

# Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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MARGARET ATWOOD'S writing has shown an ever-increasing engagement with the problematic of history and its representation. From the publication of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* in 1970, through *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), to one of Atwood's most recent novels, *Alias Grace* (1996), the questioning of history has been considered from, and developed in, various directions.<sup>1</sup> In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, poetry is the chosen mode of expression for the reconstruction of the historical Moodie's life; in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Robber Bride*, Atwood's uses of time manipulation and reflexivity of discourse are employed effectively to question the limits and validity of historical knowledge. Through these works, sewing, knitting, and other forms of handcrafting activities come to be associated with the representation of history, both as a concept and as a narrative account of the past. Nowhere is this more clearly the case than in *Alias Grace*, where one metaphor emerges as the privileged motif in Atwood's construction of history: that of the patchwork quilt.

Quilting, quilt-in-process, quilt-as-pattern-to-be-interpreted, women and their relationships to the quilt-as-object — the metaphor is extensive and is crafted into Atwood's version of the story of Grace Marks to a multitude of meaning-producing effects. Margaret Rogerson examines some of these effects by studying the patchwork motif in the novel, "situating it within the cultural and literary history of patchwork" (5-6). The history I am concerned with here, however, is not that of the patchwork as a cultural object, nor am I preoccupied with the question of historical veracity,<sup>2</sup> but rather, I intend to explore the present meaning effects produced by Atwood through her use of the patchwork quilt as a unifying metaphor in her rewriting of the history of Grace Marks.

Bound up in the effects of this rewriting is the construction of the identity of Grace,<sup>3</sup> a woman condemned for murder in nineteenth-century Ontario. When, for example, in the discourse attributed to her, Grace expresses the pleasure she feels at mastering the art of stitching, it becomes clear that this sense of pleasure spills over from the sphere of quilt-making into more personal concerns. Dr. Simon Jordan, present in the novel as Grace's privileged audience, comments on and reformulates Grace's words, bringing certain unacknowledged aspects of her discourse to Grace's (and the reader's) attention. In this reflexive movement, the quilting metaphor, which is at the centre of their discussion, participates in the postmodern structures involved in representing a version of the past.

Since the 1980s, Linda Hutcheon has been an influential theorist on the question of the historical impulse in postmodern writing. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she defines a certain body of postmodern novels as "historiographic metafiction": works in which the "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for [a] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5). *Alias Grace* may indeed be seen as an historiographic metafiction to the extent that it shows this theoretical self-awareness through the undissimulated piecing together of information from historical documents, thereby drawing attention to its modes of construction and representation.

Also involved in the fictional return to the past is the issue of the status of our knowledge of that past. Hutcheon formulates the question in terms of "how . . . documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with narrativization? The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past" (*Poetics* 122).<sup>4</sup> This interrogative stance points to the paradox that structures historiographic metafiction: that the desire to return to the past, to its resources and knowledge, is confronted by the awareness that there is no "real" access to the past, no key to unlock it, no guarantee of its authenticity. In *Alias Grace*, this paradox finds its most extensive expression through the image of the quilt, a fragmentary yet unified object whose metaphoric possibilities Atwood interrogates to the extent that the patchwork quilt comes to represent the determining paradox of the novel: that of making present meaning from traces of the past.

It is not, of course, sufficient to say that the treatment of historical matter is more about the present than about the past. A critical move must take us beyond this step to determine what sort of present meaning is being offered to the reader. Therefore, after situating the handcrafting

metaphor in the context of some of Atwood's earlier works, I will examine the way in which, through the signifying elements of the novel, the quilting metaphor in *Alias Grace* recasts history and in so doing, I will attempt to decode some of the dominant ideological positions that the novel takes up.

### Following the Threads Back

Quilting, as a domestic activity generally carried out by women, may easily be associated with sewing, knitting, or embroidery, to name but a few examples. The representation of handcrafting of this sort is relatively frequent in Atwood's fiction, and in several cases it becomes associated with ways of conceptualizing history from a female point of view. I have chosen a few examples of this thematic strategy to indicate the progressive development of its use, leading up to its fullest expression so far in *Alias Grace*.

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, based on the writings of Susanna Moodie, an English woman who immigrated to Canada in 1832, Atwood poetically reshapes the representation of Moodie's experience in terms of twentieth-century perspectives. In the first poem in the collection, the identity of Atwood's Susanna retains a relationship to its historical basis through a reference to the sort of activity Moodie does in fact describe herself doing in *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings* — for example, the work of sewing:

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 (7)

The verbal tense within which Susanna speaks is the present, creating immediacy of experience and offering an accessible point of identification for the reader. The function of the scissors, which would normally be involved in the cutting of fabric and thread, shifts to the cutting-out of a different sort of material, the photographic representation of the eyes of Susanna's double. In other words, she says it is a picture of herself, but Atwood is playing a fine line here between the historical and the poetic "Susannas." In the removal of "her eyes," Susanna, the twentieth-century figure, is

opening up a metaphorical point of access for the reader to the connections between Atwood's text and those of Susanna Moodie.

