

# Epistolary Encounters:

## Diary and Letter Pastiche in Neo-Victorian Fiction

By

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the significance of a ubiquitous presence of fictional letters and diaries in neo-Victorian fiction. It investigates how intercalated documents fashion pastiche narrative structures to organise conflicting viewpoints invoked in diaries, letters, and other addressed accounts as epistolary forms. This study concentrates on the strategic ways that writers put fragmented and found material traces in order to emphasise such traces of the past as fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory. Interpolated documents evoke ideas of privacy, confession, secrecy, sincerity, and seduction only to be exploited and subverted as writers idiosyncratically manipulate epistolary devices to support metacritical agendas.

Underpinning this thesis is the premise that much literary neo-Victorian fiction is bound in an incestuous relationship with Victorian studies. This can be identified and analysed in works that metafictionally and self-consciously engage the nineteenth century. My study therefore examines a diverse critical awareness refracted through epistolary strategies, investigating how neo-Victorian writers collaborate with or contest critical ideologies by way of perceptual and interpretative manipulation afforded by both diaries and letters. Diary form particularly refracts reflexive critical commentary on the novel and its processes and this study consequently sustains a greater focus on diaries than letters as strategic narrative devices in neo-Victorian fiction.

In five chapters, I examine five novels by writers who share a common characteristic of critical, theoretical, and academic backgrounds. Chapter one investigates how A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) employs techniques of epistolary seduction to support a critique of fictional academics who construct Victorians to fit their own critical agendas. Chapter two considers the ways in which Sarah Waters's novel, *Affinity* (1999), parodically foregrounds the Foucauldian 'gaze' with two diarists and secret letters that engage critical discourses of Victorian sexualities and nineteenth-century spiritualism. Chapter three examines *Alias Grace* (1996) to consider Margaret Atwood's interrogation of the textual re-construction of past lives by way of a diary-style voice. Chapter four discusses Katie Roiphe's 2001 novel, *Still She Haunts Me*, which plays to contemporary unease about Charles Dodgson's relationship with Alice Liddell by exploiting archival gaps with invented diary entries that eulogise desire. My final chapter explores Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997), which interpolates a diary with 'official accounts' in a form of textual autopsy that defends personal liberty and an eccentric viewpoint against communal testimony.

This study demonstrates that neo-Victorian writers use documents creatively to interrogate history and our understanding of it in diverse strategic and intertextual ways. My study is grounded in theories of pastiche and builds on Linda Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction. It is also informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose discussion of heteroglossia coincides with theories of diary form's dialogic double-voicedness outlined by Lorna Martens's work, *The Diary Novel* (1985). My study investigates the intertextual processes of metafiction in neo-Victorianism as an area that has as yet received little critical attention, with no specific investigation of epistolary forms in the genre.

# Contents

<b>Introduction: ‘Rewrite, sign, seal and send’</b>	1
1. Epistolary Forms and Metacriticism	7
2. Diary Form	12
3. Epistolary Strategies Past and Present	15
4. Pastiche and Criticism	25
5. Neo-Victorian Topics and Themes	29
6. Strategic Epistolary in Five Novels	38
<b>Chapter One: Riddles and Relics:</b>	
Critical Correspondence in A. S. Byatt’s <i>Possession: A Romance</i>	43
1. Mythical Victorians	49
2. The Ash/LaMotte Correspondence: Ghosts and Letters	53
3. Postal Nostalgia	62
4. Diaries	67
5. Exchange	70
6. Erasure and Censorship	74
7. Audience and Addressees	80
8. Secrets and Omniscient Narration	83
Conclusion	88
<b>Chapter Two: Diary as Queer Malady:</b>	
Narrative Geometry in Sarah Waters’s <i>Affinity</i>	91
1. Writing with Authority: Waters	94
2. Writing in Search of Authority: The Victorian Spinster	97
3. Writing and Authority: The Medium	104
4. Reading: History/Women	109
5. Reading: The Panoptic Gaze	113
6. Reading: A Ghost in the Panoptic Machine	118
7. Reading The Self Reflected: Diaries and Mirrors	120
Conclusion: Reading: Invisible Letters	122
<b>Chapter Three: A Deviant Device:</b>	
Diary Dissembling in Margaret Atwood’s <i>Alias Grace</i>	126
1. Historical Accounts	132
2. Authorial Intention and Diary Form	134
3. Unreliable Diary Performance	141
4. Dream or Hallucination?	151
5. Letters and Quilts	159
Conclusion	167

<b>Chapter Four: Lewis Carroll and the Curious Theatre of Modernity:</b>	
Epistolary Pursuit in Katie Roiphe's <i>Still She Haunts Me</i>	171
1. Unstable Evidence	178
2. Sexual Secrets	181
3. Event and the River of Alice	187
4. Flesh and Appetite	190
5. Alice: Fleshly Fantasies of a Dream Child	192
6. Dream Turned Nightmare	196
7. Framing the Unseen/Unread	198
8. Postscript: Letters and Power	209
Conclusion	213
<b>Chapter Five: A Dissident Diarist:</b>	
The Superfluous Other in Mick Jackson's <i>The Underground Man</i>	216
1. Case History and Testimony	221
2. Diary vs. Gossip and Hypocrisy	225
3. Diary Defence, Sympathy, and Authorial Polemic	228
4. Conformity vs. a Non-Conformist Imagination	239
5. Madness, Hypochondria, and Gothic Imagination	245
Conclusion	255
<b>Conclusion</b>	258
<i>Bibliography</i>	264

# List of Illustrations

- 4.1  
p. 202 Alice Pleasance Hargreaves (1852–1934) by Lewis Carroll  
(Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), 1858 [*The Beggar-Maid*]  
'Children and Childhood in the *Oxford DNB*'  
*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*  
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/92/92731.html>>  
[accessed 18 August 2010]
- 4.2  
p. 208 Evelyn Hatch (1871-1951) by Lewis Carroll  
(Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), 1879, no title  
*Wikimedia Commons*  
<[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hatch,\\_Evelyn\\_\(Lewis\\_Carroll,\\_29.07.1879\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hatch,_Evelyn_(Lewis_Carroll,_29.07.1879).jpg)> [accessed 18 August 2010]

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*Here I am, sitting at a little oak table where in old times possibly some fair lady sat to pen, with much thought and many blushes, her ill-spelt love-letter, and writing in my diary in shorthand all that has happened since I closed it last. It is nineteenth century up-to-date, with a vengeance. And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere 'modernity' cannot kill.*

Jonathan Harker  
Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, 1899<sup>1</sup>

*It is best, then, that I should note down events daily as they occur; and to ensure, as far as may be, a continuation of my narrative, fragment by fragment, to the very last.*

Wilkie Collins  
*Basil*, 1852<sup>2</sup>

*He felt for his idea of what was behind all this diversity, all this interest. At the back was an intricate and extravagantly prolific maker.*

A. S. Byatt  
'Precipice Encurled' 1987<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000 [1897]), pp. 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1852]), p. 247.

<sup>3</sup> A. S. Byatt, 'Precipice Encurled', in *Sugar and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995 [1987]), original emphasis.



# Introduction:

## *Re-write, sign, seal and send*<sup>1</sup>

Endangered, disordered, and disorderly, fragmented letters and diaries fashion and fabricate the neo-Victorian past. Revisionist writers freely raid and adapt nineteenth-century texts and subjects in order to double-code the past and present in an intertextual project of ‘acknowledged borrowings’.<sup>2</sup> This thesis investigates how epistolary entailments revise and supplement such double-coded structures to converge critical thinking about the Victorians within a fictional frame. Writers who code their fiction with past, present, and epistolary meanings often do so in ways that weave a strand of metacritical debate into what Diana Wallace calls the ‘cat’s cradle’ of postmodern play that patterns and re-patterns history.<sup>3</sup> Within a pastiche framework, documents dialogically engage critical discourses that dissect and re-present the Victorians for us. By means of epistolary ventriloquism, writers simulate ideas of incomplete ‘truths’, evoking Linda Hutcheon’s familiar idea that we can only know the past through its textual traces, which are always partial.<sup>4</sup> The partial nature of documentary relics and remains is not lamented, but rather aesthetically and hermeneutically celebrated by neo-Victorian writers who enthusiastically piece and re-pattern the past to their own reconfigured and critically self-reflexive designs.

Dana Shiller defined the ‘neo-Victorian novel’ in 1997 as works that use an ‘awareness’ of both history and fiction as human constructs to rethink the forms and contents of the past.<sup>5</sup> As a growing genre, neo-Victorianism progressively revisits and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, 2 vols (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869), I, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 3. Metacriticism is defined as a consideration of the principles underlying critical interpretation and judgement. Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Dana Shiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, 29 (1997), 538-60 (p. 540).

rewrites the nineteenth century in a variety of ways. Robin Gilmour identifies ‘at least’ six uses to which Victorian history and Victorian fiction have been put by contemporary writers that include inversion of Victorian ideology, subversion of Victorian fictional norms, modern reworking or completing of a classic Victorian novel, the research novel, and the historical novel written from a modern perspective, which he admits all historical novels are in some sense.<sup>6</sup> Pastiche and parody are included in this list of writerly strategies as either a ‘thoroughgoing form’ or appearing in part like the poems, letters, and diaries in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and the notebooks in Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1991).<sup>7</sup> Gilmour identifies this revisionist practice as ‘a kind of ventriloquism from within the narrative’ without explaining whose voice is disguised or what it might be saying.<sup>8</sup> My thesis proposes that ventriloquy – a frequent trope in neo-Victorianism – conducts a metacritical dialogue in the medium of fiction. In Wayne C. Booth’s terms, the author does not disappear, but chooses to disguise rhetoric under cover of a pseudo-private address.<sup>9</sup>

The complexities of neo-Victorian writers’ relationships with Victorian studies and contemporary literary theories – whether validated or subverted – are issues that may be productively examined by individual case studies that investigate the intertextual intricacies of metacritical epistolary strategies. Such attention will identify how epistolary strategies subtly embed writerly authority and organise critical positions within the text, responding to what Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn term ‘the need for critical inflection’ in the genre.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, without any retrograde return to notions of authorial intention or a search for what Hutcheon calls ‘the original and

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Gilmour, ‘Using the Victorians: the Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction’, in *Rereading the Victorians*, ed. by Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 189-200 (p. 190).

<sup>7</sup> Gilmour, p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> Gilmour, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 32.

originating source of fixed and fetishized meaning in the text', my exploration of pastiche and epistolary forms traces authorial voice in five neo-Victorian novels and its links to presiding critical trends.<sup>11</sup> My approach is informed by Hutcheon's suggestion that both parody and pastiche 'clearly involve the issue of intent' in conjunction with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories that posit authorial intent as inherent to the dialogic nature of epistolary form.<sup>12</sup> Observing particular affinities between diary theory and Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia informs my investigation of neo-Victorians' engagement with the past as a metacritical relationship. If contemporary writers' mission is, in Hutcheon's terms, to establish in order to disrupt, then how writers install and ironically manipulate auto-diegetic forms can illuminate the neo-Victorian project.

In order to understand how diaries and letters are installed and manipulated within multifaceted pastiche practices, this thesis offers detailed case studies of five novels. The novels I address exemplify postmodern pastiche practices that rethink the forms and content of the Victorian past accentuating Margaret Rose's point that 'pastiche may be used in imaginative rather than derivative ways'.<sup>13</sup> I examine the elements and ambiguities posed by intercalated documents in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: a Romance* (1990),<sup>14</sup> Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) as exemplar works that have notably shaped the genre, together with two less widely discussed novels, Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997) and Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001). These writers all embed metacriticism in their novels and set diaries and letters in dialogue with third-person narration or supplementary first-person accounts. Sharing a common characteristic of critical, theoretical, and academic backgrounds, their authors engage the issues of class, gender,

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, *Parody*, p. 38. Terry Eagleton argues that by using diary form, 'the author reveals intention by choosing the form'. Private tutorial at Lancaster University, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Rose, *Parody, Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> This text will henceforth be referred to as *Possession*.

and sexuality that are regularly explored in Victorian studies and evidence an enduring contemporary fascination with renowned Victorian lives.

The five writers I examine represent the noteworthy number of neo-Victorian writers who are also academics and critics, suggesting that scholarly/fictional relations habitually inform the genre.<sup>15</sup> Susana Onega notes a correlation between historical fiction writers like Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, and Charles Palliser, among others, who were Oxbridge trained and also literary critics, and also, in many cases, prize winning fiction writers; in this respect, it is pertinent that Atwood and Byatt are Booker prize winners and Waters and Jackson have been shortlisted for the prize.<sup>16</sup> This has impact for readership and metafictional relations; significantly, Heilmann's and Llewellyn's expansive study of neo-Victorianism extends writer/reader relationships to understand that, however controversial, 'divided readerships, between the "ordinary" reader and the more "knowledgeable" critical reader [... are] essential to the identification of the metafictionality at the core of the neo-Victorian *modus operandi*'.<sup>17</sup> A metacritical angle has, in fact, been present from the earliest instances of neo-Victorian fiction: for example, in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Discussing a 'convergence of theory and fiction', Mark Currie observes that Fowles's novel influenced a new development for writers who were also academics and critics.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in writing a feminist and postcolonial prequel to *Jane Eyre*, Rhys implicitly engaged a form of metacriticism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace has suggested that the change of direction and renewed vigour of the women's historical novel in the 1920s was, in fact, intimately connected to women's new access to university education. Wallace, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Susana Onega, 'British Historiographic Metafiction in the 1980s', in *British Postmodern Fiction*, ed. by Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 47-61 (p. 47). Previous neo-Victorian works that have won the Booker prize include J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* in 1973, Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988, and also his novel, *The True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 66. Fowles's novel contains one diary entry and a particularly significant letter that fails to reach its addressee.

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of pre-1960s' retrieval of the Victorian in fiction, see Tracy Hargreaves, "'We Other Victorians': Literary Victorian Afterlives', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2003), 278-86.

Now, post-theoretical tensions emerge in late twentieth- to twenty-first-century historical fictions.

Such tensions are investigated by Michael Greaney, who considers Byatt's *Possession* in a study of contemporary fiction's uses of theory. Greaney explores what he suggests is not so much the 'influence of theory on fiction, but of a new *confluence* between the two'; a position he believes 'dissolves the traditional boundaries between literary text and critical metalanguage'.<sup>20</sup> Focussing such ideas of confluence on what she prefers to term Victoriana, Cora Kaplan uses Sarah Waters's 2002 novel, *Fingersmith*, to suggest a coming together or flow of fiction with the detail and insights gained by scholarly research on the Victorian world:

One of the pleasures for Victorianist readers of Waters's novel is that as we admire her skills, we simultaneously understand that the story she tells is always as a parallel universe; counterfactual, imaginary, confected out of a range of materials that include Victorian fiction, and modern rewriting of the Victorian by feminist historians and critics, among others.<sup>21</sup>

Such blending of critical investigation or rewriting with a literary imagination produces what Llewellyn suggests is a critical paradigm that 'blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection of self and other'.<sup>22</sup>

I propose that examining epistolary forms offer new insights into such synthesising of critical perspectives within fiction, permitting what Llewellyn suggests is the palimpsestuous existence of critical and creative narratives 'occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another'.<sup>23</sup> This study focusses on the 'odd' or 'different ways' in which intercalated letters and diaries clear a space for such dialogue within fiction. As a leading example, Byatt – an erstwhile academic – uses discovered letters to effectively parody fictional academics who

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Greaney, *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory: The Novel from Structuralism to Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 3, original emphases.

<sup>21</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Perspective: *Fingersmith*'s Coda: Feminism and Victorian Studies', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008) 42-55 (p. 53).

<sup>22</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), 164-85 (p. 170).

<sup>23</sup> Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', p. 170.

construct Victorians to fit their own critical agendas. Promoting her belief that enjoyment and reading must be prioritised and possibly rescued from theoretical hijacking, Byatt consequently offers *Possession* as a multi-faceted text – what Ingeborg Hoesterey deems, a ‘hybrid of “theory” and fictional narrative’, which conforms to the rather awkward term ‘critifiction’.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Waters, with a PhD in historical representations of homosexuality, parodically foregrounds the Foucauldian ‘gaze’ in a diary novel that draws on critical discourses about Victorian sexuality and nineteenth-century spiritualist practices. Equally, Atwood’s long career as a feminist, postmodernist, and literary critic informs her interrogation of history’s conflicting evidence from within a diary-style narrative and, as a vocal anti-feminist academic, Roiphe creatively imagines lost diary entries, which play to contemporary unease about Lewis Carroll’s relationship with Alice Liddell. Finally, Jackson, a product of the acclaimed UEA creative writing course, more loosely incorporates critically discussed psychological and somatic ideas about the nineteenth century in a diary that contests collective public diagnosis of an ailing aristocrat to promote personal liberty.

My study concentrates on the processes of metafiction in neo-Victorianism as an area that has as yet received little critical attention, with no specific investigation of epistolary forms in the genre. The work that intersects most closely with my study is Suzanne Keen’s *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001), which has a primary focus on fiction and addresses nostalgia to consider contemporary uses of history, heritage, and the archive. Concerned mainly with works and ideas that oppose fragmentation and questions of truth, however, Keen’s study extends beyond postmodern novels and only acknowledges ‘overlaps in a small set of instances’ with historiographic metafiction. She argues:

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<sup>24</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 101. The term is adopted by Raymond Federman in *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

Despite the prevailing view that postmodernism has scuttled old-fashioned notions of Truth, by far the majority of romances of the archive seek and find solid facts, incontrovertible evidence, and well-preserved memories of times past. In the face of postmodern scepticism, this kind of contemporary fiction claims that its world-making can answer questions about what really happened, though it does so without surrendering its licence to invent.<sup>25</sup>

Here, my study diverges from Keen's; she may discuss *Possession's* representation of the archive as 'material objects in actual places' that spark a narrative performance of scholarly practice, but her particular interest lies in the research quest and understanding the attractions and frustrations of a desire to penetrate collections – archives – of documents – 'the box, the sack, the attic, the barn, the secret compartment, the family collection, and even the container in the grave' for traditional narrative resolutions.<sup>26</sup> Keen is concerned with the processes of discovering documents in the archive as 'special locations'; my interest lies in exploring how embedded documents strategically support postmodern agendas and promote ideas of contingency and partiality in history.<sup>27</sup> Her discussion does not explore the entailments strategically brought to bear by epistolary forms in postmodernist fiction, and this is the primary focus of my study.

### 1. Epistolary Forms and Metacriticism

Amidst thematic diversity, letters and diaries remain omnipresent in neo-Victorian fiction. Occasional letters may be commonplace in much fiction, but neo-Victorian novels like Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999), and Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005), to take just a few examples, more significantly employ letters or letter exchanges. Diaries and journals may appear less commonly in fiction, generally, but they are widespread in neo-

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<sup>25</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Keen, p. 48. *Possession* is the only text studied in this thesis to meet Keen's criteria that romances of the archive will feature collections of papers or documents and scenes in libraries and plot action of 'doing research' in documents. Keen, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Keen, p. 48.

Victorian texts. For instance, Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) does not notably contain letters, but Agnes Rackham's diary – buried and later disinterred – is an important plot device, and a second example, Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995), tells a tale of illusion, magic, and trickery by 'stage-managing' two diaries, with authorial sleight of hand concealing doubles and unreliable narrators. The appearance of any diary in fiction tends to be of significant strategic placement.<sup>28</sup>

What, however, are the qualities specifically inherent in letter and diary form that open them to the sophistications of a neo-Victorian project of metacritical disruption or subversion? An initial response might address the subjectivity and potential unreliability of first-person voices, but further ideas soon crowd the space of this query. For instance, Gerald Prince has suggested that the most interesting aspects of diary fiction are not the more obvious topics of 'loneliness, authenticity, loss of self, quest for self or affirmation of self', but the 'theme of the diary, the theme of writing a diary and its concomitant themes and motifs', which give writing itself a role in the plot.<sup>29</sup> With regard to letters, the most obvious thematic topic is their ready association with ardour and seduction, but other aspects are open to manipulation, such as potential for disclosing secrets, the necessity for close reading that Janet Gurkin Altman suggests is required to decode epistolary form, and the fragmentation and discontinuity inherent in any exchange of letters.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> There are neo-Victorian novels where a diary is indicated, but the narrative fails to engage entailments of the form. For example, Rachel Hore's *The Glass Painter's Daughter* (2008) contains a Victorian diary begun in 1879 and discovered by what transpires to be the diarist's descendant. The diary forms part of a dual time narrative, but, excepting a few representative entries, the diary is then converted into a third-person relating of 'Laura's story'. Similarly, *The Journal of Dora Damage* tells of bookbinding of pornography commissioned by the aristocracy in a first-person account. However, the novel belies its title by not conforming to the first-person day-to-day narration typical of a diary account and is ultimately explained as a retrospective account of the previous year's events, written by bookbinder Dora in a rediscovered book that is 'bound for nobody else but me, for nobody's perusal, for no purchase'. Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 425.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald Prince, 'The Diary Novel: Notes for the Definition of a Sub-Genre', *Neophilologus*, 59 (1975), 477-81 (p. 479).

<sup>30</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 92.



Contemporary writers may also invest documents with special status as tangible materialisations of a personal past redelivered as part of what Kaplan understands to be ‘the aesthetic pleasure we continue to take in invoking the Victorian’.<sup>31</sup> Descriptive and affective aesthetics impact on the genre when writers re-embody Victorians in an imagined documented past; as Bill Unwin in Swift’s *Ever After* explains on recovering his ancestor’s notebooks/diary, ‘when I open their pages, I open, I touch the pages that he once touched. I occupy, as it were, his phantom skin’.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a twentieth-century narrator in L. E. Usher’s *Then Came October* (2008) discovers her hated mother’s diaries amid a library of sensation fiction titles, but later reacts physically to ‘see[ing]’ her beloved grandmother’s private text by ‘caressing the leather-binding of the diary. She lifted the book to her cheek, stroking the cover as if it were her grandmother’s hand’.<sup>33</sup> My first chapter’s discussion of the seductive pseudo-material appeal of discovering documents in Byatt’s *Possession* addresses such tactile redelivery of the past.

To some extent all epistolary forms are metafictional devices that implicitly embody what Altman terms a ‘*mise-en-abyme* of the writer-reader relationship’ itself.<sup>34</sup> Diary form is, in fact, conducive for metafictional debates on reading and writing relations, as leading diary critic, H. Porter Abbott, suggests in his 1984 study, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action*:

The reflexive diary closes the gap between the creative and the critical. It is a drama of both writing and reading. Insofar as reading is a part of this drama, the text puts a light on the whole field of interpretation. In that light, the writer and his or her intentions stand out as principal concerns.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> L. E. Usher, *Then Came October* (York: Harbour Books, 2008), p. 230.

<sup>34</sup> Altman, p. 212.

<sup>35</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 49.

The interpolation of letters and diaries foregrounds a degree of writerly authority from within the text, but also places emphasis on the reader's role in decoding the narrative. This study therefore examines how neo-Victorian writers collaborate with or contest critical ideologies by way of perceptual and interpretative manipulation afforded by both diaries and letters as epistolary forms. The term 'epistolary' does refer principally to letters, but the 'epistolary novel' is defined as either comprised solely of letters or expanded to include works containing documents like diaries, journals, or newspaper clippings, in addition to letters. The differences and similarities between letters and diaries are much debated (Altman, Abbott, Duyfhuizen, Martens), with a fundamental differentiation made that letters involve exchange and diaries do not. However, distinctions become fluid when writers adopt the forms as fictional devices; in a novel, letter form essentially only differs from diary writing with the presence of an addressee in the fictional world. Any differentiation is further problematic when writers manipulate and experiment with the forms in fiction. Abbott explains that any difference

derives not from a strict semantic distinction, 'letter' versus 'diary,' but from a difference in focus or emphasis. The crucial issue is not the existence or non-existence of an addressee but the degree to which the addressee is given an independent life and an active textual role in the work.<sup>36</sup>

An example of fiction writers' play and confusion of form is found in Jane Harris's 2006 neo-Victorian novel, *The Observations*, which depicts Bessy Buckley, a maid-servant who is compelled to write a diary for employer, Arabella Reid's scrutiny. In presupposing a reader or addressee for the diary, the boundaries between diary and letter form become imprecise and conventional concepts of diary privacy are exploded. Therefore, in order to address the shape-shifting intertextual exchange that blurs usual distinctions between two forms of writing, I use the term 'epistolary' in this study to

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<sup>36</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 10.

encompass *both* embedded letters and diaries. Apart from Atwood's novel, which does incorporate a range of different documentary styles, including newspaper reports, prison records, and Grace Marks's printed 'confession', the novels I examine primarily incorporate invented diaries and letters and, in Jackson's case, intercalated official 'accounts' that are addressed to a silent audience.

