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Ghosts, Revenants and Talking Heads in Ingrid Winterbach's *Niggie*

ABSTRACT

Ingrid Winterbach's novel, *Niggie* (meaning cousin), is set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer War. Against a Jungian, archetypal reading, this article equates the characters in this novel to certain Tarot figures, exploring the role of revenants and ghosts in the lives of these characters. Of the revenants and dream images, we meet, we note amongst others, the woman with red hair and a little feather hat that can change shape. All revenants appear to more than one of the characters and leave them with a feeling of unease and unhappiness. Throughout the novel there is constantly a feeling of foreboding and uncertainty: a feeling as though all the characters were to find themselves on the threshold between life and death. Even the living characters become almost ghost-like and both reader and characters are sometimes uncertain whether they exist or not.

KEYWORDS

Ingrid Winterbach; Ghosts; Revenants; Tarot; Symbols; Dream Images.

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Ingrid Winterbach's novel, *Niggie* (meaning cousin, published in 2002¹), is set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer War. It focuses on the lives of two main characters, Ben Maritz and Reitz Steyn towards the end of the war. The war symbolises the struggle of light against darkness and these motifs of light and dark feature strongly in the novel. Against a Jungian, archetypal reading, I will equate the characters to certain Tarot figures, as well as explore the role of revenants and ghosts in the lives of these characters.

These ghosts and revenants highlight the fact that death or the underworld is ever present and the characters seem to move between these two realms with ease. The novel opens with Ben and Reitz arriving at a farm. Immediately, we are told that the farmer's wife died three months before and that he will show them her grave the following morning. His actions in the home are described as careful, with a kind of lingering yearning for his dead wife. This sets the scene for all the characters that have experienced some sense of loss during the war.

The farmer then tells them of a dream he had of a Trickster woman. Her hair is red, her face is powdered white and she wears a little feather hat²; "He cannot begin, says the farmer, to describe the delightfulness of that little hat. It was soft as the wings of a bataleur. With the flash of blue-green



light in it.” With the woman, he moves to a room with a bed. As he is about to lie down with her and reaches towards her, she is suddenly replaced by a strange man and she laughs from the porch. That is when he realises she is a trickster. The woman with the red hair, pale skin and feather hat becomes a recurring theme throughout the novel.

Ben and Reitz can both be seen as the Tarot figure, the Hanged Man. They are hanging over an abyss of uncertainty and their fate is undetermined from the start. In a strange camp in the hills where they are forced to stay for a while, they meet, amongst others, Gert Smal and his dog, representing the Fool, Oompie (meaning uncle), who is the Magician or trickster archetype and the revenant of Reitz’s wife, that Oompie helps him recall, can be seen as Temperance.

Later in the novel, when Reitz, Ben and Gert Smal set off on an unknown mission, they are ambushed. Ben and Reitz are badly wounded, but Gert Smal dies. Ben and Reitz are eventually found by two women, Niggie and Anna, from a nearby farm and nursed back to health. Niggie (who resembles the woman with the red hair and the feathered hat) represents the Popess, while Anna represents the Empress. Anna can also communicate with the dead and often has dreams related to the future. She is described as a mediator between life and death.

At the start of the novel, Ben and Reitz are escorting a traumatised young soldier home after his brother was killed next to him in battle. On their way, they come across a mountain camp of General Bergh. They are detained there and told to wait for further instruction from the General. They are free to roam the mountainous area around the camp, but not to leave. They come to represent the Hanged Man: “With his hands tied behind his back the Hanged

Man is as helpless as a turnip. He is in the grasp of Fate. He has no power to shape his life or control his destiny”³, as they are detained in the camp for no real reason.

Gert Smal and his dog can be seen as The Fool. In some Tarot decks the Fool is portrayed with a dog yapping at his heels, as if to warn him of impending danger. He is pictured on the edge of a cliff of which he is about to step off. This impending danger is later revealed when Gert is killed in the ambush.

Gert is the self-appointed leader of the camp in the absence of the actual commander, General Bergh. The Fool is also portrayed as the King’s jester and Gert’s swearing, temper and temperament make him almost comical, adding to his role as Fool or jester. In Italian, The Fool is called *Il Matto*, the mad one and in French he is referred to as *Le Mat*, the simple one. Gert is both mad and simple. He constantly has to ask Eseguel, his servant, for facts that he cannot remember.