Past is therefore seen from a present-day perspective where the reader is invited to "see things through the eyes of" Atwood's Susanna, thanks to her scissor-work on the image. Although this seems to be a positive gesture, one of "opening things up," the violence of the act cannot be ignored. The process of re-presentation always involves a loss, which is also a form of mutilation. The use of the eyes in literature is commonly seen as the metaphorical site of personal identity (eye / I) and this sensitizes the reader to the fact that the scissor-work involved in the making of the new Susanna will not leave the historical Moodie intact.

In the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where history is viewed from a future perspective that turns today's present into tomorrow's past, life is regimented and compartmentalized to such an extent that domestic activity is not permitted for the Handmaids, who are entirely reserved for purposes of procreation. In this context, knitting or sewing are privileged activities reserved for the elite class of women (the Wives) and are shown to be a minor source of jealousy for the narrating handmaid: "I envy the Commander's Wife her knitting. It's good to have small goals that can be easily attained" (23). However, the narrator's ironic discourse prevents any real idealization or reader identification with this sort of activity, as she recontextualizes it within the values of the totalitarian regime: "There's a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. This is the kind of touch *they* like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values" (17; emphasis added). In this last phrase, "they" refers to the patriarchal society of Gilead, and there is an implicit critique of those ideologies that would divide labour along gender lines, keeping women essentially in the home occupied with domestic tasks, while men enjoy the more active roles in society.

In contrast with this "present time" structure of Gileadean society, the narrator recounts memories of the "past" (1970s) when women had already achieved a standard of living and of social recognition that allowed them choices, and when they were not necessarily interested in domesticity. She says, for example, "My mother did not knit, or anything like that," and she adds that her mother did sometimes leave chains of safety pins lying around, which the narrator interprets as a lingering reflex developed in a bygone era — "Throwbacks to domesticity" (214). The double perspective on domestic activity in *The Handmaid's Tale* serves to reinforce one of the dominant aspects of the text's discourse: the idea that meaning, and the meaning of any given activity always needs to

be contextualized, situated in a particular time, within traditions and cultures, and within ideological structures that shape what it is or is not possible for the “individual” to do at any given point in history.

It is not until *The Robber Bride* that the use of handcrafting activities becomes a specific and integral part of the structures being used to represent history. These images are most clearly present in the chapters “Onset” and “Outcome,” which function as prologue and epilogue to the narrated events. “Onset” constructs the notion of historical representation in the following way: “*Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled.* This is how Tony begins one of her more convoluted lectures, the one on the dynamics of spontaneous massacres. The metaphor is of weaving or else of knitting, and of sewing scissors” (3). Here, once again, we encounter the vocabulary of sewing, knitting, and scissor-work seen above, but this time it is being manipulated by a character who, due to her profession as a historian, is directly concerned by the questions of how and why one might reconstruct historical narratives. The aspect that Tony’s discourse insists on here is the arbitrary nature of the choices concerning what is being represented and the starting points from which these narratives begin “unfolding.” The character suggests that any starting point is possible (“Pick any strand”), and history may be approached from there.

Yet, what is the nature of the historical object being approached? We are told that it “comes unravelled,” but what are we to understand from this? Is it that, in the process of unravelling, the method of fabrication and the manner of its assembly is revealed in plain and accessible terms? Or does it “unravel” like a knitted garment, to the point where the initial object, once undone, ceases to exist as such? Is it a laying bare or is it an undoing? Atwood does not seem to choose between these different possibilities: between a concept of history seen as possessing an attainable centre that we might reach, if, like Theseus following Ariadne’s thread, we could follow the thread of history to the moment of its “origin,” and an opposing concept that views history through its constructedness within language, and recognizes its potential multiplicity of meaning and interpretation.

At the end of the novel, it is not the question of origins but rather that of historical purpose that Tony addresses. She suggests that “these histories may be ragged and threadbare, patched together from worthless leftovers, but to her they are also flags, hoisted with a certain jaunty insolence, waving bravely though inconsequently, glimpsed here and there through the trees, on the mountain roads, among the ruins, on the long march into chaos” (518-19). It is here that the signifiers begin generating the “quilt-to-be,” notably through the words “threadbare,” “patched

together,” and “leftovers.” Because this image insists on the “made” (from accessible materials) rather than “given” nature of historical narratives, the novel allows us to relativize the “truths” they offer. In evoking the flag as a metaphor for histories, Atwood, through the character of Tony, constructs a dominant discursive position that seems to be saying that their value resides in allowing us to mark the territory of our heritage through the histories we shape and fashion. It is in the affirmation of an identity and the courage necessary to defend one’s own perspective, if only because any particular version of history draws its own enemies (“bravely”), that history takes on value. This positive historical function, however, is somewhat undermined in the final words of the extract, “the long march into chaos,” where any notion of a progressive historical project (by learning from past errors, for example) is flatly refused.