Despite similarities between letters and diaries, neo-Victorian writers appear most strategically to manipulate traits peculiar to diary form. A good illustrative example is Charles Palliser's 1989 novel, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam*, which contains few letters and a rather more significant diary text. Mary Huffam's notebook/diary is strategically positioned at the epicentre of a labyrinthine narrative puzzle strictly structured to the mathematical figure of the novel's title. Palliser states in his afterword that he did not want to imitate the Victorian novels that he enjoyed reading, but rather 're-contextualise them, to offer a critique like an academic work, but in the form of another novel'.<sup>37</sup> He makes clear his metacritical intent 'that the novel should be neither a historical novel nor a passive pastiche, but rather should be an ironic reconstruction of the Victorian novel'.<sup>38</sup> Onega's argument that as 'a self-contained quincunx', the structure of Mary's diary 'accurately reproduce[s] the baffling *regressus ad infinitum* structure of the centre that suggests the illusion of a centre for the whole novel', indicates diary form evidencing a doubled and critical viewpoint typically characteristic of the genre.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Palliser, 'Author's Afterword', *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990), p 1208. This text will henceforth be referred to as *The Quincunx*.

<sup>38</sup> Palliser, 'Author's Afterword', p. 1212.

<sup>39</sup> Susana Onega, 'Mirror Games and Hidden Narratives in *The Quincunx*', in *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 151-63 (p. 157).

## 2. Diary Form

As diary form appears to particularly refract reflexive critical commentary on the novel and its processes, this study consequently sustains a greater focus on diaries than letters as strategic narrative devices in neo-Victorian fiction. In her influential work, *The Diary Novel* (1985), Lorna Martens traces the history of this genre and argues that the form may have originally been adopted mimetically by fiction writers, but it later came to represent, as Martens argues, ‘an empty structure with an abstract potential’, with authors using the form more ‘dextrously and inventively’ by exploiting generic aspects such as temporal structure and single point of view.<sup>40</sup> Observing that fictional diarists, like actual diary writers, have no control over their material, she suggests that authors who choose to employ diary form in fiction have absolute control and, as a result, authority to shape events. Bakhtin’s claim that incorporated genres usually ‘refract, to one degree or another, authorial intentions’ mirrors Martens’s evidence for finding authorial voice within the fictional diary.<sup>41</sup> She explains that the actual diary provides a ‘simple communicative situation’, which she illustrates diagrammatically with tripartite poles of diarist/narrated world/reader. But whether interpolated into narrative or wholly structuring it, a diary in fiction is a *framed* communicative situation that brings a second narrative triangle of author/novel/reader to bear on the situation.<sup>42</sup> She suggests that this creates tension between what narrators say and authorial commentary:

What the presence of the second narrative triangle means for the diary novel, in contrast to the real diary, is essentially the presence of a second voice in the narrative, which we can broadly designate as the voice of the author. This voice will appear in different guises in different novels and can be refracted into several voices: the voice of the plot, of irony, of symbol, and so forth. Even the form can speak.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 295.

<sup>41</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 259-422 (p. 321).

<sup>42</sup> Martens, p. 33, my emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Martens, p. 34. Martens qualifies ‘reader’ with a question mark in the first situation, which complicates any professed simplicity in the communicative situation; diaries are written to be read by diarists themselves, but, more often than not, they are also written with other readers in mind. Acknowledging potential narratees adds complexity to a not so simple communicative situation.

Martens claims that ‘if we read carefully and suspiciously’ and if we can find points where the second narrative triangle intrudes into the first, we can view these points of intrusion as indications of how to read the text.<sup>44</sup> Especially when we can identify these other voices as the author’s voice (or detect the author’s hand), we find entrances into the text.<sup>45</sup> Martens’s somewhat abstract methodology that ‘form can speak’ is expanded more practically by Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia, which locate the author’s voice in reservations, concessions, and loopholes identifiable in the narrator’s voice. Bakhtin explains the ways in which characters’ inner speech is ‘transmitted in a way regulated by the author, *with provocative questions from the author and with ironically debunking reservations*’.<sup>46</sup> His model for textual investigation more concretely locates Martens’s ‘intrusions’ within a framed communicative situation.

The non-fiction diary is an unavoidable intertext for any fictional diary. As Bakhtin suggests, ‘incorporated genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities’.<sup>47</sup> Adopting or incorporating a diary within fiction therefore displays intention to call upon what Bernard Duyfhuizen terms the ‘presuppositions and entailments’<sup>48</sup> of the form or, as Andrew Hassam suggests, an idea of a ‘diary norm’ that is attached to the word *diary*, which, he argues, ‘exists as a cultural paradigm or model separate from diary writing as a practice’.<sup>49</sup> As Martens observes, ‘the real diary provide[s] a continuously present and ever new point of departure’.<sup>50</sup> Despite the fact that readers obviously do not enter into an autobiographical pact with authors of fictional diaries, this situation is nevertheless simulated by a novelistic pact that requires

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<sup>44</sup> Martens, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Martens, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse’, p. 319, original emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse’, p. 321.

<sup>48</sup> Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Hassam, *Writing and Reality: A Study of Modern British Diary Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Martens, p. 25.

suspension of disbelief. Readers of diary fiction are ostensibly encouraged to trust the diarist's representation of events. Such faith in the diary voice is discussed by Trevor Field in his work, *Form and Function in the Diary Novel* (1989):

Many successful diary novels manage to draw the reader into believing in the possibility of the writing process before launching off into a literally unlikely text which nonetheless remains credible as long as the reader is inspired by literary good faith.<sup>51</sup>

Diary form aims to generate an aura of authenticity and self-reflexive honesty, with Martens's governing connotation of 'sincerity' always evident.<sup>52</sup> Readers, encouraged by the inevitable intertext of the non-fiction diary, may initially believe that they maintain an all-seeing scrutiny of the diarist's private thoughts as generic echoes of sincerity work towards a traditional aim of 'buttressing the illusion of the real'.<sup>53</sup> As an 'embattled notion', sincerity is generally accompanied by ideas of consonance and dissonance apparent in novelists' attitudes to their created diarists, resulting in either authorial validation of a diarist or an opposite attitude of dissent.<sup>54</sup>

The fictional diarists studied in this thesis all have validated viewpoints that organise each novel's central critical premise. For example, from within a deliberate tangle of competing opinions and viewpoints, Atwood manages to authorise a 'private' voice framed by pseudo-diary connotations that suggest confessed sincerity amid uncertain pastiche. Similarly, Jackson's and Roiphe's attempts to filter sympathy for, respectively, an eccentric aristocrat and an adult who 'befriends' children, are controversial positions that benefit from bolstering by a sincere diary voice. Framing a voice as a diary suggests this will be confiding, sincere, and confessional, but also potentially self-deceiving. Julie Sanders observes in her essay, 'We "Other Victorians"; or, Rethinking the Nineteenth Century', that the unreliable narrator is common to appropriative fiction, as 'postmodern authors find a useful metafictional method for

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<sup>51</sup> Trevor Field, *Form and Function in the Diary Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Martens, p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Martens, p. 37.

reflecting on their own creative authorial impulses'.<sup>55</sup> Unreliable narration is signalled either overtly, for instance, by Atwood's diarist who, as a self-confessed story-teller, elaborates and manipulates meaning as she tries to make the story 'come out a better way', or more covertly, in Waters's novel, where a diarist is undone by silent letters that eventually reveal Margaret Prior to be comprehensively manipulated and deceived by others.<sup>56</sup> Jackson's diarist unfolds a limited vision as information is being actively kept from him, but not from the reader, and Roiphe presents Charles Dodgson as a confessing, but conflicted and tormented self-censoring diarist. With some similarities to Atwood's novel, Roiphe's text parodies contemporary voyeurism that focusses on secret Victorians. In all these texts, the diary becomes the hero of pastiche/parody in a Bakhtinian sense, disarming any sense of a secret text within or without fiction and by extension parodying those who hope to find confessional 'truths' in secret documents.<sup>57</sup>

### 3. Epistolary Strategies Past and Present

It was, however, precisely confessed 'truths' that nineteenth-century fiction readers looked to intercalated documents to provide. My research indicates that there are both similarities and significant differences between nineteenth-century and contemporary fiction's use of epistolary devices. The epistolary novel comprised purely of letters famously had its heyday in the eighteenth century, developing from earlier examples like Aphra Behn's *Love Letters between a Noble-man and His Sister* (1684-87) and the anonymous *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) to result in later well-known epistolary novels like Francis Burney's *Evelina: Or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into*

<sup>55</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 129.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, (London: Vintage, 2006 [1996]), p. 276.

<sup>57</sup> Using the sonnets in *Don Quixote*, Bakhtin explains, 'in a parodied sonnet, the sonnet form is not a genre at all; that is, it is not the form of a whole but is rather the *object of representation*: the sonnet here is the *hero of the parody*. In a parody on the sonnet, we must first of all recognise a sonnet, recognise its form, its specific style, its manner of seeing, its manner of selecting from and evaluating the world – the world view of the sonnet, as it were. A parody may represent and ridicule these distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the *image of a sonnet*'. 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, (See Bakhtin, 'Discourse' above), pp. 41-83 (p. 51), original emphases.

*the World* (1778), Samuel Richardson's epic *Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady* (1747-48), and *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1741), to name but three of many. Notably, in this last most renowned epistolary novel, letter writing conventions metamorphose into diary writing; indeed, as Tom Keymer points out, *Pamela* 'is never far from (and at one stage becomes) a soliloquising diary or journal'.<sup>58</sup> An eighteenth-century epistolary novel also of particular significance to this study is Sophia Lee's *The Recess: A Tale of Other Times* (1783), the success of which April Alliston claims was important in establishing both Gothic and historical fiction.<sup>59</sup> Wallace suggests that this novel proves influential for narrative strategies of historical fiction, as 'one of Lee's most important bequests to her successors' lies in her 'handling of narrative point of view and the use of a view from below or to the side of conventional histories'.<sup>60</sup>

The eighteenth-century epistolary wave has been extensively critically examined,<sup>61</sup> often with a particular focus on women.<sup>62</sup> The form lost popularity at the end of the century largely because of what Joe Bray suggests was the letter's inability to continue representing psychological tensions.<sup>63</sup> However, Bray acknowledges its impact on the style of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels<sup>64</sup> and as Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook points out, the form did not vanish at the end of the eighteenth

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<sup>58</sup> Tom Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 45.

<sup>59</sup> April Alliston, 'Introduction', Sophia Lee's *The Recess: A Tale of Other Times*, ed. by April Alliston (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000 [1783]), p. ix.

<sup>60</sup> Wallace, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> See studies ranging from the early 1940 work by Frank Gees Black, *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century* to Joe Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> See Ruth Perry's *Women, Letters and the Novel* (1980), which examines the social context of letter writing in connection with the rise of the novel; Mary A. Favret's *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (1993) redefines the letter as a feminine genre; April Alliston's *Virtue's Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women's Fiction* (1996) discusses more than a hundred epistolary novels written by women – mostly after Richardson.

<sup>63</sup> Bray, p. 108.

<sup>64</sup> Bray, p. 108.



century, but rather its rhetorical strategies and generic conventions were incorporated in fragmented form into nineteenth-century fictions.<sup>65</sup>

The nineteenth century may have been an era when epistolary forms were less in favour with novelists, but Gothic and sensation fiction writers continued to intercalate letters and diaries in plots that developed secrets and suspense for subversive agendas. Texts such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1858), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, all employ diary form. Letters are also a significant presence in classic Gothic works, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which is contemporarily reworked by Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (2003) as a housemaid's diary account of the doctor's very peculiar behaviour; similarly the epistolary strategies of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) are revisited in Elizabeth Kostova's neo-Victorian novel, *The Historian* (2005), which begins with discovery of letters hidden in a library, addressed to 'My dear and unfortunate successor'.<sup>66</sup> In Stevenson's and Stoker's pre-texts, epistolary forms are employed to explain events and restore order, whereas neo-Victorian versions recover a marginal character – history from below – or celebrate archival investigation that pieces together history with discovered documents.

Interpolated diaries and letters were staple narrative strategies in nineteenth-century sensation fiction; as John Sutherland argues, 'sensationalists specialised in a jagged style of narration that impacted on the reader's sensibility like bullets'.<sup>67</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon's most famous novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), may not have a

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<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (1996), p. 174.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (London: Time Warner, 2005), p. 5. Tim Lucas's *The Book of Renfield: A Gospel of Dracula* (2005) invents private diaries, professional journals, and wax-cylinder recordings made by Dr. Seward for his obsessive study of Stoker's character, Renfield.

<sup>67</sup> John Sutherland, Introduction to Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (London: Penguin, 2004 [1864-66]), p. vii.

diarist, but she nonetheless regularly incorporated diary writing into her works.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Ellen Wood's and Charles Reade's sensation novels contain or cite diaries.<sup>69</sup> Most conspicuously, however, Wilkie Collins pervasively embedded epistolary forms in his fiction as part of what one Victorian reviewer deemed a 'peculiar new scheme of writing a tale in the words of a dozen different narrators'.<sup>70</sup> Collins produced such notable diarists as Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale* (1866), Miss Clack in *The Moonstone* (1868), and Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* (1860), which James Wilson's neo-Victorian novel, *The Dark Clue: A Novel of Suspense* (2001), revisits with similarly amassed epistolary devices.

Collins's later novels continue to embed documents with strategic variety. Diverse manoeuvring of letters, diaries, and addressee situations is evident in such works as *Poor Miss Finch* (1873), where blind Lucilla Finch's diary is transcribed and interrupted by narrator Madame Pratolungo's contradictory or explanatory interjections that, at times, refer readers to specific earlier points in the narrative for proof or clarity. *The Law and the Lady* (1875) features Valeria Woodville in an early role of detective figure, attempting to clear her husband of poisoning his first wife; ultimately she provides proof of this by supervising the reconstruction of a torn and scattered confessional letter, as 'precious morsels of paper' are recovered (quite fantastically) from beneath three years of refuse in the 'dust-heap'.<sup>71</sup> A later work, *The Legacy of*

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<sup>68</sup> For instance, 'Clement Austin's Diary' appears in *Henry Dunbar: The Story of an Outcast* (1864); 'A Modern Gentleman's Diary' forms part of *Only a Clod* (1865); 'Sibyl Faunthorpe's Diary' in *Dead Men's Shoes* (1876); 'An Old Lady's Diary' in *The Cloven Foot* (1879); *One Life, One Love* (1890) includes chapters entitled 'Daisy's Diary in Venice' and 'Daisy's Diary in London'; 'Cora's Diary' appears in *Thou Art the Man* (1894), which also includes a chapter entitled 'A Letter from the Dead'.

<sup>69</sup> The 'Diary of Adam Grainger' appears in Ellen Wood's novel, *Adam Grainger* (1876) and diaries appear, or are cited in Charles Reade's *Hard Cash: A Matter of Fact Romance* (1864), *Foul Play* (with Dion Boucicault) (1868), and *A Simpleton: A Story of the Day* (1873).

<sup>70</sup> 'Unsigned Review, *The Times*, October 1860', in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* ed. by Norman Page (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005 [1974]), p. 99. A wealth of letters and diaries appears in Collins's works, including a short story entitled, 'The Diary of Anne Rodway' (1859) and a chapter entitled 'Leaves from Leah's Diary' in *After Dark* (1856).

<sup>71</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, (London: Penguin, 1998 [1875]), p. 339. See Catherine Delafield, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) for discussion of Collins's female diarists from a feminist perspective.

*Cain* (1888), tests out theories of hereditary criminal tendencies via a strategy of two alternating female diarists that resonates with Waters's *Affinity*.<sup>72</sup>

Neo-Victorianism's debt to sensation fiction, particularly Collins's work, is readily acknowledged by both novelists and critics of the genre.<sup>73</sup> Waters states that her first three novels, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity*, and particularly *Fingersmith*, are a pastiche of nineteenth-century sensation fiction. She specifically imitates the strategies of Collins's *The Woman in White* to stage the twists and turns of her own fiction.<sup>74</sup> Beth Palmer discusses the legacy of the sensation novel's 'awareness of material culture' evident in the intersecting diaries of *Affinity*, which she argues particularly resembles a Collins sensation text both in form and also materiality of print, with the two diaries printed in different fonts.<sup>75</sup> Strategically echoing the conventions of Gothic and sensation fiction as they are, it is unsurprising that neo-Victorian writers who appropriate epistolary forms continue to focus on topics that preoccupied these nineteenth-century genres. David Punter observes that

Sensation fiction, sometimes called 'domesticated Gothic' because of the way in which it transfers Gothic events to the heart of a supposedly respectable Victorian society, focuses upon secrets, social taboos, the irrational elements of the psyche, and questions of identity. Murder, adultery, bigamy, blackmail, fraud and disguise are common components of the plot.<sup>76</sup>

Revisionist writers revisit and reinvent both thematic and strategic inheritance to unfold adultery, madness, crimes of passion, and variations of dark desires or social transgression, as hidden diaries and secret letters come to light.

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<sup>72</sup> Other examples of nineteenth-century multi-narrator diary novels include Dinah Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859), Elizabeth Rundle Charles's *Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta Family* (1864), and Emily Sarah Holt's, *Joyce Morrell's Harvest: The Annals of Selwick Hall* (1881).

<sup>73</sup> Kelly A. Marsh identified the 'neo-Sensation Novel' as a 'new genre dominated by novelists using highly experimental narrative techniques' in an article entitled, 'The Neo-Sensation Novel: A Contemporary Genre in the Victorian Tradition', *Philological Quarterly* 74 (1995), 99-123 (p. 99).

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Waters, 'Sensational Stories', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2006  
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/bookclub/story/0,,1799518,00.html>> [accessed 5 June 2007]

<sup>75</sup> Beth Palmer, 'Are the Victorians Still With Us?: Victorian Sensation Fiction and its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century', *Victorian Studies*, 52 (2009), 86-94 (p. 91).

<sup>76</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 94.

The Gothic tradition of the lost and found manuscript is repeatedly rediscovered in neo-Victorian fiction. Catherine Spooner notes that ‘postmodern Gothic has seized on the idea of the found manuscript’<sup>77</sup> and Punter argues that the Gothic is structured around the notion of ‘the questionable source in a variety of ways [including] the motif of the lost manuscript, symbolising ambivalence about lost authority and the vanishing of the past’.<sup>78</sup> Unlike sensation fiction’s focus on plot over character, contemporary novels use intercalated diary extracts, ruptured letter exchanges, and lurid newspaper reports to explore more closely the violent psychological recesses of murderous minds. Mapping an uncertain mix of citation and invention, neo-Victorianists evidence contemporary Gothic’s fascination with ‘spaces of absence’<sup>79</sup> by advertising their creative exploitation of what Atwood terms the ‘mere hints and outright gaps’ in the archive.<sup>80</sup> Readers must therefore assess ‘evidence’ and competing accounts for dramas of textualised traces that are parasitic on both historical records and sensation fiction’s narrative strategies.

Hidden or lost documents are regularly unearthed and brought to light in a substantial body of neo-Victorian fiction that concentrates, like Byatt’s *Possession*, on revealing family secrets in documents as ‘folded paper time-bombs’.<sup>81</sup> Novels like John Harwood’s *The Ghostwriter* (2005) and *The Seance* (2008) both plot spectral suspense and secrets with epistolary strategies and manuscripts prised from secret drawers.<sup>82</sup> Archival questing turns into a genealogical mystery in Fiona Mountain’s *Pale as the Dead* (2005), which begins with an old bequeathed diary and culminates in recovery of a letter that encloses fated Pre-Raphaelite model Lizzie Siddal’s mythical suicide note.

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<sup>77</sup> Catherine Spooner, ‘Gothic in the Twentieth-Century’, in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 38-47 (p. 45).

<sup>78</sup> David Punter, ‘Ossian, Blake and the Questionable Source’, in *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani, Peter Davidson, and Jane Stevenson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 25-42 (p. 37).

<sup>79</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Margaret Atwood, ‘Author’s Afterword’, *Alias Grace*, p. 542.

<sup>81</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: 1991), p. 89.

<sup>82</sup> John Harwood, *The Ghost Writer* (London: Vintage, 2005) and *The Seance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008).

Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006) also begins an exposé of family secrets with an enticing letter that promises biographical revelation and culminates with a 'fragmented and broken' diary to unravel a tale of twins and incest.<sup>83</sup> These texts all concentrate on recovering the past by way of textual remains that await belated readers who must piece together and reanimate the past.

In fiction, as in life, documents subject to the whims and vagaries of careless inheritors and caretaking censors emanate an air of fragility, mystery, and secrecy. Letter communications can be hazardous: interrupted, misdirected, intercepted, or undelivered by mischance or design; like diaries, they may also be deliberately expurgated, defaced, burned, or buried. It was such perilous transmission of meaning that fascinated nineteenth-century sensation and Gothic fiction writers and now absorbs contemporary revisionists, as illustrated in *The Thirteenth Tale*:

Hester's diary was damaged. The key was missing, the clasp so rusted that it left orange stains on your fingers. The first three pages were stuck together where the glue from the inner cover had melted into them. On every page the last word dissolved into a brownish tide mark as if the diary had been exposed to dirt and damp together. A few pages had been torn; along the ripped edges was a tantalising list of fragments: *abn, cr, ta, est*. Worst of all, it seemed that the diary had at some point been submerged in water. The pages undulated; when closed, the diary splayed to more than its intended thickness.<sup>84</sup>

Neo-Victorian novels can emphasise a seductive allure for such archival discovery, as private diaries and beribboned bundles of old letters entice readers with papery secrets whispered long ago. Adhaf Soueif's 1999 novel, *The Map of Love*, for instance, shows Isabella Parkman recovering her grandmother's papers and journal from a trunk of belongings to find 'fragments of a life lived a long, long time ago. Across a hundred years the woman's voice speaks to her – so clearly that she cannot believe it is not possible to pick up her pen and answer'.<sup>85</sup> Such appeal in locating a past preserved in documented traces – diaries, notebooks, or letters – is imitated in the fictional world, as

<sup>83</sup> Diane Setterfield, *The Thirteenth Tale* (London: Orion, 2006), p. 315.

<sup>84</sup> Setterfield, p. 315, original emphasis.

<sup>85</sup> Adhaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 4.

documents spill from worn leather suitcases, tumble from dusty attics, or emerge concealed and disguised in libraries. The fragility and survival of documents add to the drama of their rediscovery in line with Abbott's claim that 'the drama of the survival of the text has become a part of the drama of the tale'.<sup>86</sup>

Neo-Victorianism embraces 'tantalising' fragments to organise letters and diaries quite differently to those in Victorian fiction. Within nineteenth-century plots of suspense and discovery, epistolary forms contain secrets that are sooner or later revealed. Sensation novels were defined by Katherine Tillotson in 1969 as 'novels with a secret';<sup>87</sup> Kelly Marsh further suggests that 'sensation novels, by definition, work on the assumption that present enigmas are the result of secrets hidden in the past, and that these secrets are discoverable'.<sup>88</sup> Unearthed and exposed, letters and diaries disclose documentary 'evidence' to avidly awaiting audiences, as illustrated by a Collins novel: 'If Miss Halcombe's search through her mother's letters had produced the result which she anticipated, the time had come for clearing up the mystery of the woman in white'.<sup>89</sup> Such denouement recuperates breached knowledge to produce nineteenth-century plots that require resolution for all loose narrative ends. Nineteenth-century texts treat letters and diaries as empirical or legal evidence to resolve disruption of property ownership, inheritance, marriage, and identity crises. Discovered documents provide restorative hermeneutic evidence for fictional worlds under threat from social and sexual transgression. Unlike nineteenth-century narratives of exposed and explained secrets, postmodern fiction tends not to emphasise documents uncovering 'truths', but rather deconstructs how investigatory reading and interpretation take place. Documents read in a postmodern framework of ambiguity, discontinuity, and self-conscious narration reveal decentred and destructured subjects. Manipulating documentary 'evidence',

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<sup>86</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 187.

<sup>87</sup> Kathleen Tillotson, 'Introduction: The Lighter Reading of the Eighteen-Sixties', *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. xv.

<sup>88</sup> Marsh, p. 102.

<sup>89</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1860]), p. 20.

contemporary writers play with histories, cultural ideas, and critical representations of the Victorians in pastiche forms that deconstruct the ways in which we see and perceive their lives.

‘Telling li(v)es’ is one of the basic tenets of postmodernism according to Alison Lee<sup>90</sup> and, with four out of five of my central case studies representing the keen neo-Victorian interest in actual nineteenth-century figures, this thesis is centrally concerned with how epistolary forms engage some form of biographical speculation that exposes the ‘elastic boundaries’ and ‘porous genres’ of history and fiction.<sup>91</sup> Historical figures crowd neo-Victorian fiction and writers rely on the bare outlines of famous nineteenth-century lives that often circulate as common cultural currency.<sup>92</sup> Knitting fiction from the yarns of biography, Roiphe is therefore able to draw on the familiar background of Lewis Carroll as a shy, stuttering Oxford Don whose passion for photography, diary writing, and child friends now generates controversy. William Brooker asserts that ‘popular culture thinks it knows who Lewis Carroll is’ and, as perhaps the most iconic Victorian children’s fiction, a common cultural familiarity may suggest a collective stake in the *Alice* stories.<sup>93</sup> Byatt also purloins cultural myths that inform contemporary understandings of nineteenth-century writers to evoke the well-known secret romance of Robert Browning’s and Elizabeth Barrett’s epistolary love affair and she additionally summons the mythology of Emily Dickinson as a reclusive letter-writing poet. Alternatively, the story of Canadian ‘celebrated murderess’, Grace Marks, is perhaps now most popularly known through Atwood’s critical engagement with a fractured

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<sup>90</sup> Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.1.

