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Spectral Metafiction as Différance of Authoritative Narrative in *Alias Grace*

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Abstract— *This paper treats Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace as a spectral metafictional rewriting to a historic case, examining how Atwood articulates her deconstructive understanding of historic and narrative truth. First, this paper explores how the novel deconstructs the absolute truth sustained by logocentric institutional authorities - namely science, law and religion - exposing the illusion of epistemological certainty. Next, it explore how Grace employs a possessive and spectral voice through death, possession, and defamiliarization to launch a tactful resistance against institutional dominance. Finally, this paper demonstrates how the formal realization of self-reflexive and intertextual narration constitutes a mode of spectral metafiction, wherein the continuous deferral of truth exemplifies Derrida's concept of différance and ultimately results in spectralization of narrative subjectivity.*

Keywords— ***Alias Grace; Atwood; Spectral Metafiction; Différance; Authoritative Narrative***

I. INTRODUCTION

Alias Grace (1996) is a historical novel based on a notorious murder case in Canada in 1843. Rather than reconstructing historical truth through a positivist approach, Margaret Atwood foregrounds the fractures and tensions between Grace Marks's confession and the documentary records produced by institutional authority. By exposing the instability between testimony and official discourse, Atwood interrogates the limits of rational language and factual representation. The mystery surrounding Grace's guilt is thus transformed into an ontological crisis of textuality. Instead of functioning as a transparent representation of reality, the text becomes a site of différance, a concept created by Derrida, where the violence of metaphysics is exposed, the authority of logocentric discourse is destabilized, and truth is endlessly deferred through the ceaseless play of signification. Through this sustained rethinking of historical fiction, Atwood develops a distinctive mode of spectral metafiction that challenges the metaphysics of presence.

II. DECENTERING LOGOCENTRIC DISCOURSE: THE ILLUSION OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH

The impulse to seek ultimate origins and definitive explanations is an inherent tendency of human reason. As Immanuel Kant observes in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, regardless of whether metaphysics can ultimately attain the status of a science, the pursuit of metaphysical inquiry remains a Naturanlage—a natural disposition of the human mind (Zhu, 2006, p.30). In literary reading, this tendency is often manifested in readers' persistent desire to uncover an ultimate truth or an unquestionable fact. Detective fiction exemplifies this epistemological impulse. In "The Art of the Detective Story," R. Austin Freeman summarizes the narrative structure of the classical detective story into four successive stages: "statement of the problem; production of

the data for its solution; the discovery of the solution; proof of the solution" (Freeman, 1976, p.14). Although Margaret Atwood does not intend *Alias Grace* to function as a conventional detective novel, one of the principal forces driving both the reader and the characters through the narrative is precisely this instinctive pursuit of truth: is Grace Marks a calculating murderess, or an innocent victim? Yet this metaphysical narrative structure has traditionally operated within Western discourse as a totalizing system sustained by logocentrism. Manfred Frank identifies three defining characteristics of this metaphysical mode of thought in *What is Neostructuralism?*. First, it presupposes the existence of a transcendent and absolute origin underlying the multiplicity of appearances. Second, it habitually interprets the world according to predetermined rational principles and rigid classificatory systems. Finally, it transforms systems of knowledge into instruments for mastering, assimilating, and disciplining the unknown Other (Frank, 1989, pp.3-20). Consequently, every attempt to discover a single, absolute truth is inseparable from a form of metaphysical violence that suppresses difference in the pursuit of epistemological certainty.

From the late nineteenth century onward, philosophers increasingly exposed the limitations of this metaphysical tradition. Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God" marked a decisive turning point, while Heidegger and subsequent thinkers began to question the authority of reason and the foundations of Western metaphysics. By the latter half of the twentieth century, post-structuralism further revealed the structural contradictions embedded within metaphysical thought. Among these interventions, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive project, initiated in the 1960s, constitutes the most radical critique of the logocentric assumptions underlying the metaphysics of presence. Derrida argues that there exists no transcendental origin or ultimate truth independent of the system of signs. Rather than providing transparent access to reality, language is constituted by internal contradictions, discontinuities, and blind spots that continuously undermine its own claims to certainty. Significantly, Derrida establishes the philosophical legitimacy of this critique through a deconstructive reading of one of the foundational texts of detective fiction. In his engagement with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Derrida directly challenges Jacques Lacan's influential psychoanalytic interpretation. Lacan understands the circulating letter as an absolute signifier and famously claims that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (Lacan, 1988, p.53), thereby incorporating Poe's detective narrative into a coherent signifier-centred structure. Derrida, however, identifies Lacan's structuralism as another manifestation of the metaphysical desire for a stable center. He criticizes Lacan for privileging the determinate relationship between signifier and signified and for reducing the inexhaustible openness of literary texts to a closed interpretative system. By contrast, Derrida directs attention to the dynamic tensions generated through the continual displacement of perspectives. The text refuses closure, endlessly postpones resolution, and remains in perpetual movement through the play of signification. This ceaseless deferral constitutes the literary manifestation of Derrida's central concept of différance. As Derrida observes in his critique of Lacan, the story itself never reaches a final destination but remains permanently open to further exploration. Viewed from this perspective, Atwood's narrative experiment in *Alias Grace* resonates profoundly with Derrida's philosophical critique of traditional language and metaphysics. Rather than reconstructing the historical truth of Grace Marks's crime, Atwood transforms that truth into Derrida's ever-circulating letter—a signifier that can never finally arrive at its destination, but continually shifts, circulates, and generates new meanings. Through this deconstructive narrative practice, *Alias Grace* enacts différance not merely as a philosophical concept but as an ontological mode of textual existence.