Thus far, I have tried to point out the ways in which handicrafts are used in Atwood’s writing, notably the ways in which they may signify differently depending on the context in which they are situated. Atwood’s use of these images of knitting, sewing, and snipping increases progressively, each work building on the richness of its predecessors, to the extent that *The Robber Bride* may be seen as a turning point: it is there that the scissors and thread enter more specifically into the metaphorical questioning of history. It is also in *The Robber Bride* that the patchwork quilt and its function as a female flag (an image that is picked up on in *Alias Grace*) is first suggested. But it is not until *Alias Grace* that the patchwork quilt, and with it the sphere of domestic labour, is transformed from its relatively minor status to expand into an extended metaphor informing nearly all aspects of the novel’s construction, from the typographical layout of the pages to the details of its narrative organization.

### **Beneath the Quilt: Desire and Repetition in *Alias Grace***

As an instance of historiographic metafiction, the narrative of *Alias Grace* is partially based on traceable documents.<sup>5</sup> Faced with a large number of details related to the story of Grace Marks, details which are often in contradiction with each other, Atwood had to select, eliminate, order, assemble, and fill in absences. In so doing, her story (and here the analogy with the patchwork quilt is quite visible) becomes the meeting place and site of transformation for various historical fragments: some only partially legible, others more or less reliable; some highly subjective, some written for dramatic effect.<sup>6</sup> It becomes something new made from something already in existence, and declares this in its form,<sup>7</sup> rather than at-

tempting to conceal the process of stitching together. In this sense, Atwood's character, Grace, is a composite figure. Based on the life of Grace Marks, the construction of Grace also benefits from twentieth-century awareness through her focalizing of certain social problems such as the roles that society accords to women. In spite of its dependence on the past of documented history, *Alias Grace* is, therefore, in its appeal to the reader, a novel for the present.

The novel's appeal to the contemporary reader lies to some extent in its preoccupation with the reflexive process of deconstructing narrative strategies. A valid starting point might be to consider the element of randomness in the work of narrative fabrication, which is attributed to Grace and which she is made to comment upon. In thinking about the version of her life that she will offer to Simon Jordan, she wonders, "What should I tell him when he comes back? He will want to know about the arrest, and the trial, and what was said. Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour" (353). The events of her own story are not seen as clear and chronologically organized in her mind, but rather exist in a jumble of disorder. And yet, since Grace has been constructed as the storyteller / enunciator / analysand, and since she discovers that she does in fact wish to talk about herself, she considers how to go about it. The allusion to the selection of materials for a patchwork quilt is developed here through the references to "bits of whole cloth" and "rag bag." When Grace says that she could choose "this or that," the text is emphasizing the multiple possibilities of selection involved in any narration, as well as the intervention of aesthetic pleasure in the choices made; Grace will add "a touch of colour." She wants her story to please Simon Jordan and so she will tell him what "he will want to know." The element of randomness does therefore come up against a limiting factor: desire. In the narrative, Grace's storytelling requires the return of Jordan's desire, in the same way that, for the processing of textual meaning to be productive, both author and reader must partake in the pleasure of the text.

Related to this question of desire, the quilting metaphor also offers a way in for an analysis of the construction of the subject. Of interest to us here is the way in which the quilting metaphor operates as a metastructure informing this process. It seems clear that, through its stitching of assembled blocks of fabric onto backing through "a central layer of insulating material" (Rogerson 9), the sewing of the quilt offers anchorage points for the material that serves to pad it out. The weaving of the fiction may also



be seen as providing a form of narrative backing for the historical source documents, preventing them from coming apart into a disorderly mess of scraps, a threat of disintegration that is suggested in the first chapter of *Alias Grace* in the image “a drift of red cloth petals” (6).

Grace is a competent seamstress, and when she speaks of her sewing she says, “I watched my needle go in and out, although I believe I could sew in my sleep” (66). This formulation suggests a certain automaticity of gesture, but it is also an image of repetition and implies an increasing sense of mastery. Grace’s words seem to confirm this interpretation when she says: “I’ve been [sewing] since I was four years old, small stitches as if made by mice. You need to start very young to be able to do that, otherwise you can never get the hang of it” (66). Getting “the hang of it” is indeed another way of saying “learning to control,” “learning mastery.”<sup>8</sup>