When Reitz and Ben enter the camp, Smal immediately accuses them of being deserters. They also have a letter from Commander Senekal, the commander of their unit that they have to give to a General Bergh. When General Bergh finally arrives at the mountain camp, they hand him the letter. In the letter, however, Senekal accuses them of being traitors and deserters and that General Bergh should send them right back to him. Senekal here also becomes a kind of trickster figure in his false accusations and this intensifies Ben and Reitz’s position as Hanged Men: “To be thus hanged upside down is traditionally punishment for traitors. In some old Italian decks, this card is called *Il Traditore* (The Traitor)”⁴. Fortunately General Bergh knows Senekal and dismissed his false accusations.

After a few days in the camp, they are taken into the mountains to meet Oompie.



As they are walking up the mountain, Gert Smal says: "Oompie knows many tricks. He can also see things ahead."⁵ When they meet Oompie, he is described as of undeterminable age and almost Eastern looking with a smell of rancid butter. Oompie represents the Magician, who is described by Sally Nichols in her book *Jung and Tarot: an archetypal journey*, as creator and trickster.

When they enter Oompie's house, it is described as dark, with a mouldy and medicinal smell. On the shelf against the back wall, there are many glass jars and milk churns and the floor is covered in deer and jackal skins⁶.

Ben and Reitz return to Oompie a few days later without Gert Smal to fetch medicine for one of the people in the camp who have fallen ill. As they talk to Oompie, he states that one of them is troubled. "It is a troubling that is slowly devouring him. It will not give him rest"⁷.

On the Tarot card, the Magician is depicted with a table in front of him, with many objects on it. He also has a magic wand, "that connects him with his ancestor, Hermes, the god of revelations... he can guide our journey into the underworld of our deepest selves"⁸.

When Oompie leads them into an adjacent room in his house, there is a table in the middle of the room, which resembles the Magician's table on the card. The room is filled with shelves with glass jars of all shapes and sizes. The jars are filled with objects, liquids and powders. There are skulls of horses, baboons and pigs and a few of moles and mongooses. He takes a few jars off a shelf and places them on the table in front of them:

He turns back to the shelves and for a while, stays busy moving the jars and objects around in the dim light before

he takes down the third bottle and places it on the table in front of them.

"My old trusted ally," he says.

It is a much larger jar. Reitz unwillingly calls out softly – something between a sigh and a shriek.

In the jar is a head. The head of a human. The eyes are half closed. The features slightly squashed against the side of the jar⁹.

Oompie instructs them to ask the head any question that they want answered. Eventually Ben asks the head when the war will end. The silt-like sediment at the bottom of the jar starts rising, bubbles appear at the mouth of the head and Oompie places his ear next to the jar. He then gives Reitz an enigmatic answer to his question – the war has never been nearer the end as at that precise moment.

The next day, Reitz returns to Oompie alone. He asks Oompie if he can put him in contact with his dead wife:

"It's possible," says Oompie, "but there is a price to pay"...

Reitz has to realise, says Oompie, that you sometimes come into contact with the dead at one hell of a price. Because the dead in the underworld should rather not be summonsed¹⁰.

Oompie gives Reitz a powder to smoke that will put him in contact with his dead wife. It does, however, come with a warning. He is not to use it more than three times, after which he has to bury the remaining powder. Later that day, Reitz goes down to the river to smoke the powder without anyone seeing him:

He starts smoking the powder. Pulling it slowly into his lungs. It is bitter and suddenly he jerks, feels a coldness run down his spine. His eyes become cold,



dry and swollen. He stares across the river at a tree:

At a slight distance in front of the moving branches a light haze forms – like compressed water vapour.

And inside this glow, or glowing, he sees the shape of a woman take form. It becomes progressively more firm, but never solid. Her face initially remains without any recognisable features before gradually it takes on the half recognisable form of his love, his dead wife's face. Half recognisable, half formed. Dim, unclear.

He covers his face with his hands for a moment. His cheeks are icy cold.

Then he says her name: softly and hesitatingly.

It looks as if she wants to take on a more solid form; looking in his direction.