Rather than resolving the central mystery—whether Grace committed the murders and, if so, whether she acted under a state of mental disturbance—Margaret Atwood deliberately resists reconstructing a final and authoritative account of the crime, as would be expected in a conventional detective novel. Instead, she introduces three male representatives of institutional authority, each speaking on behalf of a distinct system of knowledge: psychiatry, law, and religion, embodied respectively by Dr. Simon Jordan, Kenneth MacKenzie, and Reverend Verringer. Through their divergent perspectives, methodologies, and interpretive assumptions, these figures construct three competing authoritative explanations of the Grace Marks case. Each relies upon a seemingly coherent rational framework in an attempt to inscribe upon Grace an absolute truth sanctioned by his own discourse.

It is precisely this innovative narrative strategy that distinguishes *Alias Grace* from both conventional historical fiction and narratives that ultimately promise epistemological closure. By the novel's conclusion, neither the characters nor the readers are granted access to a definitive or fully knowable truth. Atwood herself explicitly reflects on this narrative decision:"I'm not one of those who believes there is no truth to be known; but I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth—somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery—truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us (Atwood, 2006,

p.228).” This authorial reflection reinforces one of the novel’s central insights: every attempt to recover a single, definitive truth—and every effort to identify or recover a metaphysical origin, whether through scientific inquiry, legal judgment, or religious interpretation—is ultimately destined to fail. Rather than affirming the authority of these rational discourses, *Alias Grace* exposes their epistemological limitations and reveals the impossibility of fully securing historical truth within any single explanatory framework. Atwood’s critique of authoritative rational discourse provides the essential premise for her subsequent construction of spectral narration. This critique unfolds along two interconnected dimensions. On the one hand, it dismantles the metaphysical origins and epistemological principles upon which rational narratives claim their authority. On the other, it exposes and interrogates the metaphysical violence exercised through the intertwined operations of reason and institutional knowledge.

Atwood herself has observed that, with the exception of Susanna Moodie’s account, almost every historical narrative concerning the Grace Marks case merely allowed men to project their ideas about women onto the spectacle of the crime. This insight resonates profoundly with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s influential argument in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar contend that within the patriarchal literary tradition, women have repeatedly been divided into the binary figures of the “angel” and the “monster,” both of which function as projections of male desire and anxiety rather than representations of female subjectivity (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.17). Women’s lived experiences and independent voices are consequently displaced by textual identities constructed according to masculine expectations and confined within male-authored narratives. A similar relationship between authorship and authority is explored by Edward Said in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Through an etymological analysis of the terms author and authority, Said demonstrates that the concept of the author has historically been associated with the figure of the father and the originator, thereby revealing the patriarchal assumptions embedded within Western notions of authorship (Said, 2000, p.83). In *Alias Grace*, the competing interpretations advanced by the three male authorities constitute precisely such an extension of patriarchal discourse. By appropriating Grace’s story and speaking on her behalf, they deprive her of narrative agency, transform her into a symbolic object of interpretation, and perpetuate the metaphysical violence that objectifies and appropriates the female Other.

Self-confident scientific worldview rests upon the belief that sufficiently precise data, combined with rigorous logical reasoning, can yield stable and reliable conclusions. It assumes that through method, systematic inquiry, and rational analysis, one may establish a secure foundation for transcendental truth, thereby pursuing objectivity, certainty, and systematic knowledge. Derrida’s critique of science, however, should not be understood as an outright rejection of scientific inquiry. On the contrary, he regards science—particularly mathematics—as indispensable and even as an important force within the practice of deconstruction. What he challenges is not the validity of science itself, but its claim to absolute certainty and objective neutrality. Scientific knowledge, like every other form of knowledge, is mediated by language, metaphor, and historically contingent conceptual frameworks. Consequently, the authority of scientific discourse is itself subject to philosophical deconstruction. As Atwood’s representative of scientific rationalism and nineteenth-century materialist psychiatry, Dr. Simon Jordan embodies precisely this confidence in scientific reason. He maintains that the human mind can ultimately be understood through rational investigation and that every manifestation of evil is merely the symptom of neurological disorder, claiming that “the Devil was only a malformation of the brain” (Atwood, 1996, p.81). Yet Atwood begins dismantling this scientific confidence long before Simon’s medical investigation of Grace actually unfolds. Upon arriving in the remote Canadian town, Simon experiences an immediate sense of physical unease in response to its unpredictable climate and the unfathomable depth of the surrounding lake. Faced with the vastness and mystery of nature, his confidence in scientific rationality begins to falter.

More importantly, Simon’s rational certainty proves equally vulnerable when confronted with phenomena that lie beyond the boundaries of empirical science. During his conversations with the hypnotist Dr. DuPont and Mrs. Quennell, who is deeply fascinated by spiritualism and séances, Simon repeatedly evades questions concerning supernatural experience by abruptly changing the subject whenever the discussion moves beyond the explanatory scope of materialist psychiatry. His evasions reveal precisely what Derrida describes as undecidability. Rather than demonstrating the explanatory power of scientific discourse, Simon’s rhetorical shifts function as linguistic acts of self-defence against experiences that resist assimilation into the scientific order. Consequently, Simon’s psychiatric discourse is far from possessing the transcendental certainty it claims for itself. Instead, it emerges as a historically situated symbolic construction, sustained by rhetorical strategies and constrained by its own conceptual limitations. When Simon attempts to recover the truth of Grace’s memories through scientific methodology, his epistemological framework has already begun to unravel under the pressure of both the mysteries

of nature and the disruptive presence of the supernatural. Atwood thereby demonstrates that scientific discourse can never transcend the instability of language in order to recover an uncontaminated historical truth. On the contrary, the self-confident scientific worldview itself functions as a narrative constructed upon unstable foundations, foreshadowing the inevitable collapse of scientific rationality once confronted with Grace's spectral voice.