The in (disappearance) / out (reappearance) movement of Grace’s needle also suggests an analogy with the recurring departure and return of Simon Jordan. Due to his regular visits at the beginning of Grace’s story — visits that come to give Grace a certain amount of pleasure — a form of structural “certainty-impression” is installed: “Simon Jordan will return.” He becomes the temporal point of reference in Grace’s universe. She affirms, “I used to count from my birthdays, and then I counted from my first day in prison. But now I am counting from the first day I spent in the sewing room with Dr. Jordan” (97). His appearance inaugurates a new era for Grace, and the mastery of her provisional self, in this context, will depend in part on the certainty that Simon Jordan will reappear. Grace’s words confirm this certainty: “Dr. Jordan came as *usual* in the afternoon” (242; emphasis added). His disappearance at the end of the novel, inscribed progressively into Grace’s discourse, will accompany the disappearance of the voice of the main character and, therefore, the end of the “story.”<sup>9</sup>

The sewing of the quilt in *Alias Grace* acquires a symbolic dimension of a more collective nature when Grace situates it within its social context. In Canada in the 1840s, the quilt was an important object in everyday life. Quite early on in her story told to Dr. Jordan, Grace develops a detailed social commentary on the question of the quilt. In the space of two pages in the novel, (160-61), the reader learns the following: that the patchwork quilt was an important part of a young woman’s trousseau; that in order to consider herself ready to be wed, she should possess three of them; that the pattern of the quilt depended on its intended usage — “those such as the Log Cabin and the Nine Patch were for everyday” (160); that they could be of different weights and materials depending on the season; in what manner they were stored for the winter, etc. At the



same time, Grace reflects upon the meaning given to these objects made by women:

And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags,<sup>10</sup> and then to lay them on the tops of beds? ... And then I have thought, it's for a warning... there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is where the act takes place between men and women... and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream and often where we die. (161)

Grace's reading of the meaning of the quilts is one that communicates a wary, sceptical view of life. On the whole, it seems built into the text in order to signal the extent to which life, for women in 1840, was difficult, notably because of the problem of mortality related to childbirth for women and children alike. Sexuality is also constructed negatively ("despair," "indignity") through a discourse that reaches beyond the knowledge acquired through the personal experience attributed to Grace. The overall effect of this is to bring out the idea that Grace, in her grasp of life through the objects familiar to her, has understood something of the hardships and injustice experienced by women of her era, and of the causes of these trials.

Notably, Atwood does not use the word "quilt" in the above extract at all, the function of the quilt being metaphorically represented by a "flag." As a signifier, "flag" has certain general connotations. It represents, for example, the idea of belonging to a group (national or team flags) or of claiming territorial rights. In these instances, the values associated with the group are condensed and displaced onto the flag, making it a highly symbolic object, which may be burnt, hoisted or lowered, laid over a coffin, or effaced (the white flag of surrender). In contrast to the quilt, seen mostly as an object-in-process in the novel, the flag, like the stitches, is a metaphor that tends to hold down meaning. For Grace, the quilt-into-flag speech seems to be a pause in process, a moment of stock-taking, where the meaning of the quilt becomes that of communal experience, under the "banner" of Woman. As a territorial marker, it also suggests the psychological appropriation of this communal experience by Grace. And, as Grace says, it is a "warning" flag, presumably to let other women (future generations) know what dangers they may be exposed to.

What is striking at the end of this long exposé is that Simon Jordan

has not been the least bit interested in the quilt as a cultural object. Rather, he has focussed on the unsaid of Grace's discourse, and has noticed (in keeping with his portrayal as a doctor of pre-psychoanalysis) that she is frightened of her own sexuality: "And so, Grace, he says, looking up, you consider a bed to be a dangerous place?" (161). Grace, who is not aware of having revealed anything of herself, but only of having spoken of objects outside of herself, immediately becomes wary: "I should not speak to him so freely, and decide I will not, if that is the tone he is going to take" (161). The paradox that Atwood sets up here is that, even as Grace's discourse attempts to arrest process and fix meaning, Simon Jordan's position operates as a deflector, shifting the reader's focus onto Grace's unconscious discourse, and in so doing, opening up access to process once again.

Beyond the immediate tension developed between Grace and Simon Jordan over the question of the quilt, the above extract points to an important aspect of Atwood's writing strategy in *Alias Grace*: while the interest in the question of Grace's possible participation in the Kinnear / Montgomery murders is focussed through Simon Jordan, Grace's discourse is anchored more firmly in daily life and its concerns. Through this discourse, Atwood expresses, and invites the reader to join in, her enthusiasm for an epoch, a culture, a past that is shared national property. The quilting motif, very much a part of the Canadian cultural inheritance, offers the reader one form of access to these elements. Each of the fifteen sections of the novel is introduced by an image of a quilt pattern taken from traditional Canadian designs.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the pattern chosen for any given section also functions as the title of the section, so that section five, for example, is called "Broken Dishes" and its cover page bears the design of the corresponding quilt pattern. To some extent, therefore, the titles of the chapters were determined by the limited number of existing Canadian patterns. It is interesting in this context to see what content Atwood gives to these culturally specific forms.