<sup>91</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 106.

<sup>92</sup> Cora Kaplan identifies ‘biofiction’ as a hybrid genre that highlights the tension between biography and fiction as well as marking the overlap between them. *Victoriana*, p. 65. The recent popularity of Henry James’s fictional afterlife exemplifies this. In 2004, David Lodge’s *Author Author* and Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* both explored James’s life and his craft as a writer. Neither of these works significantly incorporates letters or diaries, but two further neo-Victorian novels, Emma Tennant’s *Felony: The Private History of the Aspern Paper* (2002) and *A Jealous Ghost* (2005) by A. N. Wilson, focus on James’s novellas, *The Aspern Papers* (1888) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), respectively, with embedded letters, or in Wilson’s case, email exchanges.

<sup>93</sup> Will Brooker, *Alice’s Adventures: Lewis Carroll in Popular Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 44.

document trail.<sup>94</sup> The fifth Duke of Portland may not be quite so well-known, but Jackson draws on biographies and historical accounts to probe a well-documented eccentric reputation. Only Waters's novel has a cast of purely fictional characters, with no direct referent to actual historical personages; yet her novel nevertheless resonates with well-rehearsed life histories of Victorian women outcast or imprisoned by gender or class. It is what Byatt terms the 'slippage between personal histories and social or national histories' that interests revisionist writers who produce 'a new aesthetic energy [...] from the borderlines of fact and the unknown'<sup>95</sup> to play narrative games with pastiche Victorians in strategies that Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest open 'additional dimensions and tensions in relation to the authentic as presented in the neo-Victorian text'.<sup>96</sup>

The novels that comprise my central case studies therefore conform to Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction as 'popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'.<sup>97</sup> All five texts evidence a 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs' and all are preoccupied with the instability and indeterminacy of knowing the past through its inescapably partial textual traces.<sup>98</sup> Exploring the paradox of postmodernism as complex and indirect representations, their writers imagine, install, and manipulate imagined documents to demonstrate processes that result in 'unresolved contradictions'.<sup>99</sup> Embedded diary extracts and ruptured letter exchanges engage a postmodern debate about problems and contingencies in knowing the documented past. The processes of reading fragmentary documents are imitated in the fiction discussed in this study and fictional documents stress the role of interpretation and impel readers to

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<sup>94</sup> Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 25.

<sup>95</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.12; p. 55.

<sup>96</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 67.



assess ‘evidence’ in the context of competing accounts for a drama of textualised traces. As Sanders observes, for neo-Victorian writers, ‘the impulse is towards quotation and recreation but less with the deconstructive purpose of satire in mind than the postmodern effect of innovation through fragmentation’.<sup>100</sup> This study therefore concentrates on the imitative processes of interpreting and recording event and the purposes to which writers put fragmented and found material traces. The novels I examine emphasise interpretation of documents not in order to recognise a ‘truth’, but to understand that knowledge will always be contingent and partial *because* of the fragmentary nature of such traces.

#### 4. Pastiche and Criticism

Intercalated diaries and letters are inherently fragmented forms that demonstrate pastiche practice as a sum of its many parts. The term derives from the Italian ‘pasticcio’, meaning a pie containing numerous ingredients – a ‘hotchpotch’ or medley of elements. Pastiche in literary theories is interpreted variously as a patchwork, a medley, or pieced fragments that emphasise the mixing together of forms and styles.<sup>101</sup> Christian Gutleben’s claim that fragments of experience help understand how retro-Victorian fiction approaches the nineteenth century finds support when writers interpolate diaries and letters to code and fragment points of view.<sup>102</sup> For instance, Michael Cox’s tale of lost inheritance, *The Meaning of Night* (2006), has a narrator who pieces together the past by reading his late mother’s diaries:

Gradually, a story began to emerge from the shadows; or rather, the fragmentary and incomplete elements of a story. [...] I painstakingly gathered the fragments together, and laid them out, piece by piece, seeking the linking pattern, the design that would bring the whole into view.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Sanders, p. 122.

<sup>101</sup> See Rose, p. 73 and Hoesterey, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 139-40.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Cox, *The Meaning of Night: A Confession* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 154.

Extradiegetic readers follow this fictional process and read such documentary fragments as part of active meaning-making processes. *Possession* exemplifies the demands of this reading style, as pastiched diary extracts and letters fashion what Rose suggests is Byatt's 'kaleidoscope irony'.<sup>104</sup> Byatt's subversive critical mission is evident as, within a webbed world of intertextual reference, she manages to exemplify and disable critical readings that she believes damage and disrupt contemporary engagement with the Victorians. She seduces fictional critics with secret documents that illustrate shortcomings in their critical methods and models the rewards of close-reading. Yet strategies of withholding nevertheless ensure that she actively promotes her authoritative role as the ultimate possessor of all narrative secrets to confirm postmodern ideas that documents provide only limited historical 'truths'. It is primarily the processes of documents' fragmentation and consequent uncertain channels of communication between past and present that interest Byatt and other neo-Victorian writers who emphasise the fragmentary nature of historical knowledge in pastiche practices.

With a principal focus on neo-Victorian pastiche, this thesis inevitably confronts Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson's familiar denigration of pastiche coding as borrowing the 'stylistic twitches of other styles',<sup>105</sup> resulting in colonisation by the 'nostalgia mode'.<sup>106</sup> Jameson's rhetoric targets what he calls 'the increasing primacy of the "neo"'<sup>107</sup> and consequently must be addressed in this study of pastiche and neo-Victorian writers. John N. Duvall observes that postmodern fiction for Jameson is 'ahistorical', and hence politically dangerous, because its pastiched forms produce only

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<sup>104</sup> Rose, p. 231.

<sup>105</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 111-125, (p. 113).

<sup>106</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 53-92 (p. 75).

<sup>107</sup> Jameson, 'Cultural Logic', p. 74.

a ‘degraded historicism.’<sup>108</sup> In essence, Jameson believes ‘nostalgia forms’ are at odds with ‘genuine historicity’, with pastiche proving an agent that elides critical distance.<sup>109</sup> Pastiche, for Jameson, is an unhealthy cultural colonisation of a position once served so well by the more favourable mode of parody.

Jameson’s criticism of pastiche, focussing on its imitative or derivative nature, impacts on the genre to prompt suggestion that neo-Victorian criticism tends to fall into two camps: those following Jameson, who argue for a retrograde movement, suggesting a static and complacent revisiting of the nineteenth century and its texts, and those for whom the past can be alternatively inscribed within a historical project.<sup>110</sup> Georges Letissier observes that:

The former tend to view post-Victorianism as a retrogressive movement, fostered by late capitalism and propounding a collective misrepresentation of the past. The latter open up the Victorian past by making it the locus of an intertextual, dialogic, historicised self-understanding, going far beyond mere nostalgia, voyeurism or epistemological popularisation.<sup>111</sup>

Although the prefix ‘neo’, meaning new, revived, or modified form, does not necessarily indicate nostalgic engagement, critical investigations of writers’ recuperation, revisiting, and revisioning of the past are enmeshed with questions of nostalgia. For example, addressing modernist distancing from the Victorians, or what Grace Moore calls ‘the misprision of modernist writers’, Simon Joyce’s *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007) examines nineteenth-century adaptations in literature and film, considering a nostalgic and critical drive that attempts to secure the Victorians in contemporary imaginations.<sup>112</sup> Christian Gutleben significantly prefers the term ‘retro-Victorian’ fiction in his wide-ranging study *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian*

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<sup>108</sup> John N. Duvall, ‘Troping History: Modernist Residue in Fredric Jameson’s Pastiche and Linda Hutcheon’s Parody’, *Style*, 33 (1999), 372-90 (p. 375).

<sup>109</sup> Duvall, p. 375.

<sup>110</sup> Georges Letissier, ‘Dickens and Post-Victorian Fiction’, in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 111-28 (p. 112).

<sup>111</sup> Letissier, p. 112.

<sup>112</sup> Grace Moore, ‘Twentieth-Century Re-Workings of the Victorian Novel’, *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), 134-44 (p. 134).

*Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001). His conclusion that current engagement and revisioning of the nineteenth century is nostalgic because celebration of a Victorian tradition precludes radical subversion is complicated since, despite emphasising 'systematic fragmentation' as the genre's leading narrative principle, he somewhat contradictorily decides that the genre has only 'minimum allegiance to the postmodern spirit'.<sup>113</sup>

Sally Shuttleworth also prefers the term 'retro-Victorian' in her 1998 article, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', which was at the vanguard of critical debates that started to question why a nineteenth-century afterlife was blossoming so abundantly in late twentieth-century fiction.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's edited collection, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000), provided a timely discussion of rewritings of Victorian culture. Included in this collection, Jennifer Green-Lewis's essay articulates the critical mood to ask: 'why when we want to reinvent and revisit the past, do we choose the nineteenth century as the place to get off the train? What is it about the look of this past that appeals to the late-twentieth-[twenty-first] century passenger?'.<sup>115</sup> As part of a larger current trend of increased popularity for historical fiction, the Victorian period indeed appears to be crystallised as an emergent site of creative and critical activity.<sup>116</sup> A

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<sup>113</sup> Gutleben, p. 139; p. 142. More recently, Kate Mitchell argues for approaching neo-Victorian fiction as 'memory texts', which, she suggests, will '[enable] us to think through the contribution neo-Victorian fiction makes to the way we remember the nineteenth-century past in ways that resist privileging history's non-fictional discourse, on the one hand, and postmodernism's problematisation of representation on the other'. Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. by Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 253-28.

<sup>115</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, 'At Home in the Nineteenth Century: Photography, Nostalgia and the Will to Authenticity', in *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 29-48 (p. 30).

<sup>116</sup> Interdisciplinary examinations of a nineteenth-century cultural afterlife like Christine L. Krueger's collection, *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002) explore the effects of a Victorian legacy on contemporary practice and values by investigating the continuing influences of Jack the Ripper, Oscar Wilde, and John Ruskin in such diverse mediums as Broadway theatre, the classroom, and legal system, as well considering the widespread reproduction of material Victorian culture in furnishings, film, and television; Jay Clayton's *Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003) investigates a convergence of science and literature and argues for postmodernism's hidden or repressed connection with nineteenth-century culture.

burgeoning fictional afterlife has sparked rising scholarly interest in the branch of contemporary fiction termed variously ‘neo-Victorian’ (Heilmann, Kohlke, Llewellyn, Shiller), ‘retro-Victorian’ (Gutleben, Shuttleworth), ‘post-Victorian’ (Kucich and Sadoff, Letissier, Kirchknopf), and ‘Victoriana’ (Kaplan).<sup>117</sup> An electronic journal devoted to investigating the genre, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, was launched in 2008, with an aim to examine ‘the production of neo-Victorian artefacts, fictions, and fantasies’ that the editors consider have ‘become too prolific to be contained as a ghost in the corner of the Victorian Studies parlour’.<sup>118</sup>

### 5. Neo-Victorian Topics and Themes

This thesis and the five novels it discusses address some critical areas and key themes in a genre that is becoming increasingly broad and varied. Epistolary strategies recurrently plot neo-Victorian themes of class, gender, and sexualities, empire, race, and crime. Writers also illustrate spiritual crises provoked by scientific discovery using letters and diaries. Novels like Swift’s *Ever After*, John Darnton’s *The Darwin Conspiracy* (2005), and Andrea Barrett’s *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998) ‘dramatise the Darwinian moment’, to borrow Sally Shuttleworth’s term, using a confessional diary voice.<sup>119</sup> Barrett’s novel provides the most experimental use of documents for Darwinian themes, with multiple diarists vying to preserve and record an Arctic expedition for posterity (and eminence). Fictionalising a nineteenth-century voyage that follows British explorer Sir John Franklin’s ill-fated journey to discover the Northwest Passage, the text is a pastiche work in the style of *Possession* and *Alias Grace*, with chapter epigraphs taken from actual historical documents, and includes reproduced engravings, a newspaper

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<sup>117</sup> Anne Humpherys adopts the term ‘afterings’ in an essay, ‘The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel’, in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (London: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 442-57 (p. 442).

<sup>118</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), 1-18 (p. 1).

<sup>119</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 253. See Daniel Candel Bormann, *The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel: A Poetics (And Two Case Studies)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002) for a study of *Ever After* and *Possession*.

advertisement, and a map, together with letters and travel diaries that compete to overwrite a ship's log. Shipboard diaries begin as personal records incorporating natural history notes and sketches, or medical records, but they evolve as, subject to the irascible whims of an unstable captain, diarists become increasingly protective, wary, and secretive. With the threat of seizure, writers lose a diaristic outlet to confess emotions and describe events. Frustrated diarists resort to displacing private thoughts either in a long 'bulging' letter that naturalist Erasmus Darwin Wells writes to his brother but can never send, or copying out Thoreau's essays, as another passenger, Dr Boerhaave does, 'just for the pleasure of hearing the words in his head, shaping them with his pen' because 'he couldn't put anything he meant' as 'whatever he put here Zeke would read'.<sup>120</sup> Representing the despair of the crew's disempowerment and acknowledging his own fear of being 'too personal', Erasmus admiringly notes that Dr Boerhaave's journal had thus 'become an act of covert rebellion'.<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, however, only one voice – that of egotistical Captain Zechariah Zooerhees – achieves publication amid accusations of textual piracy. It is noted that the duplicitous Zeke always kept a doubled record – one 'handsome volume, bound in green silk' shadowed by a more covert 'battered black volume'.<sup>122</sup> With dismay, narrator and diarist, Erasmus ultimately understands that a powerful author has usurped his account with an act of piracy that renders him a '*minor character*' in the adventure tale.<sup>123</sup> Barrett thus demonstrates that the published or official account of the voyage is a pastiche mix of impounded records blended together.

A voyage is similarly the subject of Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), which belongs with a sub-set of neo-Victorian fiction focussing on issues of

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<sup>120</sup> Andrea Barrett, *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (London: Flamingo, 2000 [1998]), p. 166. This novel follows a collection of short stories, *Ship Fever* (London: Flamingo, 2000 [1996]) that predominantly focus on the nineteenth century.

<sup>121</sup> Barrett, p. 134; p. 180.

<sup>122</sup> Barrett, p. 76.

<sup>123</sup> Barrett, p 364, original emphasis.

empire and race.<sup>124</sup> Postcolonial revisioning of the past may be an inherently metacritical project, but positing the empire ‘writing back’ in invented documents is problematic for this study of pastiche and heteroglossia. As Keen suggests:

Postcolonialists affirm the political agency of colonised peoples and attempt to hear the voices of silenced subjects. They are not served by the abandonment of truth and the jettisoning of facts, as they struggle to recover cultural practices and experiences of the past in danger of erasure or forgetting.<sup>125</sup>

In her study, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire* (2009), Mariadele Boccardi notes that ‘the presence and influence of empire’ is marginalised in contemporary texts like *Possession*, Lindsay Clarke’s *The Chymical Wedding* (1990), and *Ever After* which, although set in times of imperial expansion, have ‘barely discernible’ engagement with this, as ‘the Empire leaves no trace into the present and does not, therefore, appear in the reconstructed representation of the past by the contemporary characters’.<sup>126</sup> Documents in such novels with dual time periods appear more affiliated with the romance element of these works.<sup>127</sup> Pastiche novels may therefore sideline issues of imperialism despite being conterminous with this period in history.

Non-ironic use of documents is evident in a novel like Timothy Mo’s *An Insular Possession* (1986), which revisits the Anglo-Chinese Opium War with substantial interpolated diaries, letter exchanges, and rivalling newspaper extracts. *English Passengers*, on the other hand, clearly makes use of irony to narrate the confrontation between British colonials and aboriginal tribes in Tasmania. Kneale’s story is told in more than twenty different voices, but as Michael L. Ross emphasises, the ‘presiding

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<sup>124</sup> Matthew Kneale has written a further neo-Victorian novel, *Sweet Thames* (1992), which like Clare Clark’s *The Great Stink* (2005) explores the sewer systems of Victorian London. Both novels feature some form of journal or letters: a botany journal in Clark and anonymous letters in Kneale.

<sup>125</sup> Keen, p. 213.

<sup>126</sup> Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 99. Boccardi focuses on a number of neo-Victorian novels, including, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, *The Chymical Wedding*, *Possession*, *Ever After*, *The Map of Love*, and *English Passengers*.

<sup>127</sup> *The Chymical Wedding* has no significantly intercalated documents.

credible voices are those of “eccentric” speakers, above all Peevay and the Manx ship’s captain Illiam Quillian Kewley’.<sup>128</sup> This leaves the novel’s diary framing the voice of Dr Thomas Potter in clear parody of white supremacist thinking masquerading as ‘scientific’ observation. Suggesting that this interpolated text might be part of a pastiche strategy – written as any form of homage or flattery to earlier texts or writers – proves untenable. In this respect, Kneale’s inclusion of an actual letter in the novel’s epilogue reinforces his intent to authenticate rather than experiment with epistolary representation, with Boccardi suggesting that Kneale:

Contrary to the narrative strategy employed throughout, [...] takes on the mantle of the historian to condemn the ideology that underpinned colonialism and to produce a real document from the archive which, placed side by side with the fictional ones in the novel, implicitly validates them.<sup>129</sup>

This seems to suggest that again, even in a text that plainly dislocates ideas of narrative authority with myriad multiple narrators, the postcolonial author is keen to use documents in fiction in ways that are at odds with this study of pastiche experimentation with epistolary form. In this respect, Heilmann and Llewellyn’s argument that ‘postcolonial neo-Victorianism has to negotiate, and resist, a twofold drive for Orientalism in the popular imagination’ emphasises issues beyond the scope of this study.<sup>130</sup>

By contrast, neo-Victorianism’s preoccupation with identity politics, issues of class, gender, and sexuality more readily combine with my examination of strategic pastiche methods in fiction. Class division is, for example, a fundamental tension between Jackson’s diarist and the public voices that posthumously debate and analyse him; class issues are also pertinent in Waters’s tale of working-class spiritualist fraudsters who dupe a middle-class diarist. Many neo-Victorian novels narrate class

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<sup>128</sup> Michael L. Ross, *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction* (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), p. 249.

<sup>129</sup> Boccardi, p. 106.

<sup>130</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 68.



tensions with diary or letter-writing maidservants like Grace Marks and Ruth Vigers or, less experimentally, with diarists like Martin's eponymous *Mary Reilly*; Lily Wilson, maidservant to Elizabeth Barrett-Browning in Forster's *Lady's Maid*; and Esperanza Gorse in Michael Cox's *Glass of Time* (2009). These novels all put diary form to quite conventional servitude to reveal maids' secrets of their 'betters' to readers.

Offering a more experimental approach to a maidservant's diary, Harris's *The Observations* moves between pastiche and parody, with a fictional master/slave diary relationship that explicitly acknowledges a debt to critical studies of Arthur Munby's and Hannah Cullwick's extraordinary relationship. This novel innovatively inverts class power by means of diary form. As previously mentioned, maidservant Bessy Buckley must write a daily diary as 'the main condition of [her] employment' by Arabella Reid.<sup>131</sup> Compelled to write with an addressee in mind, she additionally produces 'private' material, which appears in chapters paradoxically entitled 'What I Did Not Write'. Prior diary writers haunt Bessy – the previous maid's diary, in fact, still smoulders in the grate on her arrival at the Reid residence. As r[eid]er, her mistress, Arabella, has preconceived ideas of what she would like her servant's journal to record, a point astutely 'observed' by Bessy, who accordingly provides her with more of the same: 'if she can't tell the difference that's easy enough, I'll just make things up all the time'.<sup>132</sup>

Wholesale subversion of the diary as a private, confessional voice is thus demonstrated in this novel and the genre's affiliation to sincerity is comprehensively undercut. *The Observations* adheres to what some argue is the fundamental revisioning of the neo-Victorian project – to give a voice to those marginalised or silent in history. Rescued by neo-Victorianists from silence, the nineteenth-century classed 'other' now speaks in contemporary fiction along with pathologised 'others': criminals, madmen,

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<sup>131</sup> Jane Harris, *The Observations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 18.

<sup>132</sup> Harris, p. 60.

and prostitutes who all freely confide and confess in private diaries that manifest class consciousness as an enduring tension in historical fiction.

Even more than class tensions, sexuality is a predominant theme in neo-Victorianism. Sexuality and debunking hypocrisies of Victorian moralism, suggested by Kaplan to be ‘the leitmotif of these fictions’, are focal topics in my discussions of Byatt, Waters, and Roiphe, whose novels show a respective interest in adultery, homosexuality, and transgressive desire.<sup>133</sup> These novels evidence what Heilmann and Llewellyn term ‘the continuing appeal of that most “sensational” aspect of the nineteenth century: its politics of the body’.<sup>134</sup> They intersect with issues raised in the critical work on Victorian sexual politics that began as early as 1964 with Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, which investigates sexuality and pornography in the ‘exotic’ sub-literature shadowing ‘respectable’ Victorian society. Later, Michael Mason’s *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (1994) hypothesises that the ‘special place’ held for the Victorians in our culture arises from a ‘mix of attitudes’ to the period that involves a ‘hostility’ uniquely directed at Victorian sexual moralism.<sup>135</sup> Questioning and challenging this hostility, Matthew Sweet provocatively interrogates claims of Victorian repressive morality in his study of social history, *Inventing the Victorians* (2000). Building upon Michel Foucault’s influential challenge to the ‘repressive hypothesis’ and debunking ideas of radical differences in the history of sexuality, Sweet strives to ‘demolish the notion that the nineteenth century was an era best characterised by reticence, stability, sobriety and conservatism’.<sup>136</sup> Byatt and Roiphe intervene in these debates to contrast and valorise vibrant Victorian passions and desires, whilst using

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<sup>133</sup> Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 86.

<sup>134</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 106.

<sup>135</sup> Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> Matthew Sweet, *Inventing The Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. xxii.

epistolary forms to concomitantly suggest an unsatisfactory insipidity in contemporary sexual politics.

Neo-Victorian fiction can also employ diaries to characterise women's disenfranchised positions in nineteenth-century society. This is in keeping with generic tradition that associates diary writing with the confessional female voice.<sup>137</sup> *Possession's* Ellen Ash and *Blanche Glover* as well as *Affinity's* Margaret Prior are diarists who record struggles with prevailing gender codes and societal restrictions. Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* similarly imagines a disempowered female diarist, but more comprehensively satirises domestic ideology and uses a diary to symbolically illustrate a buried life. Diarist Agnes Rackham is married to William Rackham, head of Rackham perfumes, a man of means and client of Mrs Castaway's house of ill repute. As a distortion of the angel figure beloved by Victorian novelists, Agnes is 'a paragon of porcelain femininity' who begins diary writing as a child and, as 'a high-Victorian ideal', she remains largely in a childlike state throughout adulthood.<sup>138</sup> Agnes's increasingly unhappy derangement is illustrated in diary volumes that she considers contain 'dead thoughts, lost yesterdays, vanity. Words for the grave'.<sup>139</sup> As Faber's satire of Victorian morals represents women's social and cultural restraints as ludicrous, so too does Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), which extravagantly assembles paratextual devices around Bella Baxter, a letter-writing, Frankenstein-like creation, to fantastically illustrate that 'ideas of time, space and morality were convenient habits, not natural laws'.<sup>140</sup> Both writers fictionally address the Victorian woman question by parodying literary female stereotypes with extremes of repressed and overt sexuality.<sup>141</sup> Faber's novel provides a metafictional nod to a neo-Victorian audience, as prostitute

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<sup>137</sup> See Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

<sup>138</sup> Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 130.

<sup>139</sup> Faber, p. 552.

<sup>140</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 70.

<sup>141</sup> See Jeanette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

and diary reader, Sugar, engaged in writing a vengeful, damning, and thinly-disguised autobiographical work of fiction, states: ‘there must be receptive minds out there in the world, hungry for the unprettified truth – especially in the more sophisticated and permissive future that’s just around the corner’.<sup>142</sup> In both novels, the private text merges metonymically with the female body: Agnes buries her diaries reflecting domestic entombment and Bella, pieced and assembled as Godwin Baxter’s ‘surgical fabrication’, textually reconstructs her life or ‘true’ story to conclude and remake the narrative with her explanatory letter addressed to the future.<sup>143</sup>

Thus writers experiment with epistolary strategies to destabilise nineteenth-century canonical character types. Epistolary forms are not, however, just the preserve of ‘serious’ and critically experimental postmodern novels focussed on in this study, but are also widespread throughout the vast and nebulous body of popular fiction that engages the Victorians.<sup>144</sup> Documents appear, for example, in the increasingly popular sub-genre of steampunk, as a branch of science fiction that re-imagines Victorian steampower; William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1992) is perhaps the most well-known example of this class and it contains substantial letter exchanges. Popular fiction can, like more literary works, fabulate the lives of actual nineteenth-century personages; for example, David Ebershoff’s *The 19<sup>th</sup> Wife* (2008) uses newspaper articles, letters, and diary entries to revisit the life of Ann Eliza Young: bestselling author of an 1875 controversial memoir about plural marriage and her life as a Latter-day Saint. Popular fiction may also use the conceit of a found document presented to readers by a fictionalised editor; this is complicated in a serious historical novel like Susan Daitch’s *L. C.* (1987) that offers two different and clashing translations of a fictional diary to debate feminist and revolutionary politics, but appears more

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<sup>142</sup> Faber, p. 229.