Involuntarily, he reaches out to her and sighs.

A ripple goes through her shape, as if her surface is made of water.

He tries to talk to her, but something holds him back.

For a few moments, her face takes on an even more solid form and he sees her as she was, but as if on a faint photograph.

His eyes feel cold. His tongue thick.

Then she starts to fade; the density of her form and outline dwindles, becomes more hesitant and she dissolves.

He calls out. He wants to call her back.

But the nebulous spot that she appeared from is only visible for a few moments before that also suddenly disappears. The branches of the trees that hang low over the surface of the water are dark¹¹.

Oompie has fulfilled his role as Hermes, guiding Reitz on his journey into the underworld. Like Orpheus trying to reach

Eurydice, he has to obey the rules. Do not look back, or he will lose her again. Do not smoke the powder more than three times and then bury it.

As Temperance, Reitz's wife inhabits a realm beyond mortal reach and as no human figure is pictured in the card, it indicates "that whatever is happening here is taking place in the hero's unconscious, without the awareness or participation of the ego"¹². The red and blue of her clothes symbolise "spirit and flesh, masculine and feminine, yang and yin, conscious and unconscious"¹³. As with the subtle and hazy apparition of Reitz's wife, Temperance makes no real entrance, she simply stands there pouring: "One feels that this winged being is not newly descended from heaven, but has been standing there a long time waiting for the hero to become aware of her"¹⁴. Reitz has to smoke Oompie's potion to become aware of his wife.

Temperance is seen as an angel, a winged being. The revenant of Reitz's wife is also supposed to be an angel to him, instead her features are undefined, dark and squashed.

Reitz tries to address his wife. He has smoked the powder again and again, ignoring Oompie's instruction. Like Orpheus loses Eurydice by looking back to see if she is following him, Reitz loses his wife for a second time as he is unable to communicate with her. The last time that Reitz tries to recall her, a voice, possibly Oompie's, calls to him to jump. In his unconscious state, it occurs to him that there is no bank on the other side. She becomes a dark angel or femme fatale. An Angel of Death that almost leads Reitz into the underworld with her. Nichols states that Jung pointed out that "angels, like all archetypes, are creatures of questionable morality"¹⁵.

Reitz's journey into the underworld of his deepest self becomes a thwarted process



of individuation, unfulfilled and unfulfilling. He almost dies and cannot get his wife back. He is left with a greater sense of longing and loss than before. He is at a fragmented point in his life. Seeing his dead wife should be a turning point. He should be attaining closure and wholeness, but does not:

The terrors and insights he experienced in confronting the skeleton of the previous card (Death) have left the hero feeling shaken and lonely, disoriented and set apart. He cannot return to his old ways and habits; his life as he formerly lived it lies in ruins. His conscious personality is temporarily shattered. Although the shell of his old security is now irreparably damaged, through its very cracks a new light can be seen, a dim vision of potential wholeness¹⁶.

Instead of becoming his guardian angel that leads him to wholeness, she fragments him even more. He feels more bereft than before seeing her.

The Angel is supposed to reconcile the two worlds, the opposing aspects of life with her pouring – conscious and unconscious. Reitz, however, remains unsettled and hanging over the abyss:

When these two worlds get mixed up unconsciously, with no guardian angel to preside, our lives become muddled and confused, often with disastrous results. If we try to live on the outer side a drama that more properly belongs to the inner, the plot could end in tragedy. We might, for example, project the Angel Temperance onto some person of our acquaintance, handing over to this person's care and keeping all our conflicts, problems, hopes, and

dreams, expecting this seemingly superior being to guard and regulate the flow of our life. If so, it goes without saying that the Angel of card fourteen would one day pop up in our deck as the Devil of card fifteen¹⁷.

Reitz cannot get his wife back. The threshold between life and death has become blurred. Twice he is forced to lose his wife, once when she dies and once when he cannot reach her in the death realm. As the hanged man, he is unable to act. He is held captive in immobility and inaction by the feminine principle of his unattainable, dead wife. J.E. Cirlot writes in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, that:

Jung explains this symbolism in purely psychological terms, saying that 'hanging... has an unmistakable symbolic value, since swinging (hanging and suffering as one swings) is the symbol of unfulfilled longing or tense expectation'¹⁸.