Beyond its epistemological limitations, however, Simon's scientific discourse also reveals a more insidious form of metaphysical violence through its objectification and othering of Grace. He never approaches her as an equal interlocutor possessing an autonomous subjectivity. Instead, he consistently positions her as an object of possession, reducing her to what the novel explicitly describes as "his territory" (Atwood, 1996, p.350). From his first appearance, Simon regards his interviews with Grace as "an excellent opportunity" (Atwood, 1996, p.55), not because he seeks to understand her lived experience, but because he sees her as an exceptional clinical case capable of advancing his psychiatric research and facilitating his ambition to establish his own asylum. His confidence rests upon a hierarchical relationship in which Grace occupies the position of the object to be examined while he remains the authoritative knowing subject. This objectifying attitude is repeatedly reinforced throughout the novel. Simon imagines Grace's memory as "a locked box" (Atwood, 1996, p.132), awaiting scientific penetration, and confidently asks, "Could you sew and snip, and patch together a genius?" (Atwood, 1996, p.217). Such scientific ambition recalls Victor Frankenstein's obsessive desire to master life through scientific knowledge in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. At the same time, it represents an intensified manifestation of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. Within this binary order, the rational male subject occupies the privileged position of observer, controller, and interpreter, while the supposedly irrational woman is reduced to an object to be scrutinized, dissected, and disciplined. Grace ultimately exists only to "flourish his own sense of purpose" (Atwood, 1996, p.338).

Kenneth MacKenzie represents the authority of law, another discourse equally grounded in the principles of logocentrism. Atwood's critique of legal discourse finds a direct theoretical counterpart in Derrida's deconstructive reflections on law and justice. In "Force of Law," Derrida argues that the legal system contains an irreducible element of "mystical" that cannot justify itself from within. Since law possesses no legitimate metalanguage capable of grounding its own authority, it can only justify language through more language (Derrida, 1992, p.15). Consequently, legal authority ultimately operates as a form of institutional violence sustained by power, what Derrida identifies as the "violence of language" (Derrida, 1992, p.49). This insight is vividly illustrated in Alias Grace. Grace herself demonstrates remarkable clarity regarding the judicial proceedings that determined her fate: "That wasn't really my confession. It was what my lawyer told me to say, and what the newspaper people made up.… They can invent whatever suits them" (Atwood, 1996, p.103). As the first major case of Kenneth MacKenzie's legal career, the pursuit of factual truth quickly recedes behind the strategic demands of legal argumentation. Grace's body and testimony become little more than instruments through which MacKenzie constructs an effective legal narrative. MacKenzie proudly boasts to Dr. Simon of having rescued Grace from the gallows through his rhetorical skill and legal eloquence, triumphantly bestowing upon her the title of the "Silent Madonna" (Atwood, 1996, p.433). The irony of this designation is unmistakable. His defense is motivated less by professional responsibility than by the desire to celebrate his own legal accomplishment. Within the authoritarian logic of legal discourse, the ideal female defendant is one who remains silent and relinquishes her own narrative authority. Grace herself recalls that MacKenzie "liked to lock the door and be alone with me in my cell. He offered to comfort me, and often patted my hand" (Atwood, 1996, p.351). Beneath the apparent benevolence of legal protection thus lies another form of paternalistic control, one that secures authority precisely by appropriating the woman's voice while claiming to speak on her behalf.

Reverend Verringer, in turn, represents the religious discourse of moral purification and redemption. Compared with the aggressiveness of psychiatry and the pragmatism of law, his religious outlook appears more compassionate and less overtly rational. Yet, as Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death*, modern religion and modern rationality ultimately share the same metaphysical foundation: both presuppose "the access to the responsibility of a free self" (Derrida, 2016, p.2). Religion therefore establishes meaning through ethical judgment, seeking to impose a binary distinction between innocence and guilt, virtue and evil. Throughout the novel, Reverend Verringer steadfastly insists upon Grace's innocence, arguing that she has been driven to madness by the abuse inflicted upon her by the former governor of the penitentiary. His defense, however, is motivated less by genuine sympathy for Grace's suffering than by the usefulness of her fragmented memory to his religious and philanthropic enterprise. Grace's ambiguous recollections provide an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the redemptive power of Christian charity. She is thus transformed into a model convert—a living testament to divine mercy and religious salvation—through

whom the Church seeks to extend its moral authority within the shifting landscape of secular society.

By exposing the interior monologues of these three institutional representatives, Atwood systematically dismantles the illusion that rational discourse is objective, neutral, or disinterested. Although scientific, legal, and religious discourses appear to compete with one another, they ultimately share the same epistemological blind spot. Each imposes an already established, patriarchal interpretive framework upon the irreducible complexity of Grace's lived experience, replacing her own voice with authoritative explanations generated from outside herself. As Atwood has repeatedly observed, throughout history women have rarely been permitted to narrate themselves; instead, they have served as textual surfaces upon which male writers, scholars, and institutions project their desires, anxieties, and ideological assumptions. Rather than revealing an absolute historical truth, the failure of these authoritative discourses demonstrates that truth itself is always deferred, fragmented, and mediated through competing systems of signification. What Atwood ultimately decenters is not merely scientific, legal, or religious authority, but the logocentric desire for an origin, a center, and a final truth. The dismantling of this logocentric discourse consequently prepares the ground for spectral narration, through which Grace's voice can return without ever being fully appropriated or stabilized.