<sup>143</sup> Gray, p. 35.

<sup>144</sup> Fantasy fiction like Steven Brust’s and Emma Bull’s *Freedom and Necessity* (1997) is notable as a tale of Chartist revolution that is wholly structured by letters, journal entries, and newspaper clippings.

straightforwardly in popular fiction like Jamie Fuller's *Emily Dickinson's Diary* (1993) and Caroline Rose Hunt's *Primrose Past: The 1848 Journal of Young Lady Primrose* (2001).

Crime is also a topic revisited by both popular and literary fiction, with documents drawn upon and intercalated as contemporary writers re-imagine crimes that scandalised the Victorians. Kohlke suggests that

historians and theorists of crime regularly return to the nineteenth century as a fulcrum point, at which the popular press – and the literature and arts it inspired – not only elevated crime to the status of a bloody mass spectator sport and cause célèbre, but also that of a grotesque mirror held up to society.<sup>145</sup>

Crime as a spectator sport resonates with this study's examination of *Alias Grace* and *Affinity*, and is more loosely a subject for *Possession's* literary thefts. Re-appropriation of actual crimes and criminals directly descends from nineteenth-century sensation writers use of actual murder trials. As Andrew Manghan argues:

The sensation novelists drew on scandals that were raging through the Victorian age, but this was by no means a passive appropriation. Sensation novelists constantly changed details, added sub-plots, and neutralised some of the more shocking elements of real events and theories where women were accused of extreme violence. Such alterations are fascinating and revealing insights into Victorian mores and concerns as well as the nature of the era's print media.<sup>146</sup>

Causes célèbres are thus re-examined in neo-Victorian works through epistolary strategies in such novels as Beryl Bainbridge's *Watson's Apology* (1985), Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher: Or The Murder at Road Hill House* (2008) and Usher's *Then Came October* (2008). All these crime-based neo-Victorian works use documents to offer insights into the motivations of those driven to murder, as well as evidencing the documentary trail that led to prosecution. Bainbridge reworks the sensationally reported murder case of John Selby Watson's bludgeoning of his wife to death in 1872 as one of the first cases to be mitigated on the grounds of insanity and

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<sup>145</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Editor's Note', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2 (2008-09), i-vii (p. i).

<sup>146</sup> Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 5.

Summerscale bases her book on the 1860 ‘Road Hill’ murder case, details of which Wilkie Collins drew on for his 1868 novel, *The Moonstone*.<sup>147</sup> Bainbridge, like Summerscale, intercalates documents and acknowledges information from actual newspaper reports and court transcripts as well as letters, but Summerscale goes further to state that her narrative ‘aims to be factual’.<sup>148</sup> Alternatively, Usher wholly imagines a diary detailing Edith Carew’s motivation for poisoning her husband in 1897. This diary is read by Edith’s daughter, who strives to understand the past, but discovers instead an alien diary persona: ‘her mother was not the Edith who had written the diaries’.<sup>149</sup> Usher, like Atwood, is less interested in questions of guilt and innocence than in understanding the events that led up to the tragedies and the subsequent interpretations of the crimes. Here again, Bainbridge, Summerscale, and Usher use diary form quite conventionally for mimetic authenticity, whereas Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is selected for this study as a more innovative experiment with diary ideas that emphasise fragmentation, ambiguity, and a critical point of view.

## 6. Strategic Epistolary in Five Novels

This study endeavours to demonstrate diversity in neo-Victorian writers’ strategic use of epistolary forms. Recurrent neo-Victorian themes and topics are evident in the texts and discussed in this study, but the novels I have selected – four women writers and one man; three British writers, one Canadian, and one American – have not been chosen to represent a variety or cluster of classed, gendered, or nationalist points-of-view; but rather to explore the divergent ways that writers strategically intercalate documentary forms in fiction. Innovative use of diaries and letters in fiction drove my selection of

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<sup>147</sup> Mangham claims that the Road Murder was appropriated by Collins, Braddon, and Wood, to inspire three of the era’s best sellers: *Aurora Floyd* (1863), *St. Martin’s Eve* (1866), and *The Moonstone* (1868). Mangham, p. 64.

<sup>148</sup> Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher or The Murder at Road Hill House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. xiii.

<sup>149</sup> Usher, p. 229.

primary texts that feature letters ghost-writing actual Victorians, doubled diaries and silent letters, a diary that must remain unwritten, a diary that draws on the expurgated mysteries of an actual diary, and a diary that forms part of a posthumous trial in tension with public voices testifying in ‘public’ accounts. The criteria for choosing these five novels from the vast and rapidly expanding range of neo-Victorian fiction was their different and individually complex intertextual employment of epistolary forms for postmodern pastiche practices that evidence the metacritical angle which so significantly informs the neo-Victorian project.

In this respect, Byatt’s celebrated pastiche *Possession* is a foundational text of the genre that engages metacritical debates with fictional theorists representing actual critical positions and pursuing documented histories. The novel explores different kinds of knowledge and possession of this, but Byatt emphasises gaps in knowledge that only fiction can fill. In her recent study of women’s historical fiction, Wallace suggests that ‘*Possession* is determined to recover the “authority” of the writer Barthes pronounced dead and to reclaim him/her as a privileged medium between past and present’.<sup>150</sup> Readers of *Possession* are seduced by epistolary secrets but find more complete answers provided by the authorial voice. Critical intelligence has dislocated ideas of history and truth, but desire for knowledge of the past endures; Byatt demonstrates that fiction satisfies this in ways that criticism, biography and history cannot. As already mentioned, this chapter touches on the aesthetic appeal that epistolary forms hold for readers desirous of discovering ‘hidden’ Victorians. Recovering the documented past positions contemporary readers as new addressees and reading becomes an aesthetic, tactile discovery that engages the senses as well as prompting analytical responses to the ‘shreds and relics’ of the Victorians.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Wallace, p. 215.

<sup>151</sup> Byatt, *Possession*, p. 83.

My second chapter examines Waters's *Affinity* to investigate perhaps the most strategic distortion of epistolary relations in this study. The novel adapts and exploits tensions between a panoptic principle of uncertainty and a level of confidence promoted by diary form to effectively undermine both. The panoptic gaze is juxtaposed with diary privacy and associated suggestions of sincerity to raise questions about textual manipulation and power relations within writer/reader relations. A mystifying atmosphere of spiritualism and suspicion, manufactured myth, and generic ambiguity clouds epistolary events and disguises vital letters that are paradoxically contained within but physically absent from the text. Unseen letters escape the panoptic principle to drive both plot and the actual love affair that plays in the shadows and sub-text of the novel. My analysis illuminates questions of class as narrative visibility and class invisibility are effectively coordinated by specious epistolary confidence.

Doubt and diary form are also issues in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, the subject of chapter three. Amid an eclectic pastiche, Atwood provides a secret diary-style voice that, unlike nineteenth-century diaries, does not explain, clarify, or restore order, but only emphasises open-ended uncertainty. This novel provides not only Atwood's 'negotiation with the dead', but a renegotiation of her own earlier critical position.<sup>152</sup> Confronting the critical and often erroneous exhumation of the past, the novel questions textual construction of a nineteenth-century murder; Atwood parodies those who seek the truth of Grace Marks's 'crime' by imagining a diary-style voice that ultimately reveals nothing but a commentary on those who examine her. Grace speaks back to the various accounts that record her in a private interpolated voice, which although not written, nevertheless functions as a diary narrative. Indeed, I argue that withholding textual representation of the diary is crucial to Atwood's postmodern denial of documented 'truths'. In stream-of-consciousness accounts of disruptive dreams, Grace

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<sup>152</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



hints at a sought-after truth, but does not satisfy curiosity or answer questions of guilt or innocence. Interpolated letters further reveal the fallibility of those authorised to examine Grace.

Chapter four illustrates Roiphe's similar emphasis on the paradox of any invented diary – the idea of finding a private, confessional, or authentic voice within fiction. The novel demonstrates an interpretative illogicality that implicates those who try to read Lewis Carroll back more formally from his works of nonsense, photographs, or *lost* diary entries. With absence as its referent, Roiphe's imagined diary is unequivocally and indeed parodically fictional and can only illustrate the aporetic heart of Carrollian debates. This suggests that current readings of the absent/present Carroll are the result of supposition and guess work – close readings carried out by mad hatters applying ludicrous logic to superimpose contemporary moral and social panics on a confused base of fact and the unknown. Roiphe colonises the gaps in Carroll's archive to play on doubt rather than dispel it with punitive or repudiating verdicts. A confusion of evidence fixes Carroll firmly on the witness stand that he now seems destined to occupy eternally, but by presenting diary evidence for *both* defence and prosecution, Roiphe suggests that our knowledge base is flawed and unstable. She therefore engages a logic of contradiction to illustrate inconsistencies in two contrary propositions, which use both Carroll's diary and its elisions to shape and evidence an essentially inaccessible past.

My fifth and final chapter explores how Jackson's novel, *The Underground Man*, frames public conformist voices in 'Accounts' that interrupt a diary counterpoised to promote eccentricity. *The Underground Man* is the only text studied in this thesis that clearly refracts a specific nineteenth-century fictional 'type' of diarist. During the nineteenth century, diary form remained popular in European fiction, exemplified by works such as Ivan Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850) and works by Fyodor

Dostoevsky, including *Notes from The Underground* (1864), a text explicitly evoked in Jackson's title. In these works, a host of disgruntled, marginalised, diarists record feelings of superfluity; Jackson's Duke similarly records his alienation in a diary that contests notions of social privilege. By concentrating on a figure more usually eccentric to the neo-Victorian project, Jackson places an aristocrat's diary at the centre of his novel to contest public posthumous readings of a stereotype. *The Underground Man* comprises a diary account intercalated with 'official' accounts that are redirected to extradiegetic readers invited to participate in the court of public opinion that tries the Duke's sanity. Thus, with diary heteroglossia, the novel defends personal liberty and an eccentric viewpoint.

In all these texts, epistolary forms coordinate or, more often, compete as part of the medley or 'numerous ingredients' that characterises pastiche practice.<sup>153</sup> Conflicting viewpoints are invoked in diaries, letters, and other addressed accounts to emphasise that traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory. Heilmann suggests that 'as a sub-genre of postmodernism, neo-Victorianism, when at its most sophisticated, is self-referential, engaging the reader or audience in a game about its historical veracity and (intra/inter)textuality, and inviting reflections on its metafictional playfulness'.<sup>154</sup> I seek to demonstrate in this study that neo-Victorian writers scrutinise the coherence of thought and assumptions that critically examine and deliver the Victorians with sophisticated use of epistolary devices that invite reflections on tensions between history, fiction, and criticism.

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<sup>153</sup> Rose, p. 73.

<sup>154</sup> Ann Heilmann, 'Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2 (2009/2010), 18-42 (p. 18).

## Chapter One

**Riddles and Relics:**Critical Correspondence in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

*Do you suppose it's something to which Jeffrey Aspern's letters and papers –  
I mean the things in her possession – have reference?*

Henry James  
*The Aspern Papers* (1888)<sup>1</sup>

*It strikes me, just at present, that there may be  
better things done with this letter than burning it.*

Wilkie Collins  
*The Dead Secret* (1857)<sup>2</sup>

In her 1990 novel, *Possession: A Romance*, A. S. Byatt manipulates the fascination of lost, destroyed, hidden, and rediscovered documents to signpost readers to 'the romance of the archive'.<sup>3</sup> Byatt believes there are diverse reasons to keep the past 'alive', one of which is 'the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading'.<sup>4</sup> Her novel attempts to deliver this message by pitting documents and secrets against representative literary theorists. Letters and diaries navigate contentions between theory and writerly authority as Byatt harmonises seductive secrets and descriptive imagery to launch a counter-attack against prescriptive critical reading. It is primarily the association of letters with secrets and seduction that signifies the surrender of *Possession* to its subtitle, *A Romance*, which the epigraph to the novel justifies as 'a right to present [...] truth under circumstances, [...] of the writer's own choosing or creation'.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will examine the role of letters and diaries in Byatt's (self?) promotion of fiction against critical theory and investigate if embedded epistolary forms

<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, in *The Aspern Papers and The Turn of the Screw* (London: Penguin Books, 1988 [1888]), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1857]), p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> 'Romances of the archive' is a term adopted from Suzanne Keen's *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991 [1990]). This text will henceforth be referred to as *Possession* and all other references to it will be given parenthetically. Epigraph taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of Seven Gables*.

are more suggestive of documentary evidence or ‘helpful lies’ for a postmodern project.<sup>6</sup>

By framing fictional Victorian writers within a network of generic epistolary codes, Byatt directs readers towards the private, secret, and aesthetic. Her double-coding provides, as Margaret Rose suggests, a code that the modern is lacking and letters become explicitly illustrative of a dichotomy that demonstrates contemporary writing as aesthetically and materially inferior to the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The aesthetic romance of discovered letters and diaries offers readers riddling secrets, lost messages, and potential revelations, yet a persuasive polemic lies beyond the seductive qualities of style, romance, and the panache of Byatt’s pastiche. Ruth Perry observes that ‘seduction, a standard plot in the epistolary novel, can be seen as an attempt of one person to change another’s mind, an attempt to enter the consciousness, tamper with it, and reverse the intentions of the will’.<sup>8</sup> Within the fictional framework, Byatt’s scholars are actively seduced and diverted from their ‘erroneous’ critical ways by private messages from dead writers. The same messages invite readers to decode secrets that palimpsestically trace a path back to the authority of the author over the critic. Byatt uses letters and diaries and attendant expectations of epistolary relations to lure readers to her critical points of view and preferred strategies of reading.<sup>9</sup>

Ross Chambers discusses the tactics available to writers with Byatt’s directive agenda. Obvious strategies, he explains, are to claim to possess a secret and also imply a

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<sup>6</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning’s ‘Mr Sludge, “the Medium”’.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS, 1980), p. 129. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1741) and *Clarissa* (1747-48) are well-known examples of eighteenth-century epistolary novels of seduction.

<sup>9</sup> This is in opposition to Lucile Desblache’s account of *Possession*’s correspondence as ‘feminis[ing] the writing’. ‘Penning Secrets: Presence and Essence of the Epistolary Genre in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 40 (2000), 89-95 (p. 93). Desblache’s statement is also at odds with Byatt’s recently expounded views on The Orange Prize, where she states, ‘The Orange prize assumes there is a feminine subject matter – which I don’t believe in’. Charlotte Higgins and Caroline Davies, ‘A. S. Byatt says women who write intellectual books seen as unnatural’, *Guardian*, 21 August 2010, p. 3.

willingness to divulge this. Furthermore, laying claim to a *derived* authority by intertextual reference can seduce by making a powerful declaration of authority.<sup>10</sup> Byatt employs both ‘tactics’; she conceals and divulges secrets, and enjoins readers to complicitly evoke and realise a complex web of intertextual literary and historical allusions.<sup>11</sup> The literary ghosts who implicitly haunt and inform *Possession* materialise more explicitly in Byatt’s novella *The Conjugal Angel* (1992), and again in the short story ‘Precipice Encurled’ (1995), with the metafictional *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000) providing supporting debates to evidence Byatt’s belief that ‘it is a tale of the lives of the dead which make up the imagined worlds of the living.’<sup>12</sup> All four narratives assimilate gleaned elements of ‘real world’ historical personages and illustrate that biographic curiosity and intertextuality are natural literary partners.

*Possession* models close-reading for meaning in order to unravel secrets buried in Gothic-style impounded documents. Readers’ curiosity is provoked by material/textual wrappings that camouflage and disguise romanticised riddles. One might consider the material circumstances of discovery: Randolph Henry Ash’s letters are posted within the leaves of his ‘Vico’ stored in the vaults of the British Library; Ash and Christabel LaMotte’s correspondence is secured in a dark tower, and Ellen Ash’s documents are buried for a ‘demi-eternity’ (p. 462 ) in a glass-lined box. Research student Roland Michell discovers Ash’s draft letters – ‘only beginnings’ (p. 21) – in his ‘favourite place’, the British Library Reading Room, ‘shabby but civilised, alive with history but inhabited also by living poets and thinkers’ (p. 2). Here, Roland is primed by a storehouse of knowledge that prompts him to hear, feel, and imaginatively visualise past writers who become alive for him in the consoling dusty atmosphere. The past becomes tangible as the found ‘*urgent*’ and ‘*alive*’ (p. 50, original emphasis) letters

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<sup>10</sup> Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Theory of History and Literature*, Volume 12 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 214, original emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Chambers, p. 215.

<sup>12</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p.10.

materialise the Victorians by materially connecting Roland with Ash. Fittingly, the Victorian writer's documented private voice is safeguarded in the library, awaiting the *right* reader, one who has 'the microscopic eye of the dreamer of great dreams' (p. 149).

Pastiche documents sound an author[itative] voice that entertains, demonstrates writerly artistry, and also, crucially, vocalises what Byatt sees as unwelcome tensions between writing and critical theory. Byatt calls her form of historical writing "ventriloquism", to avoid the loaded moral implications of "parody", or "pastiche".<sup>13</sup> I would argue, however, that she makes full use of these same 'moral implications' to privilege her pastiched Victorian writers over a parodied contemporary critical establishment. Her ventriloquy rests on imitative Victorian voices that speak from verse and epistolary platforms. An examination of the much discussed pastiche poems in the novel could fruitfully substantiate Byatt's claims of ventriloquy, but such investigation is outside the parameters of this study. I will argue, however, that letters and diaries have *distinct* roles as devices that generate disguised voice. If the art of ventriloquy produces or vocalises sounds that *appear* to come from another source, it is clear that Byatt's source is the nineteenth century. It is also apparent that she aims not just to imitate the past but also to position herself authoritatively amid clamorous critical voices: what is Byatt actually projecting in *Possession* but her own vociferous complaint against theory? Byatt argues that 'critics are attempting to extrude' and her defence is to put them back in their place as 'tiny people compared to writers' by projecting her own voice to challenge this.<sup>14</sup>

A central difficulty with Byatt is that she challenges poststructuralism whilst claiming her novel to be a poststructuralist text. It is generally acknowledged that Byatt participates in a postmodern game of self-reflexivity, and she herself emphatically

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<sup>13</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Conversations with Critics* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994), p. 58.

states, ‘*Possession* is a postmodern, poststructuralist novel and it knows it is’.<sup>15</sup> Those who understand the novel to be a postmodern text tend to cite Byatt’s strategies of pastiche and parody (Byatt’s ‘ventriloquism’) as evidence of self-reflexive metafictional technique. However, reservations have been voiced. Jackie Buxton, for instance, asks: ‘how postmodernist is *Possession* really?’ She acknowledges the novel’s postmodern moments, but goes on to argue that it is ‘first and foremost a “straight” narrative, a realistic fiction’, asserting that only ‘one world is obviously given ideological priority in this text, and it is the Victorian one’.<sup>16</sup>

The contemporary storyline does suggest on one level a realist model in line with Catherine Belsey’s argument (rehearsing Barthes) that classic realist narrative ‘turns on the creation of enigma through the precipitation of disorder’.<sup>17</sup> *Possession* conforms to this with its source of disorder – love (romance) appearing in Belsey’s list of commonest causative factors.<sup>18</sup> The modern storyline also adheres to Belsey’s hypothesis that realist story moves towards ‘closure which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order’.<sup>19</sup> Byatt offers closure that re-orders her disorder, but this is complicated by the double ending of the novel, which undoes realist closure (and documented authority) with an arguably very postmodern strategy.

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<sup>15</sup> Tredell, p. 62. Arguments for *Possession* as a postmodern text are supported by critics like Suzanne Keen, who suggest that ‘the case for *Possession*’s postmodernism rests partly on matters of narrative technique. Byatt does employ several narrative strategies associated with the postmodern style, most notably pastiche, self-reflexivity and ironic doubling’. Keen, pp. 32-33. Julian Gitzen reservedly understands Byatt to ‘satisf[y] postmodernist expectations regarding authorial self-consciousness (and self-parody) and qualifies, at least in a minor key, as a writer of self-reflexive fiction’, ‘A. S. Byatt’s Self-Mirroring Art’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 36 (1995), 83-95 (p. 84). Christian Gutleben expresses his opinion that Byatt’s postmodernism is only evidenced by her ‘plurality of discursive forms’. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Jackie Buxton, “‘What’s Love Got To Do With It?’ Postmodernism and *Possession*”, *English Studies in Canada* 22 (1996), 199-219 (p. 212).

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Belsey, p. 70. Other factors listed are: murder, war, or a journey.

<sup>19</sup> Belsey, p. 70, original emphasis.

In terms of epistolary forms and pastiche plurality, I propose that, despite advertising intertextual connections to ‘real’ Victorian writers, Byatt does not aspire to reproduce an authentic nineteenth century. Instead, she conspires with a postmodern spirit of play to disrupt documents, interpretations, and meanings by manipulating the many-layered cultural representations of the era accrued with critical and biographical interpretation. Like Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), *Possession* confirms Linda Hutcheon’s view that ‘historiographic metafiction, while teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests that there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structure of our various discourses about it’.<sup>20</sup> Byatt wastes no time in ‘teasing’ readers by peopling her intertextual fiction with pastiche Victorians, recognisable as ‘real’ if decoded by informed readers who might flesh out characters with reference to attendant ‘structures’ of biographies and critical examinations. Byatt’s ventriloquism may suggest actual Victorians, but they are inescapably bound and mediated by competing discourses of the past.<sup>21</sup>

Byatt thus extends postmodern logic to create a pastiche of simulated nineteenth-century style writers, where fictional characters write fully fictionalised imitative verse and letters and diaries (and verse). In this respect, epistolary forms explicitly conform to the logic of a neo-Victorian agenda. The documents discuss the metafictional reading/writing/resurrection process, but remain only tangentially linked to their actual documentary counterparts; they are, in fact, effective ‘smoke-and-mirror’ devices that serve an authorial intent of fraudulent illusion: the ventriloquist’s voice is *always* Byatt’s. Letters and diaries and entwined ideas of seduction and secrecy are

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Browning appears in Byatt’s short story ‘Precipice Encurled’ in *Sugar & Other Stories* (1987). Alfred Tennyson and his sister, Emily, are subjects in Byatt’s novella, *The Conjugal Angel*, in *Angels and Insects* (1992). Byatt’s latest novel, *The Children’s Book* (2009), moves from late Victorian to Edwardian times and again blurs fact and fiction with inspiration from, among other themes, J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911) and the Llewellyn-Davies family, and also the life of children’s author and poet, E. Nesbitt (1858-1924).



manipulated as fictional devices, not to resurrect the Victorians themselves, but to showcase Byatt's voice inflected with the much vaunted 'rhythms' of the nineteenth century that she claims haunt her creative consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Epistolary forms therefore evidence her oxymoronic claim to play 'serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past' and reinforce a paradigm that *allows* pastiche strategies to qualify *Possession* as postmodern.<sup>23</sup>

## 1. Mythical Victorians

*If you nearly see  
The real world through the false, – what do you see?*<sup>24</sup>

Byatt draws on Victorian writers and letter-writers to flesh out her pastiche epistolary romance. For example, secrecy, seclusion, and letter writing are integral ingredients of the myth of nineteenth-century writer Emily Dickinson, who is in Byatt's view the greatest woman poet of all time. Byatt's fictional poet, Christabel LaMotte, resonates with the cultural myth of Dickinson and her verse rhythms and epistolary enigmas.<sup>25</sup> Historical fiction, including neo-Victorian novels, must secure some claim to historical continuity however ironically engaged, and intertextual allusion can organise this by incorporating real-world personages within the fictional world, as either explicit or implicit informing intertextual presences. It is therefore the case that Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997), Atwood's, *Alias Grace*, and Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001) incorporate an aristocrat, a criminal, and an iconic literary figure as

<sup>22</sup> Byatt explains, '*Possession* is not innocent evocation of voices, for the pure pleasure of recreating the Victorian rhythms by which I am haunted. It has its cunning'. *Histories*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"', original emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Although Christina Rossetti is part of the pastiche mix of Christabel La Motte, I have chosen to concentrate on the dominance of Emily Dickinson as a model leading from Byatt's comments in interview with Mervyn Rothstein: 'For Christabel LaMotte, she said, she thought for a while about using Christina Rossetti as a model. "But Christina Rossetti was too Christian, too self-destructive," Ms. Byatt said. "I wanted someone tougher. So I ended up with what I think is the greatest woman poet ever, Emily Dickinson. Her sounds, her words, the rhythm of her language. And then I crossed her back with Christina Rossetti to make her more ordinary and more English"'. 'Best Seller Breaks Rule On Crossing The Atlantic', *The New York Times on the Web*, 31 January 1991  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-atlantic.html>> [accessed 1 August 2008]

explicit intertextual presences, whereas Byatt's Victorians are more implicitly in attendance. Implicit, or explicit, as Hutcheon argues, irony marks the difference from the past, but 'intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm – textually and hermeneutically – the connection with the past'.<sup>26</sup>

Dickinson's enduring popularity has always been bound to the mysteries of her unconventional life, with ongoing cultural debate ensuring her continuing presence in literary studies. Dickinson's mythical status is sustained by public fascination with the unsolved mysteries and secrets that surround her life and work. Debate still rages over three puzzling draft letters addressed to an anonymous 'Master', and there is some recent controversy over a lately 'discovered' picture of the poet.<sup>27</sup> One novel varies the continuities between Dickinson's letters and verse by imagining discovery of a long lost secret diary. Jamie Fuller's *The Diary of Emily Dickinson* (1993) presents the 'editor' of this 'priceless document' stating that 'as thrilling as the unearthing of the diary itself is the discovery of twenty-five previously unknown poems interspersed among the entries'.<sup>28</sup> William Merrill Decker goes so far to argue that the 'aesthetic and thematic continuities that subsist between [Dickinson's] letters and poems' are essential to understanding her canon.<sup>29</sup>

Dickinson famously illustrates the knotted relationship between secrecy, letters and verse in the following poem:

The way I read a Letter's - this -  
'Tis first I lock the Door -  
And push it with my fingers – next -

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<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> American literary Professor Philip Gura claims he bought a previously unseen photograph of Emily Dickinson on the internet auctioneer site ebay. In an article entitled, 'Rare find deepens mystery of a genius: Debate rages over internet photograph of poetic recluse', Melinda Wittstock writes: 'But there have been other notable Dickinson forgeries in the past. A purported Dickinson photo surfaced in Richard Sewell's 1974 two-volume biography of the poet, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, but it was proved to be spurious 10 years ago'. *Observer*, 21 May 2000

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2000/may/21/books.booksnews>> [accessed 10 August 2010]

<sup>28</sup> Jamie Fuller, *Emily Dickinson's Diary* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), p. 8; p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 143.

