Displaced: Canadian Mindscapes in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Lidia Mihaela NECULA*

Abstract

Simply put, hyperreality is used to denote something that does not yet exist in the sense of being undeniably demonstrable. According to Jean Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation *(1981), hyperreality is a state where reality has been replaced by simulacra, meaning that what is real and what is fictional is indistinguishable. Equally, hyperreality starts as soon as one replaces the question of 'if' by 'when'. Therein, in Margaret Atwood's* Alias Grace*, it becomes quite difficult to establish whether or not Grace Marks is innocent, pure and wrongly accused of the horrible murders of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Likewise, Grace's memory (which, strangely enough, is referred to in terms of its absence rather than its presence since she is supposedly suffering from amnesia) is some sort of virtual reality, an entire world in itself, where Grace can appear to be anything she wants to be. By constantly overlapping the Canadian landscape, Grace's subconscious enables a window into the world within, one of the past, the present and the future, some sort of interface between three different psychological entities with their corresponding and symbolic representations of the landscape.*

The present paper looks into the novel from behind the lens of the Canadian landscape (although scarce in occurrences) as a metonymy of hyperreal mindscapes: doubly displaced both geographically (she is an Irish immigrant), and mentally (she seems to be manifesting a form of multiple personality disorder), Grace simultaneously exists in hyperreal mindscapes, mimicking and replicating, stating and questioning, challenging readers who are left adrift in a textual world where the boundaries between reality and representation become blurred.

Keywords: *hyperreality, simulacra, fiction, Canadian landscape, hyperreal mindscapes, geographical displacement, mental displacement*

Crafting Selves

Any country's landscape, past or present, imaginary or real, re-created or re-presented, might be viewed as an emblematic site and thus a key player in the heritage process of cultural identity; it seeps inside of us. Attempting the portrayal of the Canadian landscapes recurrent in Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* means re-mapping the geographical territories of a country that is *absent* in the *present* in its past form, i.e. nineteenth-century Canada, and which, by means of fallible scraps of memories or subjective portraying

* "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania, lidia.necula@ugal.ro

ficelles, help render the picture of a hyperreal Canadian landscape, a multiplicity of mindscapes that allow for the interplay of such forces as identity and memory.

Seen like this, it becomes clear that we internalize our surroundings so that the line between out there and in here dissolves entirely: landscapes are not echoes coming from the world, nor are they mirrors that we hold up to the world, reflecting its shapes and structures immediately and without distortion, but rather fabrications of our own imagination, creations of our own making, even though this does not occur entirely of our own choosing.

A character in its own right, the Canadian landscape in *Alias Grace* emphasizes the significance of the past in the contemporary construction of Grace Marks's identity narrative and draws attention to the powerful role of the past events of the nineteenth century as sites of cultural heritage.

The re-presentation of Canadian landscapes is mediated through particular circumstances both of the maker (as is Grace's case, who reconstructs from memory) and of the viewer (as is Simon's case, who is an observer); as such, the convergent representations of the landscapes are never the result of a private experience with nature, nor is it a one-sided experience especially since there is this duality of the re-projecting narrative threads that converge to wholly recreate the moment of its beholding, the same simulacrum which Baudrillard defines as that which replaces reality with its representations.

The plot

In her novel, Margaret Atwood rewrites the much-disputed story of Canada's infamous nineteenth-century convicted murderess Grace Marks, a guilty, cold-blooded conniving woman to some, and an innocent victim to others.

A sample of historical fiction to the point where historical records were indeed accessible, Atwood's novel seems to bring to the fore issues of gender and class roles, identity, truth, and the nature of memory, without apparently looking too much into portrayals of landscapes. And yet, set against a fuzzy background, although scarce, these portrayals of the Canadian landscape are an ever-evolving and changing organism that grows in shape and intensity as Grace's story gets told, being mapped in the same analeptical order as Grace's story, retracing that which is absent (bordering on Grace's memory and all that was once lived and has become a mere representation) in that which is present (her own re-presentations of the landscape outside).