III. POSSESSIVE VOICE: SPECTRAL NARRATION AS A TACTFUL RESISTANCE

Atwood's achievement lies in the fact that she does not stop at postmodern political satire or purely negative deconstruction. Instead, she further refines her narrative techniques to explore how the very structure and function of narrative can overturn the dominance of rational discourse from within. As Derrida argues, deconstruction is not merely a matter of discourse or theory; it is, and must be, a matter of practice. To put such theoretical resistance into practice, however, requires dismantling the totalizing structures that sustain rational narratives. Such a project necessarily calls for a disruptive narrative force characterized by irrationality, alterity, and mystery. Within the Western literary tradition, Gothic fiction and the figure of the ghost or spectre have long served as natural vehicles for resisting rational discourse.

Originating from Gothic architecture, Gothic fiction flourished throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and reached its maturity during the Romantic period. Typically, Gothic narratives are set in remote and decaying buildings that function as spaces of confinement. Within these enclosed settings, romance intertwines with mystery, while death, violence, and other dark motifs permeate the narrative. Death, in turn, gives rise to ghosts and spectres. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida develops his influential concept of hauntology, arguing that "the question of the spectre is the question of life, the limit between life and death, everywhere" (Huang, 2012, p.168). The spectre embodies the presence of an absence. Existing at the threshold between life and death, history and the present, it persistently unsettles the existing order through a temporality that is always out of joint. Consequently, when Atwood incorporates Gothic elements and haunting spectres into her historical fiction, her purpose is not simply to reproduce the atmosphere of horror characteristic of the Gothic tradition. Rather, motivated by contemporary concerns, she explores how the voice of the spectre can articulate a critique of rational narratives while opening new possibilities for storytelling in a changing historical moment. In this sense, Atwood simultaneously appropriates and transcends the anti-rational legacy of Gothic fiction. Ghosts and spectres cease to function merely as supernatural entities and instead become narrative agents through which stories are told. Her fiction therefore moves beyond Gothic mystery itself, transforming spectrality into a narrative mode that reveals suppressed experiences and gives voice to those who have been excluded from dominant discourse. Through this transformation, Atwood's narratives acquire what Derrida understands as the spectral quality of haunting. Accordingly, this thesis defines this distinctive narrative strategy in Atwood's fiction as spectral narration.

Atwood's spectral narration first manifests itself through her critical appropriation of quintessential Gothic motifs—death, spectral return, and possession—which immediately immerse the reader in an atmosphere of unease and uncanny uncertainty. Among these, death occupies a central position. In traditional Gothic fiction, recurring deaths function as catalysts for the disintegration of social and psychological order. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood foregrounds the deaths of three women: Grace's mother, her closest friend Mary Whitney, and Nancy Montgomery. Respectively corresponding to Grace's childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, these three deaths simultaneously mark the symbolic end of each stage of her life. Death, therefore, is not merely a narrative event but signifies the progressive collapse of the stable world through which Grace once understood her existence. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida argues that different understandings of death inevitably reshape the meaning of life itself, suggesting that "by means of the passage to death the soul attains its own freedom" (Derrida, 2006, p.40). Within Derrida's philosophical framework, death is never simply the biological termination of presence. Rather,

it constitutes the violent intrusion of absolute alterity, disrupting the linear temporality through which the living comprehend both themselves and the world. The "gift" of death, paradoxically, is an irreducible traumatic experience that can never be fully assimilated into consciousness. For Grace, the deaths of these three women—each occupying a decisive position in her emotional and psychological development—become three failed acts of mourning. Each death opens an ontological rupture that gradually dismantles the coherence of her lived world. The death of Grace's mother marks the complete collapse of the original order that sustained her childhood. Her mother dies aboard the immigrant ship carrying the family from Ireland to Canada, a confined space that itself evokes displacement, rootlessness, and existential uncertainty. During their impoverished life in Ireland, the mother functions as the primary source of emotional stability, embodying both familial security and the possibility of interpreting reality within a coherent narrative order. Her sudden death during the Atlantic crossing abruptly destroys this protective structure. Even more significantly, her body is cast into the sea without burial. From the perspective of Derrida's reflections on mourning, such a death without a grave prevents the deceased from being successfully localized or ritually incorporated into memory, condemning her instead to perpetual wandering. Grace thus loses the first symbolic anchor of her existence. With the disappearance of maternal protection, her childhood comes to an abrupt end. She is left to confront the violence of an abusive and irresponsible father, the embodiment of patriarchal authority, before being forced into domestic service as a maid. The collapse of her original familial order initiates her lifelong experience of displacement.

The death of Mary Whitney similarly signifies the disintegration of Grace's adolescent identity and her emerging possibility of resistance. Within Grace's subjective world, Mary is not merely an intimate companion but also an ideal mirror through which Grace begins constructing her own sense of self in an unfamiliar environment. Mary's independence, vitality, and outspoken resistance to patriarchal and class oppression offer Grace an alternative vision of female existence beyond the humiliation of domestic servitude. Derrida observes that the death of a friend constitutes "an end" of one's life for one's own existence is continually confirmed through the gaze of the other (Derrida, 2001, p.7). Mary's tragic death, caused by an illegal abortion following her abandonment by her lover, therefore possesses a double significance. It not only destroys Grace's youthful hopes but also exposes the brutal reality of how women's bodies are sacrificed within the intersecting structures of patriarchy and class domination. Even after her death, Mary's desperate words—"Let me in"—continue to resonate without resolution. Rather than disappearing into memory, her voice persists as what Derrida would call a spectral inscription. Existing in the paradoxical condition of being simultaneously absent and present, Mary's ghostly voice invades Grace's consciousness, fragmenting her subjectivity and transforming the possibility of youthful rebellion into a recurring nightmare.