For transport it be sure -

And then I go the furthest off  
 To counteract a knock -  
 Then draw my little Letter forth  
 And softly pick its lock -

Then - glancing narrow, at the Wall -  
 And narrow at the floor,  
 For firm Conviction of a Mouse  
 Not exorcised before -

Peruse how infinite I am  
 To no one that You know -  
 And sigh for lack of Heaven - but not  
 The Heaven God bestow - <sup>30</sup>

Here Dickinson suggests that letter reading requires privacy and impels secrecy; not even a mouse must disturb. Not only must Dickinson be behind locked doors to read her letter, she must also break and enter the missive to discover its secrets. Paradoxically, the speaker implies access to infinite personal space from a secluded corner of reinforced enclosure. This is teasingly presented as the view of a mystery correspondent who penetrates and liberates her confinement. Letters transcend physical enclosure and open up the world, not just beheld, but also entered via the epistolary word. Similarly, Byatt's pastiche character LaMotte secludes herself with Ash's letters and, to her companion, Blanche Glover's dismay, 'hurr[ies] them away to lie in [her] sewing-basket' (p. 46) for later private reading.

Dickinson's voluminous correspondence evidences her isolation from the public sphere and also proves symptomatic of it. Today, access to historical private letters lures readers who are eager to link writers' lives and writing, but seclusion held an allure for the Victorians also. Logan Esdale explores the attraction that Dickinson's reclusive lifestyle had for the Victorians and the consequent correspondence between reclusivity and her work:

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<sup>30</sup> R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 311.

What convinced readers of the work's authenticity as much as the uneven poems themselves was all the emphasis on Dickinson's reclusive lifestyle. Her acquaintances, editors and critics all helped to construct the idea that this writing revealed a woman who had hidden from society. Wishing for something authentic, the public found what they needed in the writing of an utterly private person.<sup>31</sup>

Today's academic audience understands notions of authenticity to be elusive, accepting simulacra in a spirit of postmodern irony. Yet lost ideals of privacy have a retro allure in an increasingly publicity-driven world of contemporary literary celebrity. In an imitative way, a 'constructed' artistic persona continues to play to an audience eager to penetrate privacy. Just as Fuller is careful to emphasise that 'Emily Dickinson will probably always remain an enigma', Byatt intertextually re-creates the mystique that envelops Dickinson to infuse her neo-creation, LaMotte, in a similar atmosphere of authenticating seclusion.<sup>32</sup> We revisit the same stereotype that fascinated the Victorians; we co-opt the woman artist in sequestered silence to resonate with an authentic female literary tradition. Like Dickinson, LaMotte seldom ventures into public in person, but does dare to enter alternatively via 'letters, that space of freedom' (p. 193). Imitatively, we participate in the epistolary recovery of private Victorians. We voyeuristically breach an edifice of privacy to authenticate our reading and understanding of literature as a tradition entwined with private Victorian lives. Are assumptions of Victorian privacy and secrecy, in fact, vital in order to validate our interpretations of them as authentic?

The secrets surrounding Dickinson do not haunt Byatt's text alone. The clandestine love affair of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett also lingers between the lines of the Ash/LaMotte romance, as Byatt intertextually borrows the myths surrounding their famous courtship. Patricia O'Neill discusses the influence of romance on Browning's work, observing that 'the dramatic interest of the Brownings' love story

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<sup>31</sup> Logan Esdale, 'Dickinson's Epistolary "Naturalness"', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 14 (2005), 1-23 (p. 3).

<sup>32</sup> Fuller, p. 10.

enhanced both moral and aesthetic interpretations of Browning's message and sustained his reputation during the years when modernist critics had rejected the work of most Victorian writers'.<sup>33</sup> The courtship and love letters have consequently become part of the cultural mythology of both writers and Byatt adapts this for a postmodern sensibility. Importantly for this discussion, the Brownings' love story vies with their literary works for primacy in public appeal.<sup>34</sup> Romance, it would appear, endures amid changing fashions in literature. To recover and communicate the power of Browning as an artist, Byatt draws on the popular appeal of a romantic grand passion, blending works and private lives for a contemporary audience. Byatt suggests that 'we like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive'.<sup>35</sup> In *Possession*, Browning the historical man becomes less visible than his mythical persona. Created from a fusion of works and letters, Browning's famous epistolary love affair becomes a key element of cultural mythology now exploited by a postmodern consciousness.

## 2. The Ash/LaMotte Correspondence: Ghosts and Letters

*I veritably possess them.*<sup>36</sup>

In *Possession*, Byatt's ventriloquy reworks the Barrett-Browning love letters to imitate the dramatisation of epistolary personas. Performance was certainly one attraction of letter writing for Browning and Barrett, as Susan Thomas points out: 'Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett use the letter to establish and maintain their own versions of their relationship. Each writes and rewrites these versions, encoding and decoding textual

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (2005) narrates the Browning love affair from the epistolary viewpoint of Elizabeth Barrett's maid, Lily Wilson.

<sup>35</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Epigraph to *Possession* taken from Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"'.

selves'.<sup>37</sup> Byatt replicates this with her fictional lovers, Ash and LaMotte, who similarly encode and revise their textual selves.

Direct parallels can be drawn between Browning's first letter to Barrett and Ash's to LaMotte. Daniel Karlin claims:

Browning deliberately presents himself; [...] he has 'composed' his approach to Elizabeth Barrett, and offers her the spectacle of his stammering sincerity, produced, directed, written by, and starring himself. Browning the writer *of* the letter stands behind Browning the character *in* the letter – and this is the ultimate, the decisive proof of what the drama is about in the first place.<sup>38</sup>

Ash flatters LaMotte's 'perception and wisdom' (p. 86) much as Robert Browning's first letter adulates 'dear Miss Barrett'.<sup>39</sup> Browning takes pains to communicate delight in Barrett's 'genius', heaping praise upon her, with the ultimate and crowning accolade that he understands she presents 'your own self' in her poetry and letters.<sup>40</sup> Intriguingly this is something he appears not to allow himself to do, either in verse or private letter.

Conversely, in Byatt's fiction, it is Ash who understands that letters allow him to 'write my true writing' (p. 131). He moves to put aside his Browning-style '*masks*' (p. 6, original emphasis) to communicate a self normally disguised or hidden. However, his first letter is necessarily a construct to carefully cloak what is, in fact, painstakingly crafted. Seemingly casual words thinly disguise the urgency of his communication. We know this because Byatt makes readers privy to two unsent 'drafts' of Ash's first letter. These prove markedly different to the fair copy that we consequently view with an informed eye. There are many similarities between Ash's opening missive and Browning's first letter to Elizabeth Barrett. Karlin suggests that Browning's first letter is a performance or 'an elaborate rhetorical charade', a position reflected in Ash's first

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<sup>37</sup> Susan Stock Thomas, 'Writing the Self and Other in Byatt's *Possession*', *Studies in Browning and His Circle: A Journal of Criticism, History and Bibliography*, 20 (1993), 88-94 (p. 89).

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Karlin, *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 51, original emphases.

<sup>39</sup> Karlin, p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> Karlin, p. 47.

letter, which also contains elements of ‘charade’.<sup>41</sup> But one thing missing from delivered letters – actual and fictional – is the palpative urgency present in Ash’s draft letters. Readers are privileged to read these first and may consequently view the laboured urbane tone of his actual letter with some scepticism.

The drafts suggest a story untold to Roland. The unsent letters in fact secure primacy in the novel, as their discovery and Roland’s subsequent transgressive concealment of them drives the quest narrative. The drafts reveal more of Ash’s hidden desires and intentions, with Byatt further manufacturing layers of the unsaid by creating visible erasures. The erased lines are representative of the poet’s private verbal consciousness. Ill-advised slips of the tongue may have been erased and amended in the fair copy, but the drafts provide palimpsestic evidence of Ash’s self-censored voice.

Byatt again intertextually draws on contemporary interest in actual Victorians. Secrets and erasures have interested Dickinson scholars, with alterations and amendments to her correspondence generating much critical debate. Martha Nell Smith believes that ‘these scars are themselves a kind of writing, an alphabet of removal designed to counter Emily Dickinson’s actual expressions. [...] The erasures are at least in part discourses of desire’.<sup>42</sup> Erasures become part of Byatt’s ‘alphabet’ of clues for detection. The censored content of Ash’s drafts reveals the intensity of his meeting with LaMotte. He erases the following: ‘share’, ‘mutually profitable’, ‘important’, and ‘extraordinary’ (pp. 5-6), deletions which plainly speak of mutual understanding between himself and LaMotte. Most prophetically, Ash writes, but erases ‘we *must meet*’ (p. 6, original emphasis). Mutual sympathy and the ‘delectable drug of *understanding*’ (p. 6, original emphasis) are invoked in draft form and these never-to-

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<sup>41</sup> Karlin, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Martha Nell Smith, ‘Omissions Are Not Accidents: Erasures & Cancellations in Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts’ < <http://www.emilydickinson.org/mutilation/mintro.html> > [accessed 11 November 2006]

be-sent letters evidence momentary, swept away constraints that he must later reinstate as epistolary decorum demands a revised, more casual introduction.

Christabel responds in like-minded performative mode to construct a sophisticated rhetorical portrait of herself as the reclusive female writer in (preferred) seclusion. Secrecy and potential duplicity are integrally woven within Christabel's creation of her epistolary self. She declares herself to be primarily 'a creature of my Pen' (p. 87) and, with shades of Dickinson, confirms her reclusive status: 'I live circumscribed and self-communing' (p. 87).<sup>43</sup> Christabel's epistolary adventure begins with a statement: 'No truly – I do not Tease' (p. 87), but this is exactly the function her letter performs. Initially restricting her invitation to remain within the bounds of epistolary communion, she begs Ash to forsake (for the time being at least) more bodily nourishment. Temptingly she outlines Ash's desired cucumber sandwiches: 'delicately salted, [...] exquisitely fine-cut' (p. 87), but discourages physical appetite at this early stage. It is, however, only postponed, not discounted, as she concludes her missive with the direct invitation: 'if you care to write again' (p. 87). Her letter is a masterpiece of titillation and suggestion for Ash and readers, veiled beneath a guise of literary allusion. This brings to mind Elizabeth Meese's idea of the seductive slow burn to the romantic flame, as 'the separation of sender and receiver, characteristic of the letter, establishes the condition for eroticism – the seductive distancing of one from the other'.<sup>44</sup> Faith and doubt, private and public selves, and the merits and mission of literary art ostensibly preoccupy their epistolary intercourse as desire builds with physical meeting and consummation delayed.

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<sup>43</sup> This resonates with thinly disguised shades of Dickinson, who wrote: 'Alone and in a Circumstance/Reluctant to be told/A spider on my reticence/Assiduously crawled'. Franklin, p. 468. Byatt quotes this verse to support her claim that 'the most startling and most beautiful literary spiders I know were made by Emily Dickinson, [...], poet of genius. Oddly, though she was a woman, and she praised her spiders as artists, they were all, improbably, male in her terms'. A. S. Byatt, 'Arachne', in *Ovid Metamorphosed*, ed. by Philip Terry (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 131-57 (pp. 151-52).

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Meese, 'The Erotics of the Letter', *South Atlantic Review*, 57 (1992), 11-28 (p. 21).



Christabel's studied epistolary reserve is, however, sifted with light-filled metaphors that illuminate a prim picture of quiet studious existence. Gleaming and shimmering language sparkles within otherwise demure prose. Christabel verbally jousts with Ash, but takes care to signal the chinks in her armoured propriety. The letter gleams with 'shining', 'glimmerings and glister', 'brilliance', 'silken' (p. 87), lush language that beckons Ash not to heed an illusory retreat, but to follow and respond to her luminosity. Here, by extension, illumination of unbound secrets is suggested to readers. Are we similarly seduced? Textually undermining her socially conformist stance, Christabel declares herself 'a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web' (p. 87) and her letters, so industriously spun, invite Ash to step recklessly into her shining gossamer snare. Ash clearly focuses on ideas of mutual understanding in his introductory missive and Christabel responds by weaving a sympathetic glowing image of narcissistic reflection. She enjoins him to pursue a destiny of tantalising but transgressive epistolary courtship. An edifice of secrecy is a preordained consequence of such transgressive enticement.

Secrets need securing, but a whisper of possible enlightenment encourages the curious to pursue and unmask. As a respectable spinster, LaMotte may be socially compelled to fence her body and virtue within a fortress of feminine isolation and enclosure, yet Byatt breaches the poet's defences by materially swathing her body and letters beneath more permeable and inviting layers of sensuously described textures. These invite undoing, both literal and moral. Wrapped within seductive textile/text, LaMotte and her secrets encourage disrobing. Disclosure is dependent on narrative unfolding to reveal the secrets held by both body and letter.

Tactile wrappings of silks, pleats, and ribbons enclose both LaMotte and the bundle of love letters. This is especially evident when comparing the scene of LaMotte and Ash's consummation with the pivotal moment when the hidden cache of letters is

discovered by Roland and Maud. Byatt delivers the coveted letters to the curious scholars in a scene that borrows from both detective and romance genres. As Roland and Maud breathlessly prowl the darkened Gothic gloom of the Bailey mansion, Maud is prompted to chant a mantra of Dickinson-style verse, ‘a kind of incantation’ (p. 82):

Dolly keeps a Secret  
 Safer than a Friend  
 Dolly’s Silent Sympathy  
 Lasts without end.  
 Friends may betray us  
 Love may Decay  
 Dolly’s Discretion  
 Outlasts our Day.

Could Dolly tell of us?  
 Her wax lips are sealed.  
 Much has she meditated  
 Much – ah – concealed.  
 [...] (p. 82).

This is again clearly linked to Dickinson’s letter poems with a union of both forms revealing more than one alone. Poetry leads to hidden documents and documents return scholars to verse to encourage collaborative pastiche assembly of Victorian lives.

Maud responds to her psychic prompt to heed the letters as ‘the shreds and relics’ of Ash’s and LaMotte’s ‘lost Love’ (p. 83) and following the ‘treasure-hunt clue’ (p. 83), she

reached into the cot and plucked out the blonde doll by the waist; her gown was pink silk, with little rosebuds round its neckline and tiny pearly buttons. She handed this creature to Roland, who took it as he might have done a kitten, cradling it in the crook of his elbow, and adding to it, in turn, the nightcapped one, in tiny white pleats and broderie anglaise, and the dark-haired one, severe in dark peacock.  
 (p. 83)

This ends the ghoulish trio’s inanimate suspension of secrets and time. Their long watch of unseeing glassy gaze, ‘rather horrid, a little deathly’ (p. 83), now surrenders to eager prying eyes. Maud carefully dismantles the dolls’ sentinel by removing many layers of folded fabrics. A ‘counterpane’, ‘three fine woollen blankets and a crocheted shawl’, a ‘feather mattress’, plus a ‘straw palliasse’ (p. 83) are all peeled away to reveal a further

package with yet more enticing wrappings of ‘fine white linen, tied with tape’ (p. 84). Such elaborate wrappings are part of neo-Victorian’s aesthetic of recovery of the past that emphasises tactile materiality for documentary relics. This is also depicted in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* (2000), for instance, where a journal is discovered nestling in a trunk within fine fabric layers: ‘a baby’s frock of the finest white cotton’; a shawl of ‘butter velvet’, and another, in ‘pale grey wool with faded pink flowers’.<sup>45</sup> Anticipatory disrobing prises precious words from protective wrappings and Byatt’s parcels finally shed their ultimate protective envelope of ‘oiled silk, [...] tied with black ribbon’ (p. 84) to expose the coveted ‘folded paper time-bombs’ (p. 89).

It later becomes evident that not only Dolly’s but also Christabel’s secrets are seductively enclosed within tantalising textures of silks, linens, rosebuds, pleats, and pin-tucks. Compare the elaborate ritualistic description of discovery of the lost letters to LaMotte, awaiting Ash for ‘the first of those long strange nights’ (p. 283): like the dolls, Christabel is tucked up tight, patiently awaiting discovery and disrobing. She is presented enclosed in bed, ‘waiting, under a stiff white crocheted bedspread and a patchwork quilt’ (p.283), in a ‘high necked white lawn nightdress, covered at neck and wrists with intricate gophering and pin-tucks and lacy edges, buttoned with a row of minute linen buttons’ (p.283). Tucks, pleats and buttons, all suggestive of secrets and undoing, present erotic feminised images of sensual mystery for woman and letters; both invite readers to participate in suspenseful revelation and discovery.

Penetration and possession of woman and word are thus aligned in the novel.

Ruth Perry deliberates on a tradition that associates narrative with penetration:

The fact that the climax of the plot generally also had to do with ‘getting inside’ a woman suggests that the sexual act works as a metaphor for the most important literary innovation – the getting inside of a woman’s consciousness by the writer and by the reader.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Perry, p. 131.

Contemporary rediscovery and secondary reading of the Ash/LaMotte correspondence question notions of virginal and protected discovery. Ash and readers are prompted to question Christabel's and Blanche's 'sweet daily rhythms' (p. 159). Byatt thus hints at a duality in Christabel's character and most clearly reflects this in her contradictory epistolary performance as recluse/seductress.

There is indeed a persistent idea in epistolary discourse that people are in some way embodied in their letters. Meese is interested in the relationship between sexual and textual bodies written and read in the love letter.<sup>47</sup> She claims that 'desire writes the absence at its heart, the shadowy hand on a fine sheet of paper or the faint tracks on the sheet after rising, inscribing love letters'.<sup>48</sup> It is evident that Christabel and her letters are folded and enveloped similarly within their coverings. Erotically 'dressed' and sealed, letters yield their red hymeneal wax to one forced entry; initial single penetration ensures just one privileged and desired reader. Later readers are always relegated to a role of voyeur and imagination is necessary to re-embody absence. Byatt is careful to always suggest an element of unknowability about the past and mystique is reinforced by evidence that destroyed and irrecoverable letters and diaries did exist, but must remain a subject for readers' imagination. This reinforces a parallel understanding of history's gaps and storytelling's incarnation of the past.

Withholding, therefore, becomes a strategy that mimics censorship and the mysteries of Victorian repression. A frigid atmosphere of seclusion may furnish the stereotypical view of Victorian women writers, but the Victorian era is of course inextricably linked to a perversely heightened eroticism associated with concealed and enclosed bodies. Elusive glimpses of the body from within protective layers of bustling silks, satins, and lace encourage fantasy and imaginative excess. As Barthes perceptively observes, 'is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment*

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<sup>47</sup> Meese, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Meese, p. 21.

*gapes?*'.<sup>49</sup> It is the 'flash', which he defines as 'the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance' that seduces; this is what both contemporary scholars and neo-Victorian novelists have found equally intriguing about nineteenth-century fiction.<sup>50</sup> A fascination with 'appearance-as-disappearance' has led to a cultural obsession which compels continued investigation of the secrets of 'hidden' Victorians.

Contemporary fiction thus steps sideways into a secret world that we imagine as a hidden nineteenth century. This is life lived as Roland and Maud increasingly suspect theirs is not. Byatt suggests that they squander emotion in exchange for a form of sequestered scholarly seclusion. Roland indeed resorts to mentally inviting the Victorians into his bedroom as erotic stimulus. In the dying throes of his relationship with Val, he allows the past world he obsessively visits in the day to enter his private fantasies. In order to kindle his waning desire, he 'lit on an image, a woman in a library, a woman not naked but voluminously clothed, concealed in rustling silk and petticoats, fingers folded over the place where the tight black silk bodice met the springing skirts' (p. 126). It transpires that this vision is, in fact, Ellen Ash, 'half-fantasy, half-photogravure' (p. 127). In stark contrast to the dry metalanguage of his academic training, Roland now succumbs to emotive language and sensuous imagery. As the letters inflame Roland's dormant imagination he responds to their seductive invitation to escape into a more vibrant Victorian world.

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<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 9, original emphasis.

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, p. 10.

### 3. Postal Nostalgia

*Fire into fog, making the past your world.*<sup>51</sup>

Mystification and uncertainty suggested in Victorian love letters draws readers towards a ‘felt’ historical connection with the romance of the past, whereas modern letters emphasise the lack of play in lives shaped by poststructuralist ideas. *Possession* is infused with sensuous metaphorical language and there is a particularly heightened concentration of vivid visual imagery around letters and poems in the novel. Byatt suggests a romanticised materiality inherent in body/letter relations and her descriptive prose makes direct appeal to the senses. Old, lost letters are romanticised and fetishised in *Possession*, with correspondence in the modern world relegated to mundane matters. Letters in Byatt’s modern world are not exchanged for intellectual play; neither do they document the ecstasy and agony of love affairs, illicit or otherwise. This is in stark contrast to the Victorian letters, which document a rich, lived world of mystery, romance, and artistry. The scholars are repeatedly drawn from romantic reveries of violet inked, beribboned, past lives back to their own unsatisfactory modern existences by the unwelcome arrival of severe, pragmatic, unromantic letters, exemplified by ‘the kind of tradesman’s brown with which all universities have replaced their milled white crested missives in the new austerity’ (p. 136).

Letters, past and present, are presented as a dichotomy of romance vs. realism. It is significant that directly after reading one of Christabel’s riddling missives, Maud receives her own ‘threatening’ letters (p. 136). Letters from Fergus Wolff and Leonora Stern occasion a simultaneous assault and harangue Maud with probing and unwelcome questions. Worryingly, they also threaten the impending and menacing materialisation of their authors. Maud begins to perceive a lack in her life that can be epitomised by her own unsatisfying epistolary relations.

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<sup>51</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning’s ‘Mr Sludge, “the Medium”’.

A sense of lack fosters Roland's and Maud's romanticised attachment to the materiality of the old letters as they become enthralled in a form of vicarious epistolary love affair. Despite a long and intense relationship with Ash's verse, Roland clearly feels a deeper connection to the writer through contact with his private letters. As LaMotte did before him, he now relishes 'the hop and skip and sudden starts of [Ash's] ink' (p. 133). Perry ponders the totemic value of letters for readers:

The degree to which love letters are treated symbolically can be judged from the way epistolary characters behave with these poor, inanimate, pieces of paper. In virtually every epistolary novel, letters are kissed, embraced, mooned over, communed with, treasured – as if they were stand-ins for the absent lover.<sup>52</sup>

The contrast between romanticised Victorian correspondence and modern communication is reinforced by Roland's understanding that his photocopies are inferior to the 'faded coppery-grey script' (p. 23) of the original 'busy passionate letters' (p. 131); they represent only Walter Benjamin's 'decay of the aura'.<sup>53</sup> Reproducing the original letters, Roland watches as the 'machine spat out, hot and chemical scented spectograms of those writings, black-rimmed by imaged empty space as the originals were edged by a century's dust' (p. 22). Roland thus 'wanted the originals' (p. 23), as they alone provide the aesthetic experience he craves. They ensure some sentimental and romanticised connection to the poets, where the copies emphasise only distance and alienation of the modern machine world. As Benjamin argued, 'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'.<sup>54</sup> Through contact with the original letters, Roland perceives 'the true lineaments of prose and *the feelings* of Ash and LaMotte' (p. 88, my emphasis). Only tangible papery presence allows Roland to vicariously feel their 'Addiction' (p. 187) and, conversely, understand his own vicarious

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<sup>52</sup> Perry, p. 101.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217-52 (p. 222).