### Interpreting the Patterns

I shall stay with the section called "Broken Dishes" to examine this question. Just before Grace's family leaves Ireland to immigrate to Canada, the character called Aunt Pauline gives Grace's mother a china teapot.<sup>12</sup> Grace remembers: "And my mother thanked her very much, and said how good she had been to her always, and that she would treasure the teapot forever, in remembrance of her" (111). However, during the trip, Grace's mother dies and "Aunt Pauline's teapot fell off onto the floor,

and the teapot broke” (122). The repetition of the word “teapot,” where the word “it” would be expected in its second occurrence, draws the reader’s attention to the importance that the object has acquired in the narrator’s mind.

Her description of the teapot as “Aunt Pauline’s teapot” operates a metonymic shift from the notion “my mother’s teapot” towards the idea “the teapot which Aunt Pauline gave my mother,” to the stated form “Aunt Pauline’s teapot.” This nomination evokes with great economy the symbolic value of the broken object: the shattered teapot represents the traumatic rupture of immigration which, for Grace, will be social (the loss of extended family ties), cultural (adapting to new codes of behaviour in a new country) and psychological (notably because of the death of her mother, which may also symbolize the loss of the “mother country”). The choice of the teapot, strongly connoted in its English cultural aspect, concentrates these losses symbolically onto a single object. The “English teapot” breaks into fragments, and it is the Canadian quilt that metonymically picks up the pieces and starts giving them form again, but the form will be rooted in the new context of the immigrant experience. In this way, through the use of the quilt pattern “Broken Dishes,” Atwood manages to relate the quilt form to events that fill out Grace’s past and which, at the same time, inscribe that past within a historical context important to Canada: the constitution of its population through immigration and the deaths and hardships that went along with it.

The activity of cultural interpretation is a constant possibility for the reader of *Alias Grace*, but it is also a facet of Grace’s discourse. From her own understanding of the quilt patterns emerges her particular vision and philosophy of life, which is both reflexive and pragmatic. The anecdote that Grace recounts concerning the quilt pattern “Attic Windows” is a good example of this: “And the other quilt was called Attic Windows; it had a great many pieces, and if you looked at it one way it was closed boxes, and when you looked at it another way the boxes were open, and I suppose the closed boxes were the attics and the open ones were the windows; and that is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light” (162). The act of interpretation is quite clearly implied in this passage. Grace’s discourse communicates variability of perspective and therefore suggests the diversity and the instability of positions offered to “the one who looks.”

Related to what one sees is the question of how one looks at things. The syntagmatic chain is obviously a crucial element in the structuring of meaning in general, and in this instance, of perspective. If we consider the

last line of the passage cited above, for example, where the binary opposites “light” and “dark” are evoked, we notice that “light” has been given the privileged position of being the final signifier in the syntagmatic chain. This structure is a recurring feature of Atwood’s writing and is also encountered at the end of the narrator’s story in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (307). Another example of this may be observed in “The Grave of the Famous Poet” from the collection *Dancing Girls*: “Inside I plant the flints, upright in tidy rows, like teeth, like flowers” (92). The strategy here would seem to be one of offering interpretative options that include both the negative and positive aspects of a situation, with the positive aspect generally placed in the final position, thereby foregrounding it. In *Alias Grace*, this notion of perspective also refers to the question of Grace’s guilt: her subject position is constructed in such a way as to suggest that her life, which Simon Jordan is trying to solve like a riddle, is not unlike these patterns. There is no final, absolute, right perspective; there are only different ways of understanding. And of course, we are being reminded that this also applies to all interpretative practices, whether they are historical, literary, or other.

The metaphor of interpretative choices does not stop there. It spreads and repeats itself, taking on different forms, but without severing the initial link with the anecdote of the “Attic Windows.” First of all, Grace explains that she had initially misunderstood the name of the pattern and had believed it was “Attic Widows.” Here, the misunderstanding is based on a phonetic difference. The fact that Grace does not hear the word “windows” but “widows” changes her understanding of the quilt’s meaning. This misunderstanding is underscored by the fact that Grace and Mary Whitney, another servant in the same household, share maid’s quarters in the attic: “I was put in the attic, at the very top of the back stairs, and shared a bed with Mary Whitney” (148). Although the two young women are not widows, Grace’s slip of perception highlights what they do have in common with widows, notably, the fact of being unmarried, and of having a particular relationship with death. Their attic chambers embody their status as maids, and an unmarried woman is often called “an old maid.” Mary will end up dying because of her status as an unwed woman, forced to have an abortion, and Grace will spend a good part of her existence in prison for having committed a murder. Death and the absence of a love-partner, the two traits that tend to define widows, will come to be important aspects in the lives of both of these very young women.

