea of the voice of God speaking and telling the stories of the Bible to the men that wrote it down. Recalling Atwood’s fascination with automatic writing, it is no wonder that this discussion of biblical possession becomes important in justifying the experience of Grace Marks and her story. Mr. Kinnear says: “that though perhaps God wrote it, it was men who wrote it down; which was a little different. But those men were said to have been inspired; which meant that God had spoken to them, and told them what to do” (Atwood 1996, p.222). Grace then says: “So I asked did they hear voices, and he said yes. And I was glad that someone else had done so, although I said nothing about it, and in any case the voice I had heard, that one time, had not been God’s but Mary Whitney’s” (Atwood 1996, p.222). Possession then is linked to inspiration and indeed to the writing of stories and narratives, albeit with slightly less authority, but nonetheless with voices from without. Likewise, the story of the Bible, as authored by the God-head, also includes the murder or the death of the author as the result of a creative re-birth, incarnation, and story-telling. Recalling Atwood’s discussion of the duck and pate, it is interesting to link the question of “who is it that does the killing?” to the sacrament of communion (Atwood 1996, p.35). Where the ‘believer’ in the power of the logos to create and destroy re-enacts the death and resurrection of the ‘word made flesh’ by participating in the murder of the author and the eating of *His* flesh and the drinking of *His* blood. The participants as in the story of the duck and pate, want to meet the “duck”/God/author, but they re-present this desire through the eating of the “pate”/sacrament/text.

Following the murder, Grace invokes the mirror imagery of possession that was earlier a part of both the poetry of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and the automatic writing scenes of *Lady Oracle*. Following the murder, Grace Marks looks in the kitchen mirror and says: “my own face in the mirror over the kitchen sink was not like my face at all. It looked rounder and whiter, with two great startled staring eyes, and I didn’t wish to look at it” (Atwood 1996, p.315). Grace further elaborates on the characteristic physical change resulting from possession, as suggested by Ellenberger and Crabtree saying, “I felt light-headed, and detached from myself, as if I was not really present, but only there in body” (Atwood 1996, p.315). Later Grace Marks remarks: “and it was as if my hand was not mine at all, but only a husk or skin, with inside it another hand growing” (Atwood 1996, p.317). Commenting on the “forgotten” murders Grace continues, “and [I] did not feel that I had been present at them at all” (Atwood 1996, p.356). Like Joan of *Lady Oracle* and the land and animal possessed woman of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Grace Marks realizes as she gazes in the mirror that her face is not her own and that even the limbs of her body are growing other inhabitants.

While the medical practitioners of the novel continually discuss the nineteenth-century debate surrounding consciousness—the virtues of animal magnetism, hypnotism, and the theories of Mesmer and others—it is through the charlatan and carnival-act hypnotist that we first encounter the spirit of Mary Whitney unmediated by the consciousness of Grace Marks. The voice speaking from within the body of Grace Marks tells those gathered in the séance-like scene, “I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it” (Atwood 1996, p.401). The spirit further claims: “I only borrowed her clothing for a time” (Atwood 1996, p.402). Finally, the earlier mythology from the old-world is reaffirmed by the spirit as the source of the possession: “she forgot to open the window, and so I couldn’t get out” (Atwood 1996, p.403). Those gathered cast their medical explanations aside and state: “Two hundred years ago...it would have been a clear case of possession” and “an exorcism would have been in order” (Atwood 1996, p.405).

Atwood’s own theories of inspiration as coming from without and the instantly written poems of childhood, the creeping animals and landscape possession of her poetry, and the automatic writing sessions of her heroines suggest that the author is indeed possessed—writing and murdering. Again in *Negotiating with the Dead* Atwood wonders “who is in control of that hand at the moment of writing?” (2002, p.45). Atwood, in the end, is unwilling to choose between bodies and spirits, authors and murderers, rather allowing them all to haunt one great house of inspiration. The author suggests not only the guilt of the author as murderer but indeed the death of the author. The “author is the murderer” and the games are all played in the dark somewhere between dreams and hypnosis, with stories told on the holds of ships and candles lit to invoke the spirits of inspiration—they all tell the story and possess the writer.

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