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, p. 220.

enslavement to nineteenth-century vibrancy precisely because it outshines the twentieth-century pallidity of his own ascetic critical life.

Roland does, however, accept that reading can be privileged and documents singly 'possessed'. This has both possibilities and limitations for those curious about the past:

Letters, Roland discovered, are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. His time was a time of the dominance of narrative theories. Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going. [...] Letters, finally, exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for *a* reader. (pp. 130-31, original emphasis).

Roland has long been engaged in 'knowing' Ash's poetic voice: 'His mind could leap ahead and hear the rhythms of the unread as though he were the writer, hearing in his brain the ghost-rhythms of the as yet unwritten' (p. 130). However, Ash's epistolary voice reveals his understanding to be superficial. The 'busy passionate letters, had never been written for him to read [...]. They had been written for Christabel LaMotte' (p. 131). John Su argues that 'the letters upset the conclusions of decades of literary criticism on the poets; they upset Roland's and Maud's confidence in their own emotions and desires'.<sup>55</sup> I would argue, however, that ultimately epistolary envy actuates the scholars to develop their own first-hand emotions and desires. It is letters and 'his secret theft' (p. 20) that provide an epiphany for Roland; as the certainties of his scholarly world begin to crumble, his mind opens to his own potential creativity.

Letters therefore become explicitly illustrative of a dichotomy that demonstrates contemporary communication as aesthetically and materially inferior to the nineteenth century. *Possession's* fictional scholars are portrayed as desiccated by the demands of a discursive system within a professional world that is dominated by 'the cut-throat ideological battles of structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction and

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<sup>55</sup> John J. Su, 'Fantasies of (Re)collection: Collecting and Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*', *Contemporary Literature*, 45 (2004), 684-712 (p. 695).



feminism' (p. 311). Byatt thus presents 'whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists' (p. 267) who may flounder as disciples of their academic discipline, yet remain enthralled by very personal love affairs with their Victorian subjects. This is a theme repeated in her 2000 novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, where another disillusioned poststructuralist scholar, Phineas Nanson, contrasts the 'fluid vacuum' of his life with the 'glittery fullness' of a fictitious eminent Victorian.<sup>56</sup> His 'dream of pursuit' may be repeatedly thwarted, but he, like Roland, does manage to secure a reward of 'release from a life of theoretical pedagogy'.<sup>57</sup>

In *Possession*, Byatt combines a pastiche of Victorian writers with a parodic attack on contemporary critical systems that bid for possession or ownership of text and meaning by dismissing writers' authority. She argues: 'many writers, and some critics, feel that powerful figures in the modern critical movements feel almost a gladiatorial antagonism to the author and the authority the author claims'.<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Dipple agrees and suggests: 'formal critical acts are powerful within the culture, and this is one reason they are resented'.<sup>59</sup> Byatt's fictional scholars are all engaged in a passionate search to secure a personal interpretation of public mythology. Ultimately, they succumb to the lure of private letters and diaries as they individually endeavour to establish their own 'figure in the carpet'.<sup>60</sup>

The scholars pursue factual material to enhance their fabrications, but striving for ownership or possession of the subject can lead to fantasy and distortion. Byatt provides persuasive textual evidence for her scholars being, in fact, more possessed than possessing. She was inspired to write *Possession* nearly twenty years before its

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<sup>56</sup> A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.18.

<sup>57</sup> Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, p. 20; p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Henry James's short story 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1896) explores narrative puzzles and secrets in order to debate authorship and interpretation. Frank Kermode, ed., *Henry James: The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1986).

publication when she observed the Coleridgian Scholar, Kathleen Coburn, carrying out her research in the British Library and contemplated who, in fact, possessed whom in this process.<sup>61</sup> Such scholarly impulse is also explored in Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) as Bill Unwin investigates Matthew Pearce's notebooks and questions 'why should I be so possessive? [...] And why should it be my task to set him before the world?'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, custodianship underpins the scholarly impulse in *Possession*, with the quest metaphorically described in a language of pursuit and capture of the holy grail of revelatory letters and diaries. But first the questers must separate their subjects from prescriptive critical revisions.

The scholars 'need the end of the story' (p. 498) and they believe their quest has successfully delivered the hidden story. However, Roland's observation that 'letters tell no story' (p. 131) must be heeded to understand that full historical 'truth' is not necessarily found in documents. The scholars' knowledge satisfies them, but it is nonetheless incomplete. Readers of *Possession* are privy to a more comprehensive story, however, as the author/narrator fills the gaps that documented history masks. Byatt argues that scholarship thinks it will 'get to the end of the quest and find out what this person was really like, and they really felt, and actually the chances are that the most important moment of their life, or most important moments, are forever hidden'.<sup>63</sup> At this point Byatt turns to diaries to reinforce this message.

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<sup>61</sup> Tredell, p. 24. Coburn's research journey is explored in her book *In Pursuit of Coleridge* (London: Bodley Head, 1977).

<sup>62</sup> Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *A. S. Byatt: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 20. Byatt appears to be primarily speaking of biography as scholarship here.

#### 4. Diaries

*The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity.*<sup>64</sup>

Byatt uses letters and poems to develop the relationship between fictional poets who are based on actual nineteenth-century writers, but she employs diary form to voice marginal characters who are purely fictive. The diaries of Ellen Ash, Blanche Glover, and Sabine de Kercoz tell partial stories that circle the central love story.<sup>65</sup> Byatt observes in her study, *Portraits in Fiction* (2002) that ‘a good novel exploits the richness of the imprecision, of the hinted’ and, while the letters in the novel provide a relatively comprehensive story in themselves, the diaries imprecisely hint at only fragments of information.<sup>66</sup> Diaries nevertheless play a major intertextual part in revealing the mysteries and secrets of the Victorians to the contemporary ‘detectives’ and are thus key for Byatt’s strategy of concealment and staged revelation.

Secret diaries raise additional issues of censorship, confession, and complications of potential or phantom addressees. Ellen Ash, for instance, is presented as a riddling and elusive diarist. Her life has been about avoidance, the unspoken, and silence and her journal is neither wedded to privacy nor a confidential securing of secrets. Alternatively, it engages in dialogic riddles that anticipate a shift from private to public. As a frustrated creative writer in her lifetime, Ellen will realise an audience posthumously, as twentieth-century investigators read her journal for clues to unlock secrets of the past. In this respect, her diary moves into the realm of epistolary address. It is constructed with readers in mind, intimating, as Janet Gurkin Altman suggests for letters, ‘an influential reader presence’, which, as such, engages a metacritical discussion of writer/reader relations.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of Seven Gables*.

<sup>65</sup> There is also one brief diary entry for [Henry] Crabb Robinson, travel writer, diarist, and famous literary correspondent, described in *Possession* as the writer of a ‘monumental Diary’ (p. 23).

<sup>66</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Portraits in Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 93.

<sup>67</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 91.

Ellen's canny awareness of posterity and potential readers reflects an argument that diary writers 'litigate' with the future, as explained by Thomas Mallon:

in one degree or another we [diarists] are likely to feel the need to litigate with the world and the future. It is then we realise that our diaries, aside from whatever else they may be, can be our depositions.<sup>68</sup>

A variation of this is Ernestina Freeman's attempt to call upon diary support to beseech her errant and escaping fiancé not to leave in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969): 'I will fetch down my diary if you do not believe me'.<sup>69</sup> Ellen's diary must become a posthumous 'deposition' possessing an afterlife that continues to the end to protect her secrets. She speaks from the grave to 'litigate' with a world and future that will know her only partially, self-fashioned through self-censored textual traces. It is left to the omniscient narrator to fill in the gaps of her story and reveal the reason for her purposeful textual obfuscation.

Ellen writes in private and, with an 'expansive ordinary eloquence' (p. 115), she crafts her diary as a 'darkly *riddling*' (p. 223, original emphasis) document, which acts as consummate concealing protector rather than sincere confessor of secrets. She certainly does not imitate one of Thomas Mallon's 'confessors', as she writes with a guarded eye to posterity. Her exile from this category results from circumspection that compels her to conceal the fatal flaw in her marriage. Ellen has, in fact, more in common with Mallon's category of 'apologists'. Mallon argues that apologists address their diaries to unborn readers and that in matters of the heart they become a place that 'stands with the sonnet and the letter as a place where great love can be immortalised and apparent mismatches defended to the world, and revenge – immediate or posthumous – sought against the faithless'.<sup>70</sup> Ellen immortalises and defends her 'great

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p. 206.

<sup>69</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Vintage, 2005 [1969]), p. 364.

<sup>70</sup> Mallon, p. 196.

love' for Randolph Henry Ash in her diary and manages to avoid the typical consequence of an apologist style, which Mallon claims is descent into madness.

Ellen is compartmentalised within her diary and reflects historical diary studies, which suggest that the form was fundamentally suited to the day-to-day time-parcelled fragmentation of women's lives.<sup>71</sup> Writing in the larger shadow of her fêted husband, Ellen also stands in comparison with LaMotte, the independent spinster, who with 'no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like *patting* of the reader's sensibility' (p. 120, original emphasis) writes impassioned verse and ardent letters. Ellen never seriously entertains her own fragile creative aspirations and remains sacrificed at the altar of duty and domesticity. Her missionary zeal to provide a home as Ash's private refuge from public demands leaves time only for intermittently recorded diary entries.

Cynthia A. Huff argues that actual manuscript diaries of nineteenth-century women illustrate 'an ideological site of contestation, a space where gendered interpretations of true womanhood meet'.<sup>72</sup> Ellen's journal mimics this contest with a mixture of resigned frustration at her gendered positioning interspersed with illuminating moments of intellectual reflection on the current '*climate* of such questioning' (p. 223, original emphasis). Christabel may be constrained by cultural dictates similar to Ellen's, but her venture into epistolary exchange with Ash takes her out of her safe same-sex domestic environment. Christabel begins to dissolve the boundaries that guard her chastity when she replies to Ash's letter, whereas Ellen finds no such epistolary escape and remains private and contained in self-reflexive writing form. She must content herself with writing only the '*carefully strained*' (p. 461; original emphasis) truth of her journal, whereas LaMotte creatively ranges across letter and verse.

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<sup>71</sup> See Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, eds., *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Cynthia A. Huff, 'Textual Boundaries: Space in Nineteenth-Century Women's Manuscript Diaries', in *Inscribing the Daily* (see Bunkers and Huff above), pp. 123-38 (p. 125).

LaMotte, in fact, suggests journal writing to be a depletion of creative energies. Her cousin, Sabine DeKercoz, reports in her diary that LaMotte found the ‘habit of morbid Self-examination’ unfitting ‘a woman for producing good work, or for living usefully’ (p. 41).<sup>73</sup> Ellen is certainly prone to ‘morbid Self-examination’, evidenced in her contemplation of the inequalities of separate spheres. This is suggested during a chess game with Herbert Baulk where she dreams of moving her ‘Queen freely across the diagonals’ and wonders at the oddity ‘that in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways – in life it is much otherwise’ (p. 228). One might extend this analogy to her and LaMotte’s writings. Ellen, in fact, admires LaMotte’s verse and esteems (envies?) her freedom of expression, ‘lively imagination’ and ‘force and vigour (pp. 120-21). By contrast, Ellen’s diary entries in 1859 repeatedly refer to her perceived ‘lack’ (p. 222); she writes of a lack of vigour, endeavour, and decisiveness, and thus confirms LaMotte’s thesis of static ‘self-examination’. Ellen is ideologically constrained to move one square or day at a time to cut a pedestrian daily tract through life and diary record. She dutifully submits to her onerous ‘sphere of influence and responsibility’ (p. 227) and this provides the ostensible material for her day-by-day diary writing, whereas LaMotte’s bodily exchange with Ash promotes new flights of imaginative creativity.

## 5. Exchange

*So far it may swerve from the truth of the human heart.*<sup>74</sup>

Focussing on the argument that diaries are the ‘flesh made word’, it becomes evident that the physical void at the heart of Ellen’s marriage is replicated in her diary text with

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<sup>73</sup> This perhaps reflects Byatt’s own view on diary keeping. She says that she tried once and so disgusted herself with her self-interest that she promptly gave up. ‘World Book Club Interview’, *BBC World Service* < [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/world\\_book\\_club.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/world_book_club.shtml) > [accessed 10 October 2007]

<sup>74</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of Seven Gables*.

exchange limited to self-communion.<sup>75</sup> Are diaries and letters the flesh made word because secrecy and secrets invariably lead back to the body in neo-Victorian fiction? Is it reading and interpretation, rather than writing, that elicits word as flesh as contemporary readers in the novel seek to retrospectively re-embody the Victorians? Nineteenth-century writers disguised or suspended the body in their writing, but traces are now sought, detected, and fleshed out by contemporary readers. Ellen is materialised from a diary silhouette, as nineteenth-century reticence collides with twentieth-century prurient interest to remake the Victorians in our own image of them.

As another of Byatt's frustrated creative writers, along with Mortimer Cropper and Roland Michell, Ellen confesses to her diary: 'I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither, but the mistress of a very small household' (p. 122). In youth, she felt herself a potential muse and enjoyed being 'the object of all knights' devotion' (p. 122). Age and wisdom develop her understanding that writing the story would have been ultimately more satisfying. She is now neither subject nor muse of Ash's poems – is it her lack of bodily exchange that excludes her from his writing? Exchange is the key issue that differentiates letter-writing and diary-keeping. Does the passion of her husband's love affair with LaMotte transform her into [his] poetry and epistolary erotics, while Ellen's frigidity consigns her to self-authored and self-censored diary writing? Huff asks the question, 'what are the correlations between, and influences upon, a diarist's conception of her physical body, and/or place within the social body, and the body of the text she is creating?'.<sup>76</sup> Ellen's diary may answer this with both its marginal status and its fundamental elisions and omissions.

LaMotte delivers herself to Ash, textually and bodily, while Ellen's diary is more a lost letter to herself. Ash's and LaMotte's shared secrets and bodily communion become interrelated in their poetry and letters. But Ellen's chaste flesh denies exchange

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<sup>75</sup> Mallon, p. xvii.

<sup>76</sup> Huff, 'Textual Boundaries', p. 124.

and results in textual secrets that are suspended in her diary awaiting later readers for whom text will suffice in the absence of body. Ellen refuses any impassioned fleshly diary confession. Her diary persona is likened to a fairy-tale heroine, a Snow White figure 'suspended' (p. 232) in a glass casket, virginal and visible, but encased and frostily silenced in her lifetime. This interrelates with an interpolated story, by LaMotte, entitled, 'The Glass Casket', where a tailor owns a 'wondrous delicate key' to unlock 'a tiny keyhole' in a 'smooth box, which had no visible cleft or split, but was whole like a green ice egg' (p. 63). He awakens a beautiful maiden from a long icy sleep with a kiss to her 'perfect cheek' (p. 63). Ash does not possess any 'wondrous' key to release Ellen from her custodial chastity and she remains a kind of ice princess, frozen in her separate and secret virginal state. Her physical frigidity is reflected in an inhibited stilling of the word, a withholding of intimacy of both body and diary confession.

The glass casket has, in fact, meaning for both women: Ellen remains muted behind her 'transparent barrier', but Christabel fears the consequences for her art if she forsakes her 'glass eminence'.<sup>77</sup> This is indeed the concern of Blanche Glover, who fears that epistolary (and bodily) exchange will have an injurious effect on LaMotte's writing. Blanche is a pastiche character of a different kind to those intertextually suggestive of famous Victorians. As one of Byatt's wholly fictional diarists, she does not summon an intertextual trail that leads to actual Victorian women, but she is nevertheless an amalgam of a host of artistic and literary stereotypes. Her character is similar to Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian jilted lesbian, Margaret Prior in *Affinity* (1999). As doomed and fatalistic spinsters, both are Ophelia-style figures who shadow famous artistic and suicidally inclined women, such as Virginia Woolf (famed diarist) and Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>78</sup> Blanche weights herself with stones and wades into 'the swollen

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<sup>77</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>78</sup> Lorna Martens argues that a rash of suicidally inclined fictional diarists were inspired by the seminal work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774). Features of the model



waters of the Thames' (p. 309) and thus evokes a commonly imagined end for fictional Victorian lovelorn women.<sup>79</sup> The clichéd idea of spurned lovers drowning in their grief has a neo-Victorian twist: the spurned suicides now pine not for men but for lost lesbian loves. The shared principles of her and LaMotte's ideas of autonomy are detailed in her private diary and the catastrophic 'failure of ideals' (p. 307) is recorded in Blanche's public address to the world – her suicide note.

Whereas the perishing of actual nineteenth-century female writers at their own hands inspired a culturally mythologising meld of their writings with Gothicised tragedy, Blanche sinks with barely a trace. Her prized art is lost and, although her journal and suicide note survive, these are of only minor interest to those fascinated with the larger figures of Ash and LaMotte. Blanche had 'wanted to be understood by those not yet born. By whom else, after all?' (p. 308) and to this end, her diary proves more enduring than her 'dumb and fragile' (p. 308) art. The journal contributes to the documentary jigsaw that modernity tries to re-construct, but she nevertheless remains a marginal enigma.

Shifting the 'romance' of the grand passion to her point of view as an intertextual and recurrent diary personality, a 'superfluous creature' (p. 309), Blanche's spare diary entries relate the damage that the dramatic epistolary affair imposes on her relationship with LaMotte.<sup>80</sup> Extending the fairy-tale allusion, Blanche represents LaMotte as another stereotypical fairy-tale innocent pursued by a predatory 'Hunter' (p. 46). Ash is represented as 'a Prowler [...] ranging and snuffing round our small retreat,

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include an unhappy love story, the suicide, and a character type of the sensitive, problematic, suffering hero. *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 86. Blanche writes in her suicide note that she intends to (more successfully) 'emulate the author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*' (p. 308, original emphasis).

<sup>79</sup> Barbara Gates argues: 'suicide by drowning, a common route for those women who did take their own lives was the way most visual artists and many writers of the Victorian era imagined female suicide'. She explains, 'Ophelias became a phenomenon in Victorian England' and points out that, 'in the visual arts, the Thames and its bridges came to represent the end of the line for such desperate women'. *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 135.

<sup>80</sup> This is perhaps an intertextual nod to Ivan Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850).

trying the shutters and huffing and puffing inside the door' (p. 46). Their 'quiet harmony' (p. 47) is disturbed by subterfuge, as persistent letter exchange infiltrates what Blanche valued as a domestic stronghold to foster a new atmosphere of subversive secrecy. Epistolary exchange delivers the public into private and proves an intrusion that, in Blanche's view, undoes LaMotte's artistic integrity. Despairingly, she rails against the effect of the intrusive letters on Christabel's artistry: 'all this correspondence is detrimental to her true gifts. She is in no real need of epistolary adulation' (p. 46).

It might be argued conversely that it is bodily exchange which, in fact, enhances LaMotte's creativity. Her epic poem, *The Fairy Melusine*, a tale of the serpent woman who 'unfurl[s] in secret' to suggest 'a creature of transformations and mysterious interrelations', reflects LaMotte's own transformation, evidenced in her interrelated verse and letter performance.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, Ellen, as domestic angel, is relegated to a form of Protestant self-reflection and arrested interrelation that limits transformation. Ellen's diary, 'leather-bound, with marbled end-papers in crimson and violet' (p. 118-19), does provide, however, a constructive conundrum that leads contemporary scholars from initial investigation of vibrant epistolary and bodily exchange to the cooler shores of self-censored diary contemplation.

## 6. Erasure and Censorship

*Of a little lying shall be.*<sup>82</sup>

Ellen resists the lure of confessing secrets to her diary and chooses to remain a textual enigma. Paradoxically, it is what Ellen does not say in her diary that proves most telling. As in Ash's draft letters, the elisions and deletions of Ellen's diary indicate a further furtive layer of her diary writing and encourage later readers to reconstruct

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<sup>81</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 7-9. Auerbach explains, 'while right-thinking Victorians were elevating woman into an angel, their art slithered with images of a mermaid'. Auerbach, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of Seven Gables*.

hidden meaning for themselves. This double-voiced discourse further demonstrates Byatt's controlled revelation of a 'truth' hinted at in Ellen's riddling diary omissions. Ellen's diary most clearly illustrates Byatt's metafictional play in accordance with Patricia Waugh's explanation of metafiction as 'the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion'.<sup>83</sup> Byatt admits that she wrote the pastiche poems in *Possession* to purposefully plant clues to unlock the narrative secrets and also to produce a kind of 'verbal flickering' as the root of scholarly or critical reading that hears 'the words both then, and now'.<sup>84</sup> Ellen's diary entries similarly encode information to support detection and revelatory strategies that connect past and present by encouraging readers to actively close-read for understanding.

Ellen defies the confidential mode of diary writing because her text ceaselessly circles around the unmentionable subject of her frigidity and non-consummated marriage. This secret is not revealed in her diary; rather, (remembering Ash has no 'wondrous delicate key' p. 63), 'the approach, the locked gateway, the panic, the whimpering flight' (p. 459) are disclosed by the omniscient narrator of the novel, who supplies knowledge that intertextually illuminates Ellen's riddling diary entries, explaining:

The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and titbits. She became his slave. Quivering at every word. *He had accepted her love.*

She had loved him for it.

He had loved her. (p. 459, original emphasis)

Ellen textual denial of her secrets reflects the sexual denial of her body. She takes pains to carefully sift the 'truth' in her diary and indeed, her modern-day editor, Beatrice Nest, has to wade through dull drifts of household details in order to detect traces of

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<sup>83</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Reynolds and Noakes, p. 14.

Ellen's private voice. Among much 'vague adjectival enthusiasm', which occurs with the 'regular tolling of a bell', Beatrice discovers 'other, less bland, tones of voice' (p. 115) in the diary that chime insistently for contemporary attention attuned to hushed sexual secrets. Initially Beatrice thought Ellen 'rambling and dull', but she later revised her opinion and 'became implicated' (p. 115) in Ellen's dissembling. As Ellen vehemently believed that Randolph Henry should be protected, Beatrice, in turn, becomes the protector of Ellen, whom she understands to be purposely 'baffling' (p. 220) the hunters and seekers. There is a sense that secrecy in some way transmits itself to those who inherit or claim private documents. Beatrice's 'possession' of Ellen's papers impels a consequent protection of Ellen's secrets; similarly, Maud and Roland feel 'so *possessive*' (p. 91, original emphasis) about the letters, 'because we found them. And because – because they're private' (p.91).

Beatrice senses a private palimpsest lying quietly beneath a necessarily muted diary voice as she begins to get 'the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid [...] *panelling*' (p. 220, original emphasis). Here is a reminder of Byatt's 'verbal flickering', as Beatrice intuits another sense or meaning lighting the way for those who look carefully. Beatrice's decision that Ellen is a 'clever and hinting sort of woman' (p. 237) is based on an inescapable suspicion that a deliberately hidden story lies behind Ellen's carefully self-edited words. Beatrice denies, however, that she is reading between the lines of Ellen's diary and informs Maud: 'we were not taught to do scholarship by studying primarily what was omitted' (p. 221). Yet this is, in effect, what she is compelled to do by the heteroglossic diary text that encourages her identification of Ellen's sideward glance towards her secrets. Beatrice, in fact, models an ideal reader of the (fictional) diary in Martens's terms. Martens recommends that diaries should always be read 'carefully and suspiciously', an implication that diarists tend to be self-

deceivers whose words gesture elsewhere.<sup>85</sup> However, Beatrice's reading is circumscribed by her opposition to feminist scholars, whose privileging of sexual secrets offends her critical sensibilities. By extension, she freezes such a suggestion from her interpretation and thus becomes a fitting safeguarder of Ellen's sexual secrets.

Beatrice does, however, perceive Ellen's 'systematic omission' (p. 221) and understands that an awareness of potential future readers inhibited Ellen's writing.

Deborah Martinson argues:

Each diarist writes experience and performance in the context of deeply ingrained cultural impositions of the proper role and behaviour for women. More directly, tension escalates when someone else who ironically assumes that diaries are private and self-revealing reads the diary to discover the 'truth' of the writer's experience. Diaries are rarely safe from intrusion. Most diary writers learn to be cautious.<sup>86</sup>

It is perhaps the case that some matters are too private to ever commit to text. As Lynn Bloom observes, 'when [...] readers lurk at the writer's elbow, welcome or not, there is no way to rule out self-censorship'.<sup>87</sup> Bunkers and Huff argue that actual women diarists 'employed strategies like repetition, deletion, and encoding to shape what is – and is not – said in their texts'.<sup>88</sup> Ellen's erasures signify self-doubt in a text that is determinedly pro-active in reinforcing a solid and durable marriage, which we learn is weakened by physical estrangement. The erasures evidence cracks in a domestic fortress and whisper secretly that it is, in fact, 'a house to hold a lie' (p. 457). Ellen is restricted by social gender constraints, but paradoxically psychically imprisoned by her ultimate failure to fulfil her allotted role physically. Her diary documents resistance to and negotiation of this position and reflectively communicates meaning that is neither fixed nor stable. The

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<sup>85</sup> Martens, p. 35.