Finally, the brutal murder of Nancy Montgomery in the cellar marks the complete disintegration of Grace's adult identity and her place within the social order. Nancy occupies an inherently ambivalent position throughout the novel. She functions both as the housekeeper who offers Grace employment and protection and as the woman whose illicit relationship with Thomas Kinnear transgresses established class boundaries. During Grace's transition into adulthood, Nancy becomes the object onto which Grace projects her anxieties concerning female sexuality, social mobility, and class identity. Nancy's death is not represented as a gradual disappearance but as a violent spectacle of murder unfolding within the confined space of the cellar. This traumatic event directly plunges Grace into the inescapable machinery of legal judgment and psychological collapse. If the death of her mother destroys the security of childhood and Mary's death extinguishes the possibility of resistance, Nancy's murder ultimately deprives Grace of any stable position within ordinary social reality. The bloodstained cellar becomes the final traumatic rupture that overwhelms Grace's rational consciousness. Death here ceases to function as an external event and instead becomes fully internalized, bringing an end not only to Grace's subjective temporality but also to the social identity upon which her adulthood depends. Death thus occupies every decisive turning point in Grace's life. The cumulative force of these three traumatic losses inscribes death permanently into the structure of her consciousness. In this sense, Atwood transforms death from a merely physical event into what may be understood as a spectral inscription embedded within Grace's psychic structure. Rather than marking a definitive ending, death becomes the haunting trace through which the coherence of reality itself is irreversibly dissolved.

Spectral haunting and possession have long been among the central narrative motifs of Gothic fiction. Haunted tales began to flourish in Canada during the 1990s (Brogan, 1998, p.1). Canada's distinctive history of colonial settlement and multicultural immigration has left the land saturated with the memories of different ethnic communities and social groups. Beneath the soil of this new continent lie countless displaced lives and their unresolved traumas. In Atwood's fiction, these memories,

buried beneath dominant historical narratives, return as haunting spectres that repeatedly intrude upon the narrator's present perception of reality. For Grace, her mother's sudden death in the enclosed emigrant ship leaves behind two lifelong psychic traces: an unopened window and a worn burial sheet. The former originates from an elderly woman's instruction aboard the ship that a window must be opened when someone dies so that the soul may depart. Yet, overwhelmed by fear and confusion, the young Grace never found the opportunity to open the window. She therefore lives with the terrifying thought that her mother's soul remains trapped forever within the dark cargo hold, "like a moth in a bottle "（Atwood, 1996, p.141). The latter trace stems from a profound sense of class humiliation. Grace fears that her once dignified mother would feel degraded by being wrapped after death in a cheap and tattered sheet. From the perspective of Derrida's hauntology, these two unfinished rituals constitute an unaccomplished mourning. Because her mother's death is never fully incorporated into the symbolic order through a proper burial, her spirit is transformed, through Grace's guilt and unconscious self-punishment, into a spectre that continually returns across temporal boundaries. Her mother's presence is therefore manifested precisely through her permanent absence. This spectralization of personal trauma ultimately reaches its most radical form in the novel through spectral possession. Within the biblical tradition, the spirits that invade human bodies are typically represented as demonic forces devoid of moral legitimacy, while Christ assumes the role of the supreme exorcist. *The Gospels* repeatedly depict Jesus healing the possessed, with the *Gospel of Mark* alone recording thirteen miraculous healings, four of which explicitly involve exorcism. Within this theological framework, possession narratives function to demonstrate the absolute evil of demons and thereby reinforce the divine authority and moral supremacy of Christ. Modern psychiatry and legal judgment, in many respects, inherit this same logic of possession and exorcism. Dr. Simon's interrogations and hypnotic sessions with Grace therefore operate as secularized rituals of exorcism, attempting to identify, isolate, and expel the alien voice believed to inhabit her, thereby reaffirming the authority of scientific rationality and legal discourse.

Atwood's narrative intervention, however, lies precisely in reversing this traditional logic. Rather than presenting possession as a manifestation of evil to be eliminated, she transforms it into a tactic of resistance through which Grace deliberately inhabits the unstable boundary between fact and truth under the mounting pressure of patriarchal authority. Such a strategy not only satirizes the disciplinary ambitions of scientific and religious institutions but also radicalizes the very notion of spectrality: the spectre no longer merely occupies its own supernatural realm but invades the body and consciousness of the living in order to reclaim the right to speak. This strategy reaches its climax in the novel's famous hypnotic scene, where Grace's voice gradually merges with that of the deceased Mary Whitney until the two become virtually indistinguishable. On the surface, the possession appears to reveal the truth of the murders. More fundamentally, however, Whitney's voice enables Grace to articulate the accumulated trauma inflicted upon both women by intersecting structures of class, gender, and social oppression. In this moment of possession, truth itself undergoes différance in Derrida's sense. While scientific and legal discourse strives to determine Grace's guilt, Grace assumes the mask of the dead, concealing herself within the fissures of history. Spectral possession thus becomes a sanctuary for marginalized women such as Grace. By transforming herself into a nonhuman spectre, she ultimately escapes the judgment and disciplinary mechanisms of the rational order constructed and governed by patriarchal authority.

Furthermore, Atwood's construction of spectral narration extends far beyond the deconstruction of historical narratives and the incorporation of ghostly motifs. More fundamentally, it reshapes narrative language through defamiliarization and reconstructs textual form in spectral terms. By repeatedly shifting temporal perspectives, superimposing multiple narrative voices, and introducing Gothic imagery charged with traumatic symbolism, Atwood creates an unstable narrative space situated between dream and reality, memory and history, presence and absence. At the level of narrative structure and temporality, Atwood experiments with a form of polyphonic dissonance, rendering the text an embodiment of Derrida's notion that "time is out of joint" (Derrida, 2006, p.20). As Bakhtin argues, dialogism constitutes the defining feature of polyphony, in which multiple voices continually engage with one another, allowing "each voice to reveal itself through dialogue and contestation" (Ji, 2009, p.36). Rejecting the linear and omniscient narrative model characteristic of traditional historical fiction, Alias Grace constantly alternates between first-person and third-person narration. This continual disruption and displacement of narrative perspective unfolds across several decades—from Grace's Atlantic crossing during childhood, to her years as a domestic servant, and finally to her secluded life in the United States after her release from prison. The result is a narrative in which historical memory repeatedly intrudes upon and haunts the present. Readers are consequently immersed in a state of uncertainty where temporal and epistemological boundaries become increasingly blurred.