One morning, Reitz sets off with Ben, Gert and his dog with the yellow eyes, on an unknown mission. They are caught in an ambush and Gert Smal is killed. Ben is so badly wounded that Reitz is uncertain whether he will live. The next day, they are found by two women, Anna and Niggie. Niggie is Anna's cousin and as a result of the war, Anna's husband has disappeared, presumed dead. Together they nurse Ben back to a semblance of health. His injuries around his throat are so bad that he is unable to speak properly again.

Reitz almost loses Ben physically, but as Ben is no longer the same, he does lose his friend as he knew him. Niggie says that it is as if the opposite bank is calling Ben, describing death as a river that is to be crossed. As they recuperate on the farm, Reitz's dreams are filled with women: the



dead Bettie Loots, his dead mother, unknown women, but never again his wife. He has lost her forever.

Anna is small with dark hair and always wears black. She is quiet and is often merely an onlooker in company. One day, Niggie says "Anna is upset today... She has reason to be, because she is in contact with the dead"¹⁹. This interests Reitz and he tries to establish the nature of this contact. Anna represents The Popess. The magician that we saw as Oompie represents yang or the masculine principle. The Popess on the other hand, is the yin or feminine aspect. She is said to embody the qualities of Isis and as she nurses Ben back to health, she is like Isis who reassembles Osiris²⁰.

Anna's communication with the dead remains mysterious. Reitz often looks at her as one who is in touch with the death realm, beautiful as someone who is a mediator between the living and the dead²¹. Anna, however, describes her ability to communicate with the dead as unreliable, that she merely has certain feelings. As the Popess, her "magic is veiled and hidden...the nature of her magic is hidden even from her. It happens in part "behind her back," as it is pictured. She is the custodian of birth and of rebirth but she does not control them"²².

Niggie represents The Empress. The Empress looks like the Popess and can be her sister. Niggie is Anna's cousin and as Nichols writes:

Whenever sisters appear in myths, dreams, and fairy tales, they often represent two different aspects of the same family or essence – in this case the feminine principle... they preside jointly over the four feminine mysteries: formation, preservation, nourishment, and transformation.²³

They nourish and preserve Ben and Reitz and transform them from wounded to healed.

Niggie also resembles the dream woman with the red hair and the little feather hat: "In the candle light, Niggie's hair is reddish brown. Her skin is like thick, white milk"²⁴. One morning when Reitz and Niggie go back to where they were ambushed, Niggie is wearing a little feather hat, instead of her usual bonnet. She is therefore associated with both the Empress and the ghost-like dream image of the woman with the little feather hat²⁵.

Of the Empress, Nichols asks, "Who is the Empress? Is she witch or goddess, devouring mother or Madonna, femme fatale or femme inspiratrice?"²⁶ This question, however, can also be asked of Niggie. Both women have a mysterious connection with heaven and earth, spirit and flesh.

Throughout the novel there is constantly a feeling of foreboding and uncertainty. A feeling as though all the characters are on the threshold between life and death. When Reitz returns to the mountain camp to fetch their journals and belongings and to let the others know what has become of them, the camp is deserted. The camp looks as though it has no history, "no-one was ever here. Nothing took place here."²⁷ All the women in the novel become femme fatales, ghosts, revenant or manes. They are personifications of death, ungraspable and unknowable. Even the living characters in the end become almost ghost-like and both reader and characters are uncertain whether they truly existed or not.

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Notes

¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the original Afrikaans text, *Niggie*. The translations are my own. Winterbach's novel was translated into English as *To hell with Cronje* in 2007. The translation was done by Elsa Silke in co-operation with Winterbach.

² Ingrid Winterbach, *Niggie*, Kaapstad, Human en Rousseau, 2002, p. 8.

³ Sally Nichols, *Jung and Tarot: an archetypal journey*, Maine, Samuel Weiser Inc., 1984, p. 215.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

⁵ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁸ Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁹ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 91-92.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 100-101.

¹² Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 251.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

¹⁸ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 138.

¹⁹ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

²⁰ Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

²¹ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

²² Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 87-89.

²⁴ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

²⁵ Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

²⁷ Winterbach, *op. cit.*, p. 225.