<sup>86</sup> Deborah Martinson, *In the Presence of Audience: Self and Diaries in Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Lynn Z. Bloom, 'I write for Myself and Strangers: Private Diaries and Public Documents', in *Inscribing the Daily* (see Bunkers and Huff, above), pp. 23-37 (p. 24).

<sup>88</sup> Bunkers and Huff, p. 5.

truth that she is living a lie – a double life with a surface that does not reflect the actuality – is reproduced in her double-voiced diary narrative.

The meaning of Ellen's diary is refracted through erasure and crafted denial. Ellen recognises the pitfalls of diary confidences and sidesteps them. Nevertheless, at times her composure slips and textual erasures evidence this. The diary contains two examples of erased text that can be read as Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic 'sideward glance'.<sup>89</sup> Ellen writes and erases: '~~Despite all~~ We have been so happy in our life together' (p. 229) and '~~I should have~~' (p. 231). The erased text is both absent and present. Ellen's self-edited sentences create two alternative and competing meanings. 'I should have', admits failure and undoes what she did do; 'despite all' indicates a wealth of unknown events, which, concealed, would be secret but, now hinted at, suggest a meaning even more significant than unerased text because it plays to readers' curiosity. Byatt thus communicates the fact that Ellen is dissembling as she writes. Visible erasures amplify text, emphasise secrecy, and promote investigation and multi-faceted interpretation.

Ellen's erasures clearly illustrate a strategic and conscious construction of her narrative for a possible audience and reveal her as an unreliable narrator, after Martens's argument that unreliability can be 'based on ellipsis, on *inadequate* narration on the part of the narrator'.<sup>90</sup> Two meanings are available to readers: one sentence is present and coherent, but it is both expanded and undermined by the absent presence of deleted text. The erasures are, of course, a deliberate narrative strategy on Byatt's part and as such gesture toward Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia. To follow Bakhtin's reasoning, the legibly erased phrases serve two speakers at the same time and express two different intentions simultaneously: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the

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<sup>89</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 205.

<sup>90</sup> Martens, p. 140, original emphasis.

refracted intention of the author. They provide ‘two voices, two meanings and two expressions’.<sup>91</sup> Ellen speaks, hesitates, and recovers composure by erasing evidence that might belie the textually assembled façade of her marriage.

The erasures bear witness to Ellen’s active composition of ‘versions’ of her text.

Discussing palimpsestic texts, George Bornstein argues:

A theory of versions tends to shift our conception of the artwork itself from product to process. Emphasis centers on the multiplicity of versions themselves rather than on privileging a final one to which the others seem mere stepping-stones. Seen in that way, the palimpsest becomes less a bearer of a fixed final inscription than a site of the process of inscription, in which acts of composition and transmission occur before our eyes.<sup>92</sup>

Might ideas of authenticity lie therefore in elisions and deletions that actively suggest secrecy? Does this process of transmission substantiate our expectations of Victorian repression to reinforce preconceptions of female seclusion? Broadening this argument to genre, what do Ellen’s erasures say about diary writing’s supposed allegiance to ideas of sincerity and confession? Strategies of erasure, in fact, call into question the whole diary text as a generic indicator of Ellen’s sincerity.

The refracted voice of Byatt as author further undermines the entire refracted discourse of the incorporated diary genre. Byatt filters her intention as initiator of this palimpsestic text to embed a further layer of obscured meaning into the diary. Does this activate a lesson in close reading? Is this Byatt’s blatant illustration that texts gesture to hidden meanings? Or is she alternatively parodying those who read pre-decided meaning into narrative? As noted, Beatrice has been particularly offended by those who would mine Ellen’s diary in search of disguised sexual secrets. Ironically, Ellen’s secret is an *absence* of sexuality. Does frigidity, in fact, constitute a sexual secret? Possibly.

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<sup>91</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* ed. by Michael Holquist and trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), p. 324.

<sup>92</sup> George Bornstein and Ralph G. William, eds., *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 3-4.

But it is not the secret feminist critics seek and here Byatt again critiques those who reduce all text ‘like boiling jam to – human sexuality’ (p. 253). Maud and Roland debate this reduction and learn that it does not, in fact, provide ‘arcane power’, but results in modern-day ‘*powerlessness*’ (p. 253, original emphasis). They conclude that ‘some violent emotion of curiosity [...] more fundamental even than sex, [is] the desire for knowledge’ (p. 82). The novel suggests that those focused exclusively on sexual tension, in fact, misplace knowledge with their theories. Ultimately it is discovered that LaMotte was neither virgin, nor lesbian, as feminist scholars believed, but, in fact, a lover and mother, and that Ellen was also misread (and dismissed) as a conforming domestic angel. The sexual presence they read into Victorian lives and texts was a theorised illusion which is ultimately righted by renewed attention to the documented voice. New readings are encouraged by epistolary narrative that promote, as Altman argues, ‘emphatic portrayal of the art of close reading, the art of analysis and explication’.<sup>93</sup>

## 7. Audience and Addressees

*I veritably possess them.*<sup>94</sup>

By imagining future readers Ellen moves her diary into the realm of epistolary address. Much as Emily Dickinson’s envisioned verse as her ‘letter to the world’, Ellen’s diary impels future readers to acknowledge that she creatively ‘commit[ted] her message to hands she cannot see’.<sup>95</sup> The diary is always, to borrow Bloom’s term, ‘audience oriented’ and self-consciously constructed.<sup>96</sup> Ellen writes enduringly in the shadow of Ash’s genius with a complex strategy of re-addressed censorship.

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<sup>93</sup> Altman, p. 92.

<sup>94</sup> Epigraph to *Possession* taken from Robert Browning’s ‘Mr Sludge, “the Medium”’.

<sup>95</sup> Franklin, p. 235.

<sup>96</sup> Bloom, pp. 24-25.



Gerald Prince asks us to consider *why* the narrator begins keeping a diary in order that we may understand the diarist.<sup>97</sup> This is a question that Maud puts to Beatrice as scholar and editor of Ellen's diary:

'What I want to ask is – why did Ellen write her journal? Was it to please her husband?'

'Oh no.'

'Did she show it to him?'

'Oh no. I don't think so. She never says so.'

'Do you think she wrote it for publication, in any form?'

'That's a harder question. I think she knew it might be read.' (p. 219)

Beatrice's explanation is at odds with Martens's understanding that diary novels function to provide a 'single first-person narrator who does not address himself to a fictive addressee or recipient'.<sup>98</sup> Ellen's eye to the future contradicts this view and illustrates Byatt's presentation of diary form as a communicative rather than self-reflexive private document. Ellen's diary does not stand alone, but correlates textually with the novel's letters to create a pastiche story for future readers.

The diary explains Ellen's role as a censor in Ash's lifetime and beyond. As she controlled Ash's domestic life and household, she continues to exert a morbid management of his [and her] reputation after death. Such posthumous spousal power is also evident in Swift's *Ever After*, as Matthew Pearce bequeaths his notebooks/diaries to his estranged wife, Elizabeth, with epistolary instruction to 'keep them, burn them – they are evidence of *me*'.<sup>99</sup> Ellen's posthumous organisation of Ash's papers is similarly aimed at recovering a power she did not own when he was alive. Following Ash's death, she colonises a new diary writing position and writes, 'sitting at His desk' (p. 442). She fears 'scavengers' (p. 219) and is wary of a public voracious appetite for the lives of the literary greats. Noting that Dickens was subject to this form of prying invasion, she vehemently declares that Ash 'shall not be picked by vultures' (p. 443).

<sup>97</sup> Gerald Prince, 'The Diary Novel: Notes for the Definition of a Sub-Genre', *Neophilologus*, 59 (1975), 477-81 (p. 479), my emphasis.

<sup>98</sup> Martens, p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> Swift, p. 52, original emphasis.

Ash's last instructions are to 'burn what they should not see' (p. 442) but, despite material possession of Ash's letters, she confesses, she cannot burn words that are not hers:

There are things I cannot burn. Nor ever I think look at again. There are things here that are not mine, that I could not be a party to burning. And there are our dear letters, from all those foolish years of separation. What can I do? I cannot leave them to be buried with me. Trust may be betrayed. I shall lay these things to rest with him now, to await my coming. Let the earth take them. (p. 443)<sup>100</sup>

In due course Ellen is bodily and textually interred with Ash and her 'coming' to writerly presence will be thereafter delayed until contemporary scholars eventually rediscover some of her secrets and realise themselves as the unknown but anticipated future readers.

Marginalised and limited in her lifetime, Ellen proves a powerful figure in a future she will never know. This is a possibility that she is never blind to this and she carefully prepares her address. Ellen's editing demonstrates a palimpsestic quality that, as Bornstein suggests, becomes 'a fluid process of creation and transmission'.<sup>101</sup> Her enveloping of documents for an interment that will preserve the past replays LaMotte's wrapping and preservation of documents for protection and posterity. Byatt acknowledges that her idea of burying documents in 'oiled silk' arose from a dormant memory of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and notes:

a normal depressive woman who decided to get rid of the letters would have just torn them up and put them in the fire. Or lost them. You can lose letters quite easily. To invent this complicated rite and make so sure that they were buried and not dead because they couldn't be rotted, is an artistic or creative act.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Hermione Lee discusses the impact of burned and destroyed letters and diaries on later biographers. She observes that 'bonfire stories' abound in stories of literary biography as variants of Henry James's novella, *The Aspern Papers* (1898). *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Bornstein and Williams, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Byatt comments: 'I was very amused when I reread this passage which I had forgotten, to realise I had used it in *Possession* when the character went out and bought a glass bottle with a stopper and then bought oiled silk, and I knew I had some immensely sensuous memory of wrapping things in oiled silk, and I didn't know where it came from – but of course it came from burying the letters in the bottle'. A. S.

Byatt implies that wrapping and concealment are acts of preservation that become creative acts. Ellen, writing for the future, decides which papers survive and which are burned. William Decker argues that ‘to preserve or destroy a personally inscribed manuscript determines what the letter, beyond the initial cycle of exchange, may become as a cultural object’.<sup>103</sup> By burning one letter and carefully and ritualistically preserving an array of chosen documents, Ellen creates a pastiche to her ordering and finally enters an arena of exchange. She authoritatively assembles fragments of text to piece a story that constitutes a desired, if belated, creativity. By extension, she illustrates the provisionality of documents and the selection and discard processes that make history. By supplementing first-person narrators with authoritative omniscient narration, Byatt further illustrates that textual traces of the past are always profoundly incomplete. Fiction steps into this breach and to embellish myths and suppositions with imaginative omniscient filling of gaps which Byatt argues she incorporated to ‘heighten the reader’s imaginative entry into the world of the text’.<sup>104</sup> This strategy emphasises Hutcheon’s argument that ‘metafiction is still fiction, despite the shift in focus of narration from the product it presents to the process it is’.<sup>105</sup>

## 8. Secrets and Omniscient Narration

*How did you contrive to grasp  
The Thread which led you through this labyrinth?*<sup>106</sup>

Despite the fact that Ellen Ash and Christabel LaMotte were largely disempowered in life, it is nevertheless evident that they possess a powerful afterlife as secretors of meaning. The two fictional Victorian women conceal telling documents, taking care to

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Byatt and Ignês Sodré, *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations About Women Writers*, ed. by Rebecca Swift (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 65.

<sup>103</sup> Decker, p. 24.

<sup>104</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 56.

<sup>105</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 39.

<sup>106</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning’s ‘Mr Sludge, “the Medium”’.

lay a trail that leads only to edited truths. Letters and diaries are therefore central locations of secrets, secrecy, concealment, and revelation in *Possession*. They are both keepers and revealers of secrets. Secrecy, from the Latin, *secretus*, to separate or distinguish, informs narrative by organising concealment, disclosure, confession, discovery, quest, and revelation. Secrecy is about knowledge or the state of knowing. Secrets hide or separate knowledge from others. There are those who have knowledge and conceal it and those who must decode textual clues to enter a liminal space where meaning and knowledge reside.

Byatt inspires the act of gaining knowledge by metafictionally modelling rewards for literary sleuths who closely read the past and its texts.<sup>107</sup> Byatt, in fact, preordains the narrative quest by intertextually embedding the first epistolary clue in Giambattista Vico's 'new science': Roland notes, 'Vico had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend; this piecing together was his "new science"' (p. 3). Extradiegetic readers will be similarly encouraged to piece together a story that finds history 'lying' more satisfyingly in myth and legend than bare-boned and incomplete fact. In order to identify documents as the keys that will unlock the secrets of their quest, Byatt's contemporary characters must approach the documents' separateness by penetrating and understanding the reasons for and methods of concealment. Maud unearths her own documented heritage from within the dark recesses of a distant relation's crumbling ancestral home. This leads eventually to a Gothicised scene of midnight grave-robbing that unearths Ellen's pieced narrative. The clue-laden documents are therefore embedded in two distinct branches of knowledge: the academic powerhouse of the London Library and a neglected archive of personal history that jointly lead to a material disinterring of the dead and their buried texts.

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<sup>107</sup> Byatt argues: 'every time you re-read [...] you rediscover both the people and the narrative, *and* the mind of the author which is the place in which all these things cohere'. Byatt and Sodr , p. 249, original emphasis.

Byatt thus initiates an interpretative dialogue between private and public knowledge and, by extension, between fiction and criticism.

It is evident that epistolary forms submit to the logic of secrecy in light of postmodern play, providing, as Matei Calinescu argues, ‘a ludic challenge’ for readers which, one might argue always, requires the close-reading strategies so valued by Byatt.<sup>108</sup> The topic of secrecy is also inextricably linked to history and historical fiction for Byatt. Citing Roberto Calasso, author of *The Ruin of Kasch* (2005), who argues that secrecy is ‘post-History’, she links this point to literature and the ‘connections between modern historical novels and the popular genres that tell stories about secrecy, the spy story, the thriller, the detective novel’.<sup>109</sup>

Byatt’s mix of genres forges an affiliation between epistolary forms and the detective strand that operates within the novel.<sup>110</sup> She states:

*Possession* plays serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past – the detective genre, the biography, the mediaeval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne’s fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third-person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale.<sup>111</sup>

Peter Huhn argues: ‘classic detective fiction is constituted by the very process and problem of storytelling. It foregrounds the centrality of narration by employing the principle of *secrecy* as the motivating force for the construction of its stories’.<sup>112</sup> Byatt deftly combines the structuring principles of detective mystery with epistolary conventions to activate the ‘hermeneutic act of reading’ that will unlock the secrets of

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<sup>108</sup> Matei Calinescu, ‘Secrecy in Fiction: Textual and Intertextual Secrets in Hawthorne and Updike’, *Poetics Today*, 15 (1994), 443-64 (p. 445).

<sup>109</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>110</sup> Roland ‘purloin[s]’ (p. 124) the letters and intertextually reminds readers of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1845). See Michael Greaney, *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory: The Novel from Structuralism to Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 119-22 for a discussion of *Possession* as a rewriting of Poe and Lacan’s theoretical commentary on Poe’s story.

<sup>111</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 48.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Huhn, ‘The Politics of Secrecy and Publicity: The Functions of Hidden Stories in Some Recent British Mystery Fiction’, in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. by Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (London: Greenwood, 1997), pp. 39-50 (p. 39), original emphasis.

the past.<sup>113</sup> Riddles and gaps are symptoms of secrecy and diaries and letters enigmatically drive the plot.

Secrecy and detective fiction are also important factors in debates of intentionality and intertextuality. Sissela Bok suggests that concealment 'bespeaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines: a capacity that underlines not only secrecy but all thinking, all intention and choice'.<sup>114</sup> Dipple argues that the detective genre reinforces writers' authority. Addressing Umberto Eco's work, she explains that he 'sees the detective novel as a dominant metaphysical mode, the unravelling of which leads to major epistemological illustrations through which the author can impose his/her will, or at least demonstrate it to the reader'.<sup>115</sup> Concepts of secrecy are always aporetic in a fictional context because they wholly serve authorial intention to withhold and delay information. Secrets exist in fiction usually to be revealed sooner or later; their narrative power lies primarily in their promise of potential revelation. Byatt conceals meaning in *Possession* and reveals her concealment through omniscient narration. Epistolary forms encode secrets to primarily support Byatt's metafictional and metacritical debate, but they do not provide all the answers.

Hutcheon asserts that detective fiction is a 'self-conscious' form with 'strong conventions of order and logic' and always 'intensely self-aware'.<sup>116</sup> Reading the form requires active interpretation. In *Possession*, letters and diaries provide clues that enable Roland and Maud, who consider that 'literary critics make natural detectives' (p. 237), to discover the secrets of the past. The scholars adopt empiric deductive thought and resort to sleuthing strategies in order to secure knowledge. Their conclusions are nevertheless undercut by authoritative assertion of limitations in their methods. Byatt

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<sup>113</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic*, p. 71.

<sup>114</sup> Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>115</sup> Dipple, p. 48.

<sup>116</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic*, p. 72.

opens up a gap in the quest logic to reveal a dormant level of knowledge that remains undiscovered by the scholars. She obligingly steps into the breach to conclude authoritatively that only omniscient storytelling can disclose a final secret.<sup>117</sup> The postscript to the novel goes beyond all the information supplied by recovered documents to offer a final secret staged in a verdant utopia. A further letter is destined to remain undelivered to its addressee, but its message becomes privileged knowledge shared only with extradiegetic readers of *Possession* – the gates to this ‘paradise’ are firmly shut to *all* fictional scholars.<sup>118</sup>

Letters and diaries provide incomplete truths, reinforcing Hutcheon’s idea that we can only know the past through its traces, which are always partial.<sup>119</sup> Byatt moves against this to emphasise her metafictional thesis by comprehensively unfolding the past with omniscient narration. She defends her use of this ‘unfashionable’ narrative device:

My instinct as a writer of fiction has been to explore and defend the unfashionable Victorian third-person narrator – who is not, as John Fowles claimed, playing at being God, but merely the writer, telling what can be told about the world of the fiction.<sup>120</sup>

Just as *Alias Grace* in some way writes back to Atwood’s earlier critical self, *Possession* is Byatt’s response to Fowles, as noted progenitor of neo-Victorianism who, Byatt argues, employs the omniscient narrator for mockery and ‘modern diminishing parodies’ of the Victorian thinkers.<sup>121</sup> For Martens, writers who combine first person diary narration and omniscience have a common purpose: ‘the author wishes to have an omniscient narrator recount the story, and thereby keep a firm grip on the fact of the plot, yet at the same time make the reader privy to a character’s thoughts by quoting his

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<sup>117</sup> Margarida Esteves Pereira argues that Byatt ‘seems to be asserting the necessity to restore the author back to the text, so as to save him/her from the risk of total annihilation, together with the idea of the canon’. ‘Refracting the Past in Praise of the Dead Poets in *Possession: A Romance*’, in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 149-64 (p. 155).

<sup>118</sup> Byatt points out in interview that she is ‘always seduced by putting *Paradise Lost* into the end of anything’. Reynolds and Noakes, p. 20.

<sup>119</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 109.

<sup>120</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 102.

<sup>121</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 79.

thoughts extensively'.<sup>122</sup> Byatt highlights the attraction that Victorian secrets hold for a modern audience, but ultimately her 'claim to the old privileges of authorial omniscience' enlightens where documentary evidence falls short.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

*How many lies did it require to make  
The portly truth you here present us with?*<sup>124</sup>

Evident tension in Byatt's relations with poststructuralist literary thought reflects her belief that 'criticism has become a power game'.<sup>125</sup> Her critique infiltrates *Possession*, as theorists who blindly mould writer and work to support pre-written agendas are invariably subjected to satirical sabotage. Byatt presents her character, Christabel LaMotte, mired, as Emily Dickinson has been, in various theoretical positions that confine women writers to prescriptive feminist or lesbian interpretations. Byatt exposes to ridicule those who 'know what there is to find before they've seen it' (p. 31, original emphasis). Thus, fictional academics, such as the militant feminist scholar of LaMotte, Leonora Stern, together with Ash's hagiographer, Mortimer Cropper, are mercilessly lampooned and scorned for their misguided critical pretensions. It falls to the recovered secret documents to challenge the inflated confidence of Stern and the 'indefatigable Cropper' (p. 2) and initiate reconsideration of their dogmatisms.

Letters and journals in *Possession* disinter the past to reveal the wrong turns and misunderstandings of scholarship as it vainly reconstructs history to its own pre-existing design. The letters ultimately prompt Roland and Maud to alternatively step out of the shade of academia into a transcendent 'gleaming scented life' (p. 268), where they may

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<sup>122</sup> Martens, p. 36. Byatt commented, in discussion at the Southbank Centre, London (February 2008), that omniscient narration allowed her a freedom that was unavailable with characters' voices.

<sup>123</sup> Greaney, p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"'.

<sup>125</sup> Byatt, *Histories*, p. 6. For an extended discussion of Byatt's ambivalent relationship with modern critical theories, see Christien Franken, 'The Turtle and Its Adversaries: Polyvocality in A. S. Byatt's Critical and Academic Work', in *A. S. Byatt, Art, Authorship, Creativity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 1-32.



discover their own desires and ambitions. Epistolary enlightenment throws into question all the ‘facts’ that have been established by academic scholarship. Roland points out the crucial ramifications for the establishment: ‘these letters have made us all look – in some ways – a little silly, in our summing-up of lives on the evidence we had. [...] we shall need to *reassess everything*’ (p. 485, original emphasis). Byatt moves swiftly to sharpen her textual talons for a pointed parodic attack on the critical establishment. Cropper’s ventriloquism is rendered mute and Stern is chastised for her uncompromising categorisation of LaMotte as a lesbian, feminist poet. Only Beatrice Nest escapes ridicule, and this is attributed to her intuitive sympathy and her role as ‘prophetess’ (p. 496) rather than her ponderous scholarly method. Beatrice’s alienation from methods of theoretically inflected, contemporary scholarship exempts her from critique and allows her a vital role in rediscovery and interpretation of the documents, namely Ellen Ash’s diary, long derided by Blackadder, et al.

Byatt invites voyeuristic reading of fictional letters and diaries in order to dissolve an idea of the ‘real’ amid theory and pretence. We may negotiate an evolved critical intelligence that has irrevocably dislocated ideas of history and truth, but, as Dana Schiller observes, ‘the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past [... is] not extinguished by doubts as to how inaccessible it really is’.<sup>126</sup> Byatt plays to this desire with seductive secrets and aesthetically dressed epistolary relations. Embedded letters re-enact an epistolary romance that traces ‘actual’ Victorians and diary writing offers a metafictional commentary on reading–writing relations. Ellen Ash’s diary proves a *mise-en-abyme* device that rehearses Byatt’s authorial strategies by demonstrating the skills of a pasticheur as one who evades, crafts, elides and wilfully deceives, yet also sifts clues and hints at secrets untold.

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<sup>126</sup> Dana Schiller, ‘The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, 29 (1997), 538-60 (p. 557).

Byatt's fragmented secret documents entice fictional scholars from their poststructuralist interpretative paths. Altman questions whether epistolary narratives have particular ways of playing to (or against) readers' voyeurism and desire for mastery by providing a creative pleasure in coordinating fragments.<sup>127</sup> *Possession's* embedded epistolary secrets answer this by inspiring narrative curiosity that overpowers the fictional scholars' allegiance to critical theories. The scholars may live 'in a time which valued narrative uncertainty' (p. 129), but this is steadily displaced by a new and urgent 'narrative curiosity' (p. 238). In search of knowledge, they scour nineteenth-century private documents and construct a skeletal tale that Byatt fleshes out with imagination and story. Textual secrets organise a quest for control of narrative and the past, but Byatt ultimately expands on evasive and riddling documents and critical quests for them with authoritative omniscient narration. Roland regrets that 'coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable' (p. 422) yet Byatt closes and coheres her narrative with a writerly authority that aims to more fully satisfy 'unfashionable' narrative desires inspired by epistolary curiosity. The letters and diaries demonstrate Byatt's postmodern play with form as a masquerade of documentary realism. It is the omniscient narrator who proves the most authoritative device in Byatt's anti-critical thesis. Here is the voice that goes beyond 'the jewels of information' (p. 7) contained in documented secrets to organise knowledge and narrative 'all as the author wants it'.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Altman, p. 193.

<sup>128</sup> Epigraph to *Possession*, taken from Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"'.