The competing voices continuously interrogate and undermine one another, so that no single discourse—not even Grace's own confession—can claim exclusive access to truth. History thus becomes a polyphonic labyrinth suspended between the ambiguity of first-person testimony and the limitations of third-person rational observation, a labyrinth that forever resists closure.

Atwood further subjects narrative language to a process of defamiliarization through the introduction of bizarre and unsettling symbols, allowing meaning to leave its trace while simultaneously refusing complete disclosure. Throughout the novel, symbols and metaphors are saturated either with strikingly vivid colours or with grotesque biological imagery, together constituting Atwood's distinctive symbolic aesthetics of colour. Among these recurring images, the peonies occupy a central position. At the beginning of the novel, Grace, confined within the prison walls, hallucinates a cluster of brilliant peonies. Intertextually, these flowers inevitably recall the wild rosebush standing outside the prison in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, itself a symbol of moral discipline and social judgment. Yet in Atwood's narrative climax, the peonies are transformed into flowers of blood, recalling Nancy Montgomery's blood splattering across the earth after her murder. The flowers thus cease to function merely as natural objects and instead become spectral manifestations of traumatic memory. Similarly, images such as the split "peach" and the disembowelled "haddock" evoke intensely visceral sensations that point directly to the violated, objectified, and exploited bodies of working-class women (Atwood, 1996, pp.79 & 408). The colour red—manifested in the flowers, the blood, and Grace's red hair—forms another significant spectral symbol throughout the novel. It simultaneously signifies death and danger while embodying the irrepressible vitality of marginalized women. These vivid yet brutal metaphors detach language from the apparent stability of reality, allowing truth to emerge like the footprints of a ghost: visible enough to suggest its presence, yet constantly escaping through the endless deferral and displacement of signification.

In Derrida's philosophy, the spectre precisely embodies this paradoxical presence of absence. It represents those voices suppressed by official history and silenced by rational authority, returning ceaselessly to expose the contradictions of the existing order. Rather than adopting the detached, authoritative critique of an omniscient third-person narrator, Atwood embeds deconstructive thought directly within Grace's lived experience. Grace is not merely the object of theoretical interpretation but an autonomous subject who gradually comes to recognize, challenge, and resist the operations of rational authority herself. Although Gothic fiction has traditionally occupied a marginal position within the literary canon, Atwood's appropriation of Gothic conventions far exceeds the simple accumulation of supernatural motifs. Through her spectral narrative language, she exposes the intertwined oppression that patriarchal society and rational discourse impose upon women's bodies and subjectivities. This strategy of narrative defamiliarization enables the text itself to assume a spectral mode of existence: like a ghost, it leaves traces while resisting complete presence. In doing so, Atwood transcends the conventional understanding of ghosts as merely supernatural objects and transforms spectrality into an ontological condition of the text itself.

IV. SELF-REFLEXIVE AND INTERTEXTUAL NARRATION: THE SPECTRALIZATION OF NARRATIVE SUBJECTIVITY

Atwood's innovation in spectral narration lies not only in her inheritance and transformation of Gothic themes and narrative structures discussed above, but also in her creative elevation of storytelling itself into the central subject of the novel. In doing so, she further develops spectral narration into spectral metafiction, extending her critique of metaphysics from philosophical discourse into the realm of literary criticism.

From the perspective of structuralist narratology, represented by Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, and Vladimir Propp, every aspect of narrative structure—whether temporal and spatial organization, narrative perspective, or narrative levels—is governed by a rigid and hierarchical order. In his morphological study of folktales, Propp reduced the complexity of narrative characters and plots to thirty-one invariant functions, seeking to formulate a universal grammar capable of determining the development of all narratives. Likewise, in his influential structuralist essay Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives, Barthes systematically organized narrative into the hierarchical levels of functions, actions, and narration, attempting to establish for literature a taxonomic system comparable to that of modern linguistics. Genette pushed this pursuit of structural order even further. In *Narrative Discourse*, he constructed an exceptionally precise analytical framework governing narrative temporality and voice, ranging from the strict distinction between diachrony and synchrony, to the meticulous measurement of story time and narrative time, and finally to the rigorous classification of narrators as homodiegetic or heterodiegetic (Genette, 1980, p.245). In this sense, structuralist narratology can be understood as the manifestation of logocentric metaphysics within literary criticism. By reducing literary texts to static geometric

systems governed by fixed structural relations, it strips narrative of its spectral heterogeneity and living vitality.

Against this structuralist tradition, Atwood's narrative experiment in *Alias Grace* dismantles the very notion of narrative closure. Rather than functioning merely as a story, the novel becomes a site for reflecting upon storytelling itself, thereby acquiring a distinctly metafictional dimension. More importantly, it foregrounds narrative as an open, continually evolving, and spectral process, resulting in what may be termed spectral metafiction. On the one hand, through Grace's unreliable narration, Atwood challenges the structuralist assumption that unreliable narration necessarily conceals an ultimately recoverable truth. Unreliability is no longer employed as a rhetorical device designed to mislead readers before revealing an objective reality; instead, it becomes a fundamentally spectral narrative condition in which meaning remains permanently unstable. On the other hand, by subverting the conventional narrative trajectory of female crime–moral redemption, Alias Grace establishes a profound intertextual dialogue with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Yet rather than culminating in redemption, Atwood suspends its possibility altogether. Grace's spectral testimony continually postpones the arrival of truth, ensuring that meaning remains indefinitely deferred. In doing so, the novel transforms metafiction from a self-conscious literary technique into a spectral mode of narration that resists closure, certainty, and the metaphysical desire for final meaning.