On the side of history

Keeping to the historical facts, Thomas Kinnear, a wealthy landowner, and Nancy Montgomery, his housekeeper and mistress, are murdered in July 1843. Grace, working as a maid for Mr Kinnear on the day of the killings, claims that she has no recollection of what happened, despite being present at the house at the time. Only 16 years old, Grace is on trial alongside Kinnear's former stable hand, James McDermott, and she is eventually put on death row for her role in the murder of Thomas Kinnear. Grace's life is spared and her death sentence is changed to life imprisonment thanks to the advocacy of her attorney and sympathetic reform groups. Found guilty, James McDermott is hung on November 21st, 1843.

In 1859, a group of reformers and spiritualists seeking a pardon for Grace ask for the help of the young, ambitious and promising American medical doctor, Simon Jordan, who travels to Kingston Penitentiary to examine Grace. The reform group relies heavily on his findings for their petition. Simon's motivations are complicated because he is passionate about the emerging field of psychiatric therapies. In assisting Grace to recall the murders, he aims to get at the truth and prove his methods correct. Additionally, Simon plans to use Grace as an example to attract wealthy, powerful patrons to his next project, a mental health centre, after demonstrating success in his treatment of her.

On the side of fiction

Grace's first-person narrative is intermingled with Dr Simon Jordan's third-person one. The novel begins in 1851 and covers a period of 25 years, but most of the events take place in 1859 and are told under the form of analepses which Grace unfolds to Simon. Part of the story is told in letters, many of which are exchanged between Simon and his mother, Simon and his friend Edward Murchie, or Simon and Reverend Verringer, and which can be said to function like ficelles that serve to round off not only the rest of Grace's story, but also the missing hues and brushes of colour of the Canadian landscape. Reality exists but is distorted in representation, as in their re-contextual-izations, these landscape portrayals present a glamourised and, at times, idealised image.

Landscaping Canada through Irish lenses

Re-constructed mainly from their absence, Grace's portrayals of the Canadian landscape are of a dynamic entity type subjected to abrupt changes and unpredictable disruptions: the latter is construed as a living and breathing organism with a geographical body (predominantly made up of

forms of relief such as Ontario Lake, hills and valleys) and a more sensorial body (made up of the weather phenomena, the flora or the fauna occurring in certain areas).

And yet, they are eloquently present in their absence! With a view to clearing her name and proving her innocence, Grace is recounting past events entangled in an amnesic memory: her early perceptions and later re-projections of the landscape are constantly overlapped by the journey back in time, which opens a door into her subconscious, thus allowing for a gaze at the world within, the Holy trinity of her past, present and future lives that are accommodated by "her earthly shell. Her fleshly garment" (Atwood 2019: 468)

In limbo

Physically trapped in the present of 1851, by which time she will have been imprisoned for 16 years, Grace Marks, "daughter of John Marks […] a Stone-mason by trade" (110) is currently working in the house of the Governor's wife where she is mostly observed from the standpoint of curiosity as her seeming yet intriguing madness endows her with qualities that almost make her enviable:

> she manifests 'a composure that a duchess might envy', she is a woman 'thoroughly self-contained', 'her voice is low and melodious, and more cultivated than is usual in a servant – a trick she has learned no doubt through her long service in the house of her social superiors; and she retains barely a trace of the Northern Irish accent with which she must have arrived, although that is not so remarkable, as she was only a child at the time and has now spent more than half her life on this continent. (154)

Seemingly musing on issues that are hardly expected to be of interest to a low-class ignorant and prisoner like her (although, according to Mary Whitney's views, it is better to be an ignorant, as the difference between stupid and ignorant is that the ignorant could learn), Grace is obviously, yet not unexpectedly, above her station as she has the bright mind and the sharp eye to notice things and bring to the fore issues of gender, class and identity as they come out while attempting the reconstruction of her memory jigsaw puzzle. To her, all those women gazing at and observing her

> are like swans, drifting along on unseen feet; or else like the jellyfish in the waters of the rocky harbour near our house, when I was little, before I made the long sad journey across the ocean. They were bell-shaped and ruffled, gracefully waving and lovely under the sea; but if they washed up on the

> beach and dried out in the sun there was nothing left of them. And that is what the ladies are like: mostly water. (24)

Displaced, having been "in various places" (110) in Canada, Grace seems to have lost her Irish linguistic identity as she "retains barely a trace of the Northern Irish accent" (154), but her memory does manage to preserve some traces of her former geographic Irish identity that she keeps in her re-presentation of "the waters of the rocky harbour near" her house. (24)

Landscaping her own Canada

Grace's first perception of the Canadian landscape lies more on the side of frightening, "all rocks and trees" (142) which "looked dark and forbidding, and not fit for human habitation at all; and there were clouds of birds that screamed like lost souls, and I hoped that we would not be compelled to live in such a place" (142).