They are, of course, unaware of this when they discover the quilt in question, and they can therefore laugh quite heartily over this confusion

between “Windows” and “Widows.” This provides the context of yet another misunderstanding: “We could not stop laughing... We buried our faces against the quilts, and by the time [Mrs. Honey] had opened the door Mary was composed again, but I was face down with my shoulders heaving, and Mrs. Honey said, What is the matter, girls, and Mary stood up and said, Please Mrs. Honey, it’s just that Grace is crying about her dead mother” (163). Here, the duality of laughing and crying, joy and sadness, is concentrated in one single image, the “heaving” of Grace’s shoulders. This movement may be associated with either one or the other of the extreme emotions, and it is not rare that the excess of one provokes the onset of the other. The intensity of their reactions is perhaps an indication of the return into consciousness of the repressed feeling that, as I suggested earlier, they themselves are the “attic widows.” Once again, it is the act of interpretation that dominates in this anecdote, but the organ of misperception is, this time, the eye (of Mrs. Honey), as well as the ear.

A final ramification of the “Attic Windows” image occurs immediately after Grace recounts the above incident to Simon Jordan. Thinking about the word “widow,” Grace considers more seriously what it must be like to be a widow in society: “I thought about how the men would wink and nod when a young and rich widow was mentioned, and how a widow was a respectable thing to be if old and poor, but not otherwise, which is quite strange when you come to consider it” (163). The composite nature of Atwood’s construction of Grace is apparent here. On the one hand, she is seen to be a rather naive woman, yet in this passage, she is also shown to have understood a certain number of things about life. The privileged first-person narrating position is being used to indicate, once again, the terms of a situation approached from two perspectives. The social status of a woman was, and clearly is, variable depending on her age and her resources. Young and rich, a widow could become the prey of unscrupulous men, but beyond a certain age, and without money, a widow would be “respected” to the extent that she would be in a pitiable, innocuous situation, beyond exploitation in monetary or sexual terms.

Through the example of the quilt pattern “Attic Windows,” the reader is engaged in a process of reflection on the question of interpretative choices. Indeed, the fact that the rewriting of the historical Grace Marks’s biography is effected through a series of oppositions — linguistic (window / widow), psychological (laughing / crying), and sociological (young widows / old widows) — is symptomatic of the influence (conscious and unconscious) of dominant discourses in current literary theory: the “self”-centred three-directional approach that includes lin-

guistics, psychoanalysis, and ideology. Through Grace's situation in society, a situation which is characterized by her gender, her poverty and later, her imprisonment, she develops a personal perspective on social life rooted in the material conditions of her existence.

### The Self as Trinity

In the basic structure of the quilt metaphor, there is an underlying ambiguity that is one of the constants in Atwood's work: the tension between the "one" and the "many."<sup>13</sup> The patchwork quilt (like the Canadian mosaic) is particularly well-suited to represent this tension, since, as a work in progress, it acknowledges diversity, yet as a finished product, it becomes a cover, a blanket; something which, to function effectively, must emphasize its unity. The seams work in this double-edged way; like the quilt patterns which may be interpreted differently depending on one's perspective, the seams may be seen as indicators either of joining or of separation. I would tend to agree with Linda Hutcheon's view of these tensions in Atwood's writing when she affirms that "the complex relationship between these [paradoxal] elements is not one of simple opposition so much as fruitful confrontation" (*Canadian* 157). The quilt may be seen as an object of unity in spite of fragmentation, or as an object of division in spite of assembly. The metaphor is deliberately ambiguous, allowing for and even encouraging the simultaneous consideration of opposing points of view. However, both perspectives do not receive equal weight and endorsement in the novel's discourses. With a view to determining the relative value accorded to each position, I will turn to the end of *Alias Grace* and ask of it: what subject position(s) does the text proffer for the reader?

The novel ends with Grace in the process of finishing the last quilt. In a letter that she addresses in her mind to Simon Jordan, who she imagines may be dead ("if you are still in the land of the living" [441]), Grace sews the quilt that will unite her with the two symbolically important women in her life: Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery. The fact that two of these women have died at the hands of fellow human beings (Mary Whitney's death was due to a badly performed abortion, and Nancy was murdered) and that they are shown in the novel to have integrated Grace's self (a form of schizophrenia seems to be the diagnosis which the men discussing Grace's condition agree upon)<sup>14</sup> does not augur well for the former prisoner. So, when she includes in her quilt pattern — the first she ever makes for herself — pieces of cloth belonging

to each of the three women, she is constructing a new reference point for herself — solidarity among women victims:

But three of the triangles in my quilt will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away.

I will embroider around each one with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern.

And so we will all be together. (460)

The solution to the alienating effect of her situation (married to a man she has neither chosen nor loves) is seen in metaphorical terms in the assembling of fragments, each of which represents a link with one of the three women who suffer from their social and sexual conditions in the novel.