From the perspective of classical rhetorical narratology, represented by Wayne C. Booth, unreliable narration is generally understood as a technical rhetorical deviation. Such deviation necessarily presupposes a stable point of reference—namely, an objective truth that exists independently of the narrator. The narrator departs from this truth because of moral deception or psychological deficiency, while readers are expected to reconstruct the concealed, authentic reality through textual clues. Henry James's Gothic novella *The Turn of the Screw* exemplifies this model of unreliable narration. Although the governess's account is deeply coloured by psychological instability and uncertainty, readers are nevertheless encouraged to assemble the scattered textual evidence, much like detectives, in order to determine what really happened—whether the estate is genuinely haunted or whether the apparitions are merely products of the governess's hysteria. Atwood, however, moves beyond this classical narratological paradigm by fundamentally deconstructing its epistemological assumptions. Grace's unreliable narration—including her dreams, memory lapses, and the apparent possession by Mary Whitney—is not designed to conceal an underlying objective truth waiting to be recovered. Rather, it demonstrates that such an ultimate truth never exists in the first place. Through strategic concealment, deliberate postponement, and extensive narrative omissions, truth itself is transformed into what Derrida terms a trace: it continually calls for interpretation while perpetually refusing definitive presence. Unreliable narration is thus reconfigured into a spectral mode of narration.

This transformation also reflects Atwood's own creative process. She has acknowledged that she initially intended to recount the historical case through an objective third-person perspective before ultimately deciding upon a first-person narrative. As Atwood later explained, first-person narration possesses an inherent subjectivity that enables deception, concealment, omission, and repeated revision, making it a far more suitable medium for representing the instability of historical truth (Atwood, 2025, p.472). Grace possesses not only a compelling motivation to narrate but also a remarkable awareness of the mechanisms through which narratives are constructed. She gradually recognizes that both Kenneth MacKenzie during her trial and Dr. Simon Jordan afterward seek merely to incorporate her into stories fashioned according to their own discursive frameworks; the factual truth of her experience is ultimately of secondary importance. Once Grace becomes conscious of this narrative mechanism, she reverses the relationship of power and reclaims control over storytelling itself.

Confronted with Dr. Simon's aggressively positivist interrogation, Grace displays a striking degree of metafictional self-consciousness through her interior monologue. On the one hand, she satisfies Simon's expectations by recounting lengthy episodes from her childhood and domestic service, even carefully incorporating expressions that conform to masculine fantasies of the obedient working-class woman. On the other hand, she repeatedly frustrates his investigation through irony, strategic silences, psychological gaps, and conveniently timed lapses of memory. By manipulating language in this manner, Grace deliberately creates interpretive blind spots. Exploiting the deceptive possibilities inherent in first-person narration—its capacity for concealment, omission, and selective disclosure—she becomes not merely the narrator of the story but a spectral subject, one who perpetually eludes scientific scrutiny and resists objectification by totalizing structures of power. Once a narrator becomes aware that she is simultaneously being narrated and possesses the power to narrate, the text acquires the self-reflexive dimension that constitutes metafiction. Accordingly, by dismantling the structuralist expectation of an implicit, recoverable truth—the logocentric centre around which narrative meaning is

presumed to revolve—Atwood transforms *Alias Grace* into a postmodern laboratory for exploring how history is fictionalized and how language itself fabricates truth. Within such a textual framework, the question of what actually happened to Grace becomes secondary to the processes through which competing narratives are produced, circulated, and authorized.

Grace's chilling declaration, "So I stopped telling them anything," exemplifies this narrative strategy (Atwood, 1996, 35). Her deliberate silence and persistent narrative gaps enact Derrida's critique of language as a mechanism that inevitably assimilates and neutralizes alterity. Grace recognizes that the language of the living functions as a rational apparatus of domination: any attempt to translate her complex and traumatic experiences into coherent discourse would inevitably reduce her irreducible otherness to the pre-existing categories of patriarchal knowledge. Consequently, her refusal to speak is no longer a sign of passive voicelessness but a spectral form of resistance. By withholding interpretation, she transforms herself into a trace that refuses linguistic domestication, rendering narrative authority powerless before the absolute opacity of her silence. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood elevates the ghost from a Gothic motif or atmospheric device into a mode of storytelling. As Atwood herself has acknowledged, although ghostly figures had appeared in her earlier works and she had long believed that Canadian literature was inseparable from ghosts, it is only in *Alias Grace* that the narrator fully realizes the metafictional potential of spectrality. Through Grace's act of storytelling, the ghost ceases to be merely a supernatural presence and becomes a narrative strategy—a way of telling stories that resists metaphysical violence by exposing the instability of truth, history, and narrative authority themselves.

From the perspective of classical structuralist narratology, most stories in literary history can be abstracted into recognizable narrative types, such as Propp's formalist model of narrative functions. Among these, the narrative pattern of female transgression—moral suffering—spiritual atonement—reintegration into the dominant social order constitutes a canonical narrative paradigm in Western literature, one that serves to alleviate patriarchal anxieties and reaffirm moral certainty. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a representative example of this tradition. Although its heroine, Hester Prynne, initially resists the rigid doctrines of Puritan society, the subsequent development of the plot ultimately leads her through physical suffering and moral transcendence to internalize the scarlet letter "A" emblazoned upon her breast as the sign of her sin. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, she is reintegrated into the mainstream Puritan order under the guise of spiritual sanctity. In this sense, *The Scarlet Letter* once again confirms a narrative structure grounded in definitive judgment and ultimate redemption.