By constantly overlapping the Irish landscape over the Canadian one, Grace attempts to fill in the empty spaces of her memory.

> What I remember is a small rocky harbour by the sea, the land green and grey in colour, with not much in the way of trees; and for that reason, I was quite frightened when I first saw large trees of the kind they have here, as I did not see how any tree could be that tall. I don't recall the place very well, as I was a child when I left it; only in scraps, like *a plate that's been broken*. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in. (118-9)

Grace's portrayals of the Canadian landscape, projected through her eyes as makers of images, are rounded off from the information we get from Simon, as an observer of images, and his epistolary descriptions which have the role of ficelles, since they both textualize and reproject *inside* that which is *outside*. Thus, from such *witness* letters, we learn of Canada's "splendid picnics" (28) which are taken on the "shores of bluest Lake Ontario" (28), or of "sturdy Oak(s)" (28) entwined by the "loving Ivy Vine" (28) in the summertime; or that in wintertime everything is "covered with snow" (59) and that "far north and on the lakeshore" (59) the weather can hardly be good for the lungs, "as it must be very chill and damp" (59).

For the most part, the geographical boundaries of Grace's story keep pendulling back and forth Kingston, Toronto and Richmond Hill, each location representing a stage in her life or an alternative hyperreality she creates: Kingston/ the Penitentiary, Toronto/ Grace's years with Mary

Whitney, and Richmond Hill/ Grace's years at Mr Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, all of which do help recreate a vivid and colourful picture of nineteenth-century Canada.

> I did worry about being out in the country, rather than in town, as I was now used to Toronto life - there was so much to see while walking out on errands, and sometimes there were shows and fairs, although you had to watch for thieves there; and outdoor preachers, and always a boy or a woman singing on the street for pennies. I'd seen a man eat fire, and another that could throw his voice, and a pig that could count, and a dancing bear with a muzzle on, only it was more like lurching, and the ragamuffins poked it with sticks. Also, it would be muddier in the country, without the fine raised sidewalks; and no gas lighting at night, nor grand shops, and so many church spires, and smart carriages, and new brick banks, with pillars. But I reflected that if I did not like it in the country I could always come back. (233-234)

Kingston

A "watery place" (84) in the spring, Simon's Kingston is "not a large place" (87), and its "streets are muddy and cluttered with horse dung" (87). It is "not a very prepossessing town" since, having "burned to the ground some two decades ago" (60) it "has been rebuilt with charmless dispatch" (60) and, in the hope that it will "make them less prone to conflagrations" (60), its "new buildings are of stone or brick" (60).

There is one centre around which both Simon and Grace keep revolving, and that is the Penitentiary: to Simon, the Penitentiary embodies the palpable reality he perceives as a treasure hunt intended to reveal secrets such as those of the "Greek temple"(60) or the "pagan god" (60) the inhabitants of the town worship, but to Grace the Penitentiary embodies the unpalpable, unseen mindscape, a space of her own, which she subconsciously but artificially recreates as an alternative to her dwelling space in the present: "I sit down on the straw mattress. It makes a sound like shushing. Like water on the shore. I shift from side to side, to listen to it. I could close my eyes and think I'm by the sea, on a dry day without much wind" (36). Grace's reality does not exist but it is hidden through a re-presentation that feigns a reality, her entire world is a simulacrum, a sign which has no semblance of reality whatsoever but offers her an escape from the ongoing reality of her current situation that has been replaced by false images, a mindscape, wherein it becomes impossible to distinguish between the real and the unreal.

And yet, Kingston is not a mindscape for Grace alone, as it gradually becomes one for Simon as he sees himself trapped in a reputation-staining

affair with his landlady which will further attract a negative portrayal of the city, metonymically represented by the means of the "dank miasmas" (151) which will "grow too hot" (151), and "the summer diseases" (151) in keeping with the psychologically uncomfortable situation he let himself dragged in.