Yet this notion of female solidarity<sup>15</sup> has to be seen within the context of two of the women having lost their lives, with, indeed, the insinuation during the hypnosis sequence that Mary controlled Grace's mind to carry out the murder of Nancy (401). Although Atwood may be aiming at the demystification of female goodness (an important element in *The Robber Bride*), this is not the dominant effect of the female grouping in this instance. Rather than solidarity for social progress, Grace-become-quilt incarnates the unity of psychological recuperation; Mary and Nancy lose their individuality and become dehumanized fragments which make up part of who Grace is.<sup>16</sup> That of course only begs the further question of what sort of identity is being constructed for Grace and for the reader through the "flag" of ineffectual three-in-oneness contained in the final sentence of the novel, "And so we will all be together."

This Trinity-like construction, whose main intertext, the Christian Trinity, is referred to explicitly by Grace who sings, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity" (33), as well as by the character Jeremiah/Du Pont ("Consider the Trinity" [406]), tends paradoxically to both undermine and to reaffirm the notion of the unified individual, or the essential self; it undermines it through its representation of a self which includes others. This is, of course, a crucial element in the project of progressive (as opposed to liberal) humanism which has come to dominate theoretical debates in the human sciences since the 1960s. And yet, like the flag metaphor, the Trinity



is a closing down of process; it is an attempt to both anchor and define identity. Because it is inextricably bound up with the transcendental, the Trinity becomes an irresistible unifying force, suggesting that essentialism is not fundamentally modified nor destabilized by the elements of its diversity. No matter how many parts make up the One, that One remains whole and united.

In *Alias Grace*, this conflict between the one and the many produces indeterminacy of ending, a narrative feature also found in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* and which is practically an Atwood trademark. The heroines of these works, largely centred in their refusals of the societal roles open to them, are unable to create new options. There is a distinct fatalism about their situation where, having achieved a sense of heightened awareness of the conditions of their existence, they seem to be saying, "Well, as for the future, there's nothing I can do but wait and see what happens." These women do not become active agents in their own lives, only more perceptive observers. Thus, when Grace realizes at the end of the novel that there is something growing in her, and that it is either a late pregnancy or a tumour, she thinks, "It is strange to know you carry within yourself either a life or a death, but not to know which one. Though all could be resolved by consulting a doctor, I am most reluctant to take such a step; so I suppose time alone must tell" (459). Constructed from a late-twentieth-century point of view, this "refusal to know" is a conservative stance. In this sense, what the ending of the novel seems to affirm is the inability to come to terms with one's personal limits, with one's own mortality, and therefore with one's need for the Other.<sup>17</sup> Grace will remain closed in upon herself, even if it kills her. In similar ways, the other novels cited above also come to an end when the first-person narrator reaches an impasse: to continue the story would mean looking for new ways of being with others.

In the final pages, Grace carries on quilting, making but minimal changes to the traditional patterns. First of all, she acknowledges the phallic dominance of patriarchy — "On my Tree of Paradise, I intend to put a border of snakes entwined" (459). This is an ambiguous gesture in the sense that it may represent Grace's greater awareness of the opposing forces in society, yet by including them in her quilt as part of the framework, she reinforces the place and function of patriarchy, undermining her own position. The second change she makes to her view-of-life quilt is to substitute a female (essentialist) Trinity for previous male ones; perhaps an adequate solution for the nineteenth-century context of Grace's story, but hardly a progressive model for the novel's own time. The ab-

sence of any dynamism in this ending gives us the impression that Grace is neither truly alive nor truly dead; still a prisoner, she is now the lady in the castle, the lady in waiting, waiting for nothing, sewing her life away.

## Conclusion

A pertinent metaphor for a structural paradox, the patchwork quilt in *Alias Grace* represents the postmodern (contradictory) desire for unity and diversity, for freedom and security, for process and closure. Because of its fragmented composition, it may be seen as lacking fundamental unity, and yet, through its functions of covering, concealing, of providing comfort and warmth, as well as through the regular repetition of its design, it offers security. This structural paradox may well be the generating tension which drives the narrative of Atwood's historical fiction, but it is also a form of indecisiveness. In *Alias Grace* and in other novels by Atwood, this indecisiveness leads to endings which, although skilfully crafted, seem to collapse in on themselves in terms of the sociopolitical concerns these works raise.