On the one hand, *The Scarlet Letter*, as a canonical literary text, recurs throughout Atwood's essays. In *Curious Pursuits*, Atwood repeatedly praises Hawthorne's literary achievement, recognizing *The Scarlet Letter* as an outstanding historical novel that employs a seventeenth-century colonial setting to diagnose the spiritual crises of nineteenth-century readers. Likewise, in her influential feminist essay "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature," Atwood classifies female villains throughout literary history and cites Hester as an example of "a good woman who did a bad thing for a good reason" (Atwood, 2006, p.184).Throughout these earlier critical writings, Atwood consistently acknowledges Hawthorne's historical contribution to both characterization and the development of female narrative types. Yet, as a leading postmodern writer, Atwood later came to question this tradition: Is transgressive behavior the exclusive privilege of men? At the conclusion of this essay, she issues a direct call: "Women characters, arise! Tack back the night" (Atwood, p.181). Although the essay surveys a wide range of canonical female villains, it offers neither a concrete literary model nor a practical guide for imagining a new kind of female criminal who resists regulation by patriarchal moral discourse. Alias Grace, therefore, may be understood as Atwood's ambitious intertextual experiment to put her own critical manifesto into practice.

Building upon previous scholarship and drawing on the structural framework of *Alias Grace*, this study argues that Atwood transforms the novel itself into a sustained subversion of the traditional narrative of female crime—and of the female criminal represented by *The Scarlet Letter*—through a sophisticated strategy of hypertextual parody within a metafictional framework. Atwood's deconstruction of the conventional female-crime narrative is most clearly reflected in her displacement of its central narrative impulse. Rather than organizing the narrative around the logocentric pursuit of factual certainty—identifying the criminal, establishing the truth, and assigning guilt—she deliberately shifts attention away from these objectives. Unlike Hawthorne's Hester, Grace is never fashioned into a subject who ultimately achieves moral transcendence. Instead, Atwood dismantles the closed structure of guilt and judgment through spectral testimony, deferred truth, the deconstruction of legal and moral judgment, and the ultimate suspension of redemption.

At the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, the scarlet letter A, officially embroidered upon Hester's breast, ultimately unites signifier and signified into a stable symbol with fixed meaning, clearly defined boundaries, and full

incorporation into the dominant social order. By contrast, at the end of *Alias Grace*, Grace, though released from prison, receives neither secular nor spiritual redemption. Instead, she spends the remainder of her life painstakingly sewing the patchwork quilt that runs throughout the novel. "The Tree of Paradise" quilt assembled by Grace herself becomes perhaps the most compelling narratological metaphor for Derridean différance. Unlike Hester's clearly bounded letter A, invested with unequivocal meanings of punishment or sanctification, the quilt is constructed from heterogeneous and fragmented pieces of cloth stained by traumatic histories—including scraps from Mary Whitney's undergarments and pieces cut from Nancy's dress. It possesses no privileged center. Instead, each fragment refers to and intertwines with the others in an endless network of relations. The quilt embraces discontinuity, assembles heterogeneity, and, through its outward-extending stitches, continually gestures toward the permanent absence of any final center. Grace stitches together not only pieces of fabric but also the traces of her own life with those of Mary and Nancy. Because the spectral testimony produced through possession remains forever unverifiable, the secular legal judgment imposed upon Grace is itself undone within the interstices of the quilt. Truth never reaches a final destination, and redemption is rendered impossible. Through this form of spectral metafiction, Atwood conceals Grace within the quilt's unfinished and indeterminate fragments, thereby transcending the moral closure characteristic of Hawthorne's female-crime narrative and establishing, for twenty-first-century historical fiction, a spectral narrative paradigm that remains perpetually open, continually becoming, and forever resistant to ultimate incorporation into patriarchal order.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the postmodern novelist John Fowles pushes narrative playfulness to its extreme by providing three alternative endings. Charles and Sarah are variously allowed to marry, separate, or remain within an open-ended conclusion, making the novel's metafictional strategy a self-conscious game of authorial manipulation. Atwood's metafiction, however, is invested with the spectral force of historical trauma. Grace's ending is not the product of the author's arbitrary selection among narrative possibilities. Rather, through Mary Whitney's spectral possession and the circulation of rumor, Grace actively transforms truth into an indeterminate trace that can never be conclusively established. For Atwood, therefore, metafiction is not merely textual play but a form of resistance through which the spectral subject confronts rationalist narrative and patriarchal judgment. The foregoing discussion demonstrates that, by extending the novel's critique of metaphysics, Atwood transforms storytelling itself into the central subject of Alias Grace, thereby endowing the novel with a fundamentally metafictional form. More importantly, in addressing the question of how stories should be told, she offers spectral narration as her answer, imbuing metafiction itself with a distinctly spectral quality.

V. CONCLUSION

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood fully recognizes for the first time that the ghost can function not merely as a narrative motif but as a mode of storytelling. Moreover, truth is presented as a process of perpetual différance: throughout the act of narration, it is continuously produced, deferred, and transformed. Because the ghost's testimony is inherently ambiguous and forever beyond verification, it resists definitive interpretation. Grace's awareness of this condition enables truth itself to acquire a spectral quality in Derrida's sense. Accordingly, *Alias Grace* presents narration not as the representation of a pre-existing reality but as the ongoing process through which being itself comes into presence. Through the innovative form of spectral metafiction, Atwood ultimately demonstrates that textual structure remains permanently open, unstable, and subject to continual displacement.

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