Toronto

Accordingly, the Canadian landscape which is thus portrayed reveals itself as a metonymy of Grace's hyperreal mindscapes. Grace is doubly displaced. Geographically, she is an Irish immigrant, and the very few reminiscences she has of the Irish landscape overlap situations in the present and, until she reaches Toronto, she seems to be trapped in some sort of Limbo, a place of in-betweenness with no clearly assigned borders. Mentally, Grace seems to be manifesting a form of multiple personality disorder: apparently split in three and a vessel for the spirit of her dead mother (connected with by her shawl which she used to wrap her bundle of winter clothes), her dead friend Mary Whitney (whom she exchanges garments with) and her former and dead employer, Nancy Montgomery (whose piece of cloth she keeps from her dress).

> But three of the triangles in my Tree 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 of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (534)

Grace simultaneously exists in hyperreal mindscapes, mimicking, replicating and remoulding her virtual selves constantly challenging readers who are left adrift in a textual world where the boundaries between reality and representation become blurred, making it difficult to distinguish between *reality*, and *her own simulation* of *reality* as *fantasy* seems more *real* than *reality* as the *image* has more *poise* than the *original*.

Of Memories, overlapping edges of time and peonies

There is one powerful symbol which is recurrent throughout the novel: peonies.

> Out of the gravel there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling

> and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground. In the one instant before they come apart, they are like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's, that first day, only those were white. (5)

This is one of the opening scenes in the novel and it becomes difficult, if not impossible to overlook it: by their association with the snail (the tentative and cautious subconscious part hiding away Grace's *lost memories*), peonies become some hyperreal representation of Grace's subconscious world, a mindscape which is artificially recreated and sterile, just like those peonies which "had a dry feel" (364-365) and Grace knew they were "made of cloth" (364-365).

Peonies seem to perform the function of an opiate/lotus-like flower that has the ability to trigger off a long chain of conceived remembrances, of hyperrealities where she finds solace: long-stemmed roses and white peonies are the flowers that Grace puts in Mary Whitney's coffin; white peonies and pink roses are the flowers planted in front of Mr Kinnear's verandah which Grace sees when she first reaches Richmond; shining and red are the peonies she dreams about in prison, and these peonies "are like satin, which are like splashes of paint" (344) and their soil is "emptiness", "empty space and silence" (344).

Undoubtedly, this silence, this empty space is that hole in signification which language can only capture by re-constructing through imagination what otherwise cannot be perceived and spoken of (and for) through direct observation and reporting. This silence both empties and creates Grace's hyperreality as it stimulates the fabrication of appearance and reality, the unending fusion and confusion of identities until all barriers are lifted and Holy Trinities effected. Peonies are, in this respect, Grace's hyperreality seen not as an object and medium of the traumatic imagination but rather as an obscure illusion, since it is memory that keeps eluding itself.

When memory is fallible, storytelling comes into play, since stories are capable of exerting their manipulative and hypnotic force even after a long time: this is because memories are formed and given consistency only through the working of imagination. Thus, although Grace's mindscapes are determined by reality-testing, the frame of her hyperreality's is structured by the remnants of the hallucinatory fantasy: the ultimate guarantee of her sense of reality turns on how what her experiences of reality conform to the fantasy frame.

> 'Lying', says MacKenzie. 'A severe term, surely. Has she been lying to you, you ask? Let me put it this way – did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether. Perhaps Grace Marks has merely been telling you what she needs to tell, in order to accomplish the desired end.'
> 'Which is?' asks Simon.
> 'To keep the Sultan amused,' says MacKenzie. 'To keep the blow from falling. To forestall your departure, and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible.' (4380)

Concluding Remarks

In *Alias Grace*, Canadian landscapes are reimagined by means of mindscapes, and Grace's lost memories are not intended to be recovered as if somebody had lost them, nor are they meant to represent reality but only to signify it. Grace's mindscapes are particularly important when their object is the unrepresentable, i.e. a reality of extreme events which, by their traumatic nature, resist representation. In this case, Grace's mindscapes do not reveal themselves as imitations of reality (mimesis), but rather as reconstructions through imagination, or as re-presentation – with images barren of the power of fancy incapable of informing our consciousness, let alone speaking for it, as we are who we are only by producing images of ourselves and our world via imagination.

References

Atwood, M. (2019) *Alias Grace.* Third Edition. London*:* Virago Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Baudrillard, J. (2000) *The Vital Illusion*. Julia Witwer (Ed.) New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.