Like the dark and light patches of the quilt, Grace is a contrasted figure, and what the reader makes of her will depend partly on the (ideological, gender, class) positions from which she is read. Nonetheless, the dominance of her presence as narrating voice in the story tends to gather her up into a coherent unity, a form of subjective sovereignty that is supported by the metaphors of the flag and the Trinity. Not unlike the impression created by a finished patchwork quilt, what we are left with most forcefully at the end of the novel is therefore the effect of a unified, patterned whole. Of course, momentary "unity" of the self, in the form of personal conviction, is a prerequisite for the individual to be able to take action. But this is not what occurs here. When Atwood imposes closure on her dialogue with historical traces, the progressive possibilities of meaning opened up in the course of the novel are not transformed into action, or even into hopeful anticipation, but rather they, with Grace, subside into the regressive field of essentialism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Margaret Atwood's latest novel to date, is also concerned with the theme of history and its modes of representation in the present.

<sup>2</sup> This concern is the focus of an article by Judith Knelman.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article, any reference to the historical Grace Marks or Susanna Moodie will include their surnames, whereas the fictional or poetic characters developed by Atwood will be designated by their first names only.

<sup>4</sup> Or to put it in Atwood's terms: "how do we know what we think we know?" (*In Search* of 8).

<sup>5</sup> Atwood gives references for her sources in the novel's afterword.

<sup>6</sup> As an example for each of these qualifying statements, see the letter from Duggan (partially legible), the anonymous *History* (more or less reliable), Harrison (highly subjective), and Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* (189-210) (dramatic effect).

<sup>7</sup> For example, through the use of direct quotations from the confessions of both Grace Marks and James McDermott in epigraphs to different sections of the novel.

<sup>8</sup> Within Grace's discourse, "the hang of it" also seems to refer back to the punishment which was originally intended for her: death by hanging.

<sup>9</sup> For another perspective on language and desire in *Alias Grace*, see March (73-79).

<sup>10</sup> Here, the image of the quilt as a flag, which was first suggested by Tony in *The Robber Bride* is repeated and expanded.

<sup>11</sup> Atwood cites her sources for these patterns in her acknowledgements at the end of the novel.

<sup>12</sup> There are no documentary sources for the events preceding Grace Marks's departure from Ireland. This is clearly one of the areas in which Atwood "felt free to invent" (*Alias Grace*, author's afterword 467).

<sup>13</sup> Practically all of Atwood's heroines are situated in the margins in relation to dominant societal values, and their dilemmas are often concerned with trying to find a place in society without sacrificing their individuality.

<sup>14</sup> In the section entitled "Pandora's Box," just after Grace has been hypnotized, certain phrases such as "a clear case of possession," "a neurological condition" and "double consciousness" are pronounced by the men. However, the only judgement which rallies their opinions is that of "dédoublement." Simon Jordan suggests "[that] the subject, when in a somnambulistic trance, display[s] a completely different personality than when awake, the two halves having no knowledge of each other"; this commentary is not contested by Reverend Verringer who adds "stranger things have happened." Du Pont also seems to accept this proposition: "two distinct personalities, which may coexist in the same body and yet have different sets of memories altogether, and be, for all practical purposes, two separate individuals. If that is, you'll accept ... that we are what we remember." Jordan completes this remark by saying: "Perhaps ... we are also — preponderantly — what we forget," and at this point his discourse is clearly pointing in the direction of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, particularly in its repressive function (All quotes 406). Atwood seems to be playing around here with time frames, constructing a retroactive moment whose function is to anticipate future developments which will lead to the beginnings of psychoanalysis. In relation to these time frames, Judith Knelman notes that there are patently anachronistic elements in Atwood's presentation of the medical knowledge and theories of the time.

<sup>15</sup> This is also explored in *The Robber Bride* through the three female characters in battle with the fiendish Zenia.

<sup>16</sup> A similar structure, that of working female solidarity into the handmade products of domestic occupation, is present in the poem "A Red Shirt":

It may not be true  
That one myth cancels another.  
Nevertheless, in a corner  
Of the hem, where it will not be seen,  
where you will inherit  
it, I make this tiny  
stitch, my private magic. (*Poems* 50)

There is, both in this poem and in the final image of *Alias Grace*, the desire to dissimulate, or to

"blend in" the secret message which one woman might leave for another. This form of 'secret code' is also worked into *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the handmaid who precedes the narrator 'Offred' writes the mysterious "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" on the inside of a closet. Although secret codes carry the pleasure of transgression, there is of course the danger that they may never be discovered and hence remain ineffective. Certainly the handmaid who wrote the message was not saved by the code, since she hanged herself. In this perspective, the secret codes are but a minimal form of defence which may do nothing more than create a solidarity of the eternally oppressed.

<sup>17</sup>The tendency towards essentialism which I have suggested in my reading of the Trinity structure, as well as the consistent resistance to recognizing one's need for others in Atwood's work have also been commented on by Frank Davey in an analysis of *Cat's Eye*: "The novel's emphasis on a 'cat's eye' kernel of inner being, together with its satire of social conventions of all kinds, leaves very little room in it for any sort of social affiliation. People who group together here are invariably suspected of doing so out of enthusiasm for trendy projects or causes" (233).

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