Chapter Two

## Diary as Queer Malady: Narrative Geometry in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*

*She has your books by heart more than my words,  
And quotes you up against me till I'm pushed  
Where, three months since, her eyes were.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning  
*Aurora Leigh*<sup>1</sup>

The abiding neo-Victorian interest in loosening the corsets of mythically repressed Victorian sexuality evident in *Possession*'s epistolary revelation is developed more strategically in Sarah Water's second novel, *Affinity* (1999). Waters uses diaries and silent letters to interweave a tale of Victorian sexual and social mores informed by strands of critical discourses on women and spiritualist practices. Demonstrating an affinity between epistolary strategies and the keen neo-Victorian interest in spiritualism,<sup>2</sup> Waters's novel, like Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1991), Victoria Glendinning's *Electricity* (1996), and Melissa Pritchard's *Selene of the Spirits* (1998), interpolates diaries as documented 'evidence' to either anchor or contest paranormal claims. It is Waters, however, who organises a most sophisticated and experimental use of epistolary forms to expand spiritualist themes with a homosexual twist. Evidencing H. Porter Abbott's observation that it is a 'mixture of sincerity and self-deception that governs [the diary] text', *Affinity* reworks nineteenth-century sensation fiction conventions and simultaneously interrogates our critical vision of the Victorian occult.<sup>3</sup> *Affinity* interposes entries for two diaries to reveal lives entwined and mired in a 'queer' atmosphere of Victorian spiritualism.<sup>4</sup> A victim of spiritualist fraud, Margaret Prior's diary is entangled within a web of epistolary relations between herself,

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book VII (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1856]), p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> See Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, eds., *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Also Tatiana Kontou, *Spirituality and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Waters consistently plays on the ambiguous meaning of the evolved word 'queer' throughout the novel.

her maid, Ruth Vigers, and the imprisoned medium, Selina Dawes. This chapter examines how Waters's two diarists reflect Millbank gaol's 'passion for queer geometry' as the novel correlates women's experience of late nineteenth-century prison life with domestic confinement.<sup>5</sup> Subverting the panoptic power principle of the prison with manipulated diaries and secret letters, visibility in the novel is framed by generic expectations of unconcealed diary form and clandestine coordination of elusive letters that crucially evade the gaze of readers.

Neo-Victorian writers repeatedly conjure the riddling world of nineteenth-century spiritualism to evoke and ventriloquise voices of the past. Waters, like Roberts, Glendinning, and Pritchard, juxtaposes an 'authentic' and 'sincere' diary voice with the mysteries and contrived counterfeiting of spiritualist practices. Appropriating and manipulating ideas and themes of the non-fiction diary, these revisionist writers call upon what Bernard Duyfhuizen terms the 'presuppositions and entailments' of diary form, which include an immediacy of writing: a secret, self-addressed text; an awareness of the writing act; a 'written to the moment', reflexive drama; and 'a solipsistic characterised act of reading'.<sup>6</sup> Generic echoes of diary sincerity work towards a traditional aim of 'buttressing an illusion of the real' – a constructive concept for questioning faith and doubt in spiritualist practices.<sup>7</sup> Yet Waters significantly chooses *two* diary voices to narrate her tale, thus distorting any 'panoptic' textual effect in *Affinity* with competing epistolary discourses that immediately undermine the confessional atmosphere of the single confessional narrator.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2000 [1999]), p. 235. All other references to this text will be given parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 96; pp. 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (2004) also interweaves two diaries and for Ann Heilmann provides 'a striking metaphor for the imaginative and performative acts of contemporary neo-Victorianism'. 'Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2 (2009/2010), 18-42 (p. 20).

The two diaries lie side by side, ostensibly in unequivocal view for the reader. Margaret's diary unfolds as a series of episodic, to-the-minute reflections, whereas Selina's documents a year prior to the start of Margaret's.<sup>9</sup> Reading two diary accounts disturbs narrative that is already inherently fragmented into diary entries; Waters therefore undermines any generic confidence by inviting readers to compare and contrast the perspectives of two diarists. Dual narration encourages readers to perceive Margaret's misreading of herself and Selina, as well as our own misapprehensions. A clear understanding of the relationship between divided narratives only becomes fully apparent at the close of the novel.

Diaries may illustrate a private confessional voice, but when interpolated in fiction, it is never a single voice that speaks. This chapter examines how the forms and themes of diary writing filter Waters's authorial voice and neo-Victorian perspective. I begin, therefore, by outlining Waters's critical viewpoint before moving to explore writing and voice in diary fiction by examining the two female diarists: Selina Dawes, a young psychic medium, imprisoned in Millbank Gaol on a charge of fraud and assault, and wealthy spinster, Margaret Prior, who becomes a 'Lady Visitor' to provide a 'moral pattern' for the female prisoners (p. 29). A shift in focus from writing to reading will first note the relationship between diary form, containment, and women's writing, before establishing how maidservant Ruth Vigers distorts both panoptic gaze and diary principles. The chapter concludes by explaining the significance of mirrors for self-reflexive diary fiction and considering the vital role that letters play as texts speaking silently behind diarists' voices.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a variation of the more usual technique that interpolates a diary amid various epistolary narratives, evident, for instance, in Pritchard's *Selene of the Spirits*, where the diary of a medium (similarly named for the goddess of the moon) interrupts or haunts the main narrative, which is dense with letters and some extracts from spiritualist magazines.

## 1. Writing with Authority: Waters

*I think we must have said much more than I have written here.* (p. 109)

Waters has a revisionist aim to broadcast voices that were historically silenced by class or gender and, most specifically for her agenda, because of homosexuality. Her fiction follows a tradition where early twentieth-century women writers wrote historical novels in the wake of women poets and the 'cento'. Their pastiche assemblage incorporated, as Waters observes, 'a number of modern literary paradigms, including some of the key topoi of the twentieth-century homosexual representation'.<sup>10</sup> Waters's blend of intertextual scholarship and fiction follows a path laid by writers like Sylvia Townsend Warner and Maude Meagher, who used historical fiction as a platform to debate the absence of same-sex love in literature from a literary critical standpoint.

Waters stealthily weaves her fiction with strands of her own critical view and, I will argue, uses heteroglossic subtleties in diary form to organise a strategic engagement of scholarship and fiction. Waters suggests in her critical writing that

An enduring gay historical motif is that of the recovery of the secret book or 'lost diary', the hitherto forgotten or unpublishable homosexual testimony. [... The] motif has been employed to recover the homosexual voice and lend it historical authority, to represent the evasion or defiance of heterosexual suppression and the exposure of other, non-traditional routes along which historical knowledge might be passed.<sup>11</sup>

Employing the diary motif, *Affinity* incorporates many aspects of the various critical debates that have helped reconstruct the Victorians in postmodern times. For instance, Terry Castle's well-known study, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993) is intertextually and parodically present in the numerous references to women/lesbians as ghosts; for example, as Margaret watches female

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Waters, 'Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Meagher's *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 7 (1996), 176-88 (p. 186). In this critical examination, Waters investigates early twentieth-century novelists who tried to recover a lesbian past by reconstructing ancient cultures in historical fiction.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Ann Waters, 'Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London, Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1995), p. 245.

prisoners, she comments to a warder: ““They might be ghosts!” [...] But Miss Ridley had turned to me. “Ghosts!” she said, studying me queerly’ (p. 20).<sup>12</sup> Similarly evident are contemporary ideas that argue new freedoms were available to nineteenth-century female spiritualists. In this respect, Alex Owen’s renowned study of spiritualism in late Victorian England, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989), in which she asserts that ‘spiritualist mediumship was capable of sabotaging the mechanics of power inherent in the Victorian codification of gender difference’, proves a key metatext for neo-Victorian engagement with nineteenth-century mediumship and spiritualism.<sup>13</sup> Roberts indeed cites Owen’s work as ‘invaluable’ in clarifying ideas for her exploration of Victorian spiritualism (with diary form) in *In the Red Kitchen*.<sup>14</sup>

Most significant for Waters’s work, however, is a focus on the critical gaze that resonates with Michel Foucault’s 1975 work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and his discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptic principle.<sup>15</sup> This connection has been ably demonstrated and explored by both Marie-Luise Kohlke and Mark Llewellyn.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Lucie Armit and Sarah Gamble have investigated how Waters moves from Foucault’s explanation of the panopticon’s mechanism to reveal it as an ‘optical illusion’.<sup>17</sup> Focussing on Gaston Bachelard’s ideas of space, they broaden the epistolary genre to interpret journals as a letter exchange framework. Suggesting that

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). In her critical article, Waters clearly identifies branches of theorising that she believes fall short of addressing writers’ engagement with lesbian history. She cites Castle’s study as ‘impressive’, but limiting. She reasons that Castle may readily acknowledge individual novels as ‘groundbreaking’, but disappointingly for Waters, she does not place these works in a larger context that would illustrate a developing tradition in historical fiction. ‘Wolfskins’, *Women*, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Michèle Roberts, ‘Author’s Note’, *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Minerva, 1991), no page number.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> M. L. Kohlke, ‘Into History through the Back Door: The “Past Historic” in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 15 (2004), 153-66. Mark Llewellyn, ““Queer? I should say it is criminal!”: Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*”, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 13 (2004), 203-14.

<sup>17</sup> Lucie Armit and Sarah Gamble, ‘The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*’, *Textual Practice*, 20 (2006), 141-59 (p. 148).

the two diaries are ‘superimposed one upon the other to create a sort of palimpsest’, they highlight a mutual dependence between the texts.<sup>18</sup> Whilst agreeing that each diary has potential to overwrite the other, I am interested in the fact that the two diarists are effectively controlled by one over-seeing reader/writer who requires both diaries *and* letters to orchestrate intersecting texts.

Ideas of visibility – who sees whom and who sees more clearly – are a key theme of *Affinity*, with much interplay between light and dark and concealment within shadows. Notably, nineteenth-century spiritualists believed that those engaged in mesmerism must master the ‘gaze’. Owen quotes Miss Chandos Leigh Hunt, a nineteenth-century London based mesmerist and healer:

The mesmerist must possess a ‘great and good spirit, great powers of mental concentration, and a powerful Magnetic Gaze’. The gaze, ‘a clear, calm, searching, piercing’ look, was acquired through constant practice and perfect self-control. An experienced operator could stare at one spot for up to an hour without blinking, all the while concentrating her will-power on the internal self.<sup>19</sup>

Waters foregrounds the critical model as readers are bombarded with hypnotic repetitions of the ‘unsettling gaze’ (p. 64), recurring with almost parodic persistence throughout the text.<sup>20</sup> The panoptic gaze and the diary are in one sense based on opposing principles. The gaze suggests silent communication between observed and observer; and the diary, a narrative that is usually written and read solely by the diarist, represents self-reflexive, inward-turned communion. Yet appropriated by Waters as narrative strategies, gaze and diary are laid bare and twisted into a doubled and double-crossed chain of communication.

Waters does not simply incorporate critical ideas in support of her fiction, but also potentially challenges contemporary scholarly debates on female homosexuality. It has been suggested that her work does not readily subscribe to a mode of

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<sup>18</sup> Armitt and Gamble, p. 152.

<sup>19</sup> Owen, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Configurations of the ‘gaze’ are repeated more than one hundred times throughout Waters’s novel.



historiographic metafiction, possibly because this cultural project has become limiting. Kohlke has indeed posited a discernible dissatisfaction among contemporary writers who suspect that postmodern critical ideas have not fully delivered what they promised. She argues that ‘historiographic metafiction may have exhausted its transgressive possibilities and become problematic rather than liberating to writers such as Waters, disillusioned with a postmodern tradition heavily criticised as ineffective in producing anticipated social and political change’.<sup>21</sup> Waters manages to metacritically question the limitations of homosexual theorising in literary studies today by looping critical debates back on themselves within fiction via diary form. Yet, as Cora Kaplan observes, ‘theory and literary criticism underpins [Waters’s] narratives as generic emphasis, in settings, in themes: it does not parse the narrative for us, or cut it up into bite-sized lessons’.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Writing in Search of Authority: The Victorian Spinster

*I said that that book was like my dearest friend.  
I told it all my closest thoughts, and it kept them secret.* (p. 111)

For Waters’s novel, Gerald Prince’s question, ‘why does the narrator begin keeping a diary?’ is again pertinent.<sup>23</sup> The answer for Margaret Prior is a desire to re-order a complex reality that has nearly destroyed her. *Affinity* begins with Margaret observing architectural patterns that she seeks to emulate in her writing. Her study of the geometric organisation of the prison (both on drawings and actual building) is commensurate with the potential containment of writing within a personal diary – a text that segments and orders personal experience. As observed by Kohlke and Llewellyn, Margaret strives to imitate her father’s scholarly textual ordering in her diary and the masculine design of the prison is, from the onset of the novel, juxtaposed with

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<sup>21</sup> Kohlke, ‘Into History’, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Prince, ‘The Diary Novel: Notes for the Definition of a Sub-Genre’, *Neophilologus*, 59 (1975), 477-81 (p. 479).

Margaret's analogous desire for form and containment in her writing. Kohlke argues that Margaret's 'would-be historical subjectivity stages itself in the shadow of her dead historian-father'.<sup>24</sup> Llewellyn observes that Margaret's 'diary begins with a longing for her father', which he suggests 'reflects her desire for "masculine" mental empowerment'.<sup>25</sup> Margaret's language may betray perplexed and anxious thinking ('twisting', 'crooked'), but she wishes to rationalise this anxiety by ordering private writing into 'a catalogue, a kind of list' (p. 241). Her ultimate failure to do this illustrates Waters's interrogation of the problems of writing female/homosexual experience.

Margaret's sense of herself as criminally transgressing the social norm allows her perception of fluidity in the boundaries between herself and Millbank's inmates. The institution was designed in 1812 on Bentham's architectural panoptic model, with a plan that facilitated maximum visibility and self-regulating control over prisoners at all times. The matrons of Millbank may keep Selina under lock and key, but Margaret is similarly dependent on securing liberating privileges from her own matriarchal gaoler. As a potential hysteric, Margaret is subject to the 'clinical gaze' of her mother, family, and health professionals.<sup>26</sup> Foucault's theorising of this concept reveals a nineteenth-century belief in a powerful tool, capable of penetrating illusion and seeing through to an underlying reality.

As panoptic object, under surveillance by family, staff, and doctors, Margaret unsurprisingly seeks private communion within the confessional pages of her private journal. Others readily write her into a range of social and ideological discourses and

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<sup>24</sup> Kohlke, 'Into History', p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'Queer?', p. 207. Llewellyn explores this to further understand tensions produced in Margaret's diary: 'Margaret draws a conscious distinction between the narrative drive which has emboldened her to undertake her diary and her need to find solace and peace from the tempers of her heart in logic, reasoning and a masculine view of the role of the chronicler of history'. Mark Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould? Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre', in *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 195-210 (p. 199).

<sup>26</sup> An idea explored by Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Vintage, 1975).

she hopes her own writing will potentially counterbalance this. Margaret's rebellion is predictably classified as hysteria, for which a cure (or silence) is prescribed, resulting in regular doses of chloral hydrate (later laudanum) administered by her mother. Margaret is nonetheless complicit in silencing her own recent past, as her burning of an earlier diary demonstrates. Secrets compel Margaret to destroy documented evidence of her illicit relationship with Helen. Yet her fragmented allusion to the destroyed text goes some way to '[un]buckle' (p. 29) her past to the reader. It soon becomes evident that the secrets contained in this ill-fated earlier diary return, phoenix-like, to inflame her present narrative.

Margaret did begin her second diary with the express purpose of avoiding the pitfalls of her earlier destroyed text: namely, not to succumb to that derided and clichéd formula, the 'journal of the heart' (p. 70). This suggests that personal journals indulge unhealthy fancies and undermine the convalescent 'remedies' prescribed by doctors and family. Pondering Mr Barclay's dismissive view of women writers, Margaret debates his opinion:

All women can ever write, he says, are 'journals of the heart'—the phrase has stayed with me. I have been thinking of my last journal, which had so much of my own heart's blood in it; and which certainly took as long to burn as human hearts, they say, do take. (p. 70)

Margaret nevertheless chooses writing as her preferred medicine: 'I mean this book to be different to that one. I mean this writing not to turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the chloral, to keep the thoughts from coming at all' (p. 70). However, her mother's warning that 'it was unhealthy to sit at a journal so long; that it would throw me back upon my own dark thoughts and weary me' (p. 70) proves to be Margaret's ultimate destiny. Alone with her diary, she is unable to revise her fate and can only repeat a second thwarted romance plot. Far from achieving power through authorship, Margaret becomes both a ghostwriter (again Castle's ghostly lesbian is a spectre) and her own gullible reader. Her diary records an aspiring romance, yet

ultimately the document is a fiction within a fiction, hiding Vigers as an unrecognised yet powerful author. The diary has to be destroyed because Margaret perceives ‘the smears of Vigers’s gaze upon the pages, sticky and white’ (p. 348). A complex shadow story lies between the lines of her diary, revealing that the only viable same-sex love story within the novel is one necessarily realised by dark deceit and mesmeric trickery.

As a Victorian spinster, Margaret’s freedom and authorship is interestingly restricted, not by her father, but by her mother as gatekeeper of patriarchal ideology. In fact, before his untimely death, Margaret enjoyed a measure of freedom and intellectual purpose by assisting her father with his scholarly work at the British Library. Following his death, cast adrift in a feminised world, alien to her sensibilities, Margaret tries to recapture some sense of her lost scholarly self. Bored and bewildered by the preparations for her sister’s wedding and grievously injured by Helen’s defection to the safe conventions of marriage, she languishes, isolated with only her diary as confidante. Domestic confinement enables Margaret to identify readily with the plight of the female prisoners at Millbank, as she increasingly despairs of her own detention in a prison that holds no prospect of release.

*Mrs* Prior would prefer to script a part for her daughter in a traditional nineteenth-century marriage plot. However, Margaret uses her diary to write an alternative fantasy lesbian love story that defies all her mother’s ideals and principles. Margaret recognises the challenge she represents to societal norms and prescriptive femininity and muses: ‘women are *bred* to do more of the same – that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger’ (p. 209, original emphasis). As Kohlke observes, Margaret’s family sanitises her breakdown, muffles her suicide attempt and, in addition, edits the story of her relationship with Helen ‘into a “straight” narrative of normative heterosexuality’.<sup>27</sup> This is a fiction so often repeated

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<sup>27</sup> Kohlke, ‘Into History’, p. 159.

publicly that Margaret thinks, ‘I have heard the story told that way so many times, I am half-way to believing it myself’ (p. 103).

Waters reminds that domestic containment and hysteria, or madness, was a prevalent discourse in Victorian novels and that ‘guilty’ women – diary writers like Helen Huntington in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1858) and the unnamed diarist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) – were punished within the home. Margaret’s role as writer is framed by nineteenth-century literary allusion and explicit intertextual references to a number of Victorian texts and writers. Margaret is indeed suspicious that her mother may be echoing ‘Mr Le Fanu’s novel, about the heiress who is made to seem mad’ (p. 20). This allusion to J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1871 novel, *The Rose and the Key*, casts familial relationships in a melodramatic and potentially sinister light and, by suggestion, manoeuvres Margaret into the role of traditional confined Gothic heroine: she imagines a conspiracy to silence her by ‘fastening my own past shut, with a strap and a buckle’ (p. 29). Waters also alludes to the prison in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857) and draws more explicitly on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 verse epic, *Aurora Leigh*. Selina appropriates the apposite name, ‘Aurora’, at Margaret’s suggestion but, hearing echoes of her earlier liaison, Margaret recoils: ‘The words made me flinch, for I caught, behind them, the voice of Helen – of Helen, who had once named me for a figure in a book’ (p. 187). Waters steadily dismantles this allusion, however, with Margaret’s diary unmaking her literary alter ego and unfolding towards absolute disempowerment.

Intertextual links may also be made between Waters’s novels and her own literary ‘grandmothers’. Waters notes, for instance, that Meagher incorporates a Helen of Troy figure into her fiction who, Waters argues, appears ‘temporarily reconstructed as an object – and perhaps subject – of lesbian desire; but ultimately one of those wives

and mistresses ‘bound in complicity with the patriarchal system’.<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps more than coincidence that Margaret’s first thwarted same-sex relationship is with another ‘Helen’ – whose name ‘suited her so well’ (p. 187) – who ultimately flees dangerous sexual waters to take refuge on the safer shores of marriage. This perhaps resonates with an illustrative trope in lesbian literary tradition that acknowledges an omnipresent imperative that drives those, whose ““destiny” [is] to be unable to live “without men””.<sup>29</sup>

Waters does not (textually) present a utopian future for her nineteenth-century characters. This coheres with early twentieth-century historical lesbian fiction that may have fantasised about, but did not explicitly detail lesbian relationships in fiction. Waters argues that this position was realistic and also

a striking testimony both to the erotic imperatives of the period in which it was produced (a fantasy of liberation, its lovers are nevertheless reunited only *extra*-textually), and to the strategies with which a visionary novelist might attempt to negotiate and challenge those imperatives.<sup>30</sup>

Although Waters may now more freely negotiate lesbianism within fiction, she continues to subscribe only to fantasy liberation. She remains true to the reality that effectively wrote lesbian relationships out of history. Selina and Ruth Vigers may effect ‘a fantasy of liberation’, but this is beyond the scope of the novel and there is certainly no such destiny for Margaret, who ultimately destroys herself and her own written record to become again silenced by her own hand. Margaret’s diary does not testify to liberation but, like her earlier text, succumbs to destruction as a torturous record of ‘twisting thoughts’ (p. 30) and unrealised relationships. It becomes evident that there is no constructive authorial role available to Margaret; a fact foreshadowed by her mother’s crushing dismissal: ‘You are not Mrs Browning, Margaret—as much as you would like to be. You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only *Miss Prior*’ (pp. 252-53, original emphasis). It is suggested that spinsters are alienated from any authoritative

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<sup>28</sup> Waters, ‘Wolfskins’, *Women*, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup> Waters, ‘Wolfskins’, *Women*, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> Waters, ‘Wolfskins’, *Women*, p. 188, original emphasis.

role – creative or otherwise. Margaret may strive to write with authority, but her diary becomes a palimpsest that her maid, Ruth Vigers, powerfully overwrites with her own chosen story.

Nevertheless, I suggest that themes and associations of diary writing lend an air of authenticity and veracity to Margaret Prior's ultimately unreliable narrative. Diary readers, as Abbott suggests, are encouraged by the form and its 'illusion of authentic revelation' to collude with a confiding voice.<sup>31</sup> In questions of authenticity and fraud, letters may engage correspondents to weigh, measure, and debate ambiguity and uncertainty, but a diary allows a private space for a medium to articulate tensions between her own voice and those either summoned or swindled from the spiritualist ether. A private diary voice may confess to deception or support an illusion that maintains the suspension of disbelief, or alternatively dismantle this as trickery.

Doubt, suspense, and hesitation dog any reading of *Affinity*. Readers encounter potentially supernatural events in the novel and may be prompted to a Todorovian form of hesitation: do we enter Selina's 'dark circles' (p. 218) as the realm of the fantastic or, conversely remain on the more solid ground of scepticism as we read on?<sup>32</sup> This decision renders Selina either a manipulative fraud or an innocent victim. Without the autodiegetic authority inherent in diary form, would readers inevitably err on the safer shores of scepticism? It is largely faith in a 'sincere' diary that encourages susceptibility to the possible supernatural happenings in Waters's novel. According to Lorna Martens, 'the diary's structure itself can be exploited to illustrate and reinforce the novel's thesis, or to undermine the diarist's own intent'.<sup>33</sup> In due course, just as in the eyes of some, 'even a great old, grim beast like Millbank' (p. 312) improbably shifts and shivers on

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<sup>31</sup> H. Porter Abbott, 'Letters to the Self: The Cloistered Writer in Nonretrospective Fiction', *PMLA*, 95 (1980), 23-41 (p. 29).

<sup>32</sup> This ambiguity is replicated in Owen's study of Victorian spiritualism, where she states, 'after nearly seven years I can only say that I have come to terms with a *modus operandi*. I do not and cannot make a final judgement on the reality or otherwise of the spirits'. Introduction: no page number.

<sup>33</sup> Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 34.

unstable ground, readers of *Affinity* may increasingly find themselves questioning generic territory.

### 3. Writing and Authority: The Medium

*'Selina Dawes,' she said. 'A queer one'.* (p. 42)

It is significant that Selina's journal introduces the novel but narrates a period one year before Margaret's begins, as this leads to a subsequent enforced retrospective reading of Selina's entries and effectively renders Margaret's account not at all 'prior', but always secondary to preceding events.<sup>34</sup> Margaret's entries are interpolated with Selina's and both journals eventually circle back to Selina's starting point at the close of the novel. This further unsettles certainties arising from Abbott's assertion that diary form offers confinement to the world of a single ego, where 'one is encouraged by the form itself to let go of the perspective of the other'.<sup>35</sup> Margaret's journal is never an independent, self-reflexive piece of documentary writing: it is always produced in tension with Selina's own diary voice.

Selina's purpose for writing a diary is less clear than Margaret's. The fact that she details her mesmerist appointments and fees would suggest that the document is a kind of log or record of her career as a spiritualist; her daily reference more explicitly simulates the veracity of a real diary, yet denies access to any confessional voice. It is left to Margaret's diary to report conversations with Selina and detail investigations into Selina's trial and spiritualist practice furnishing the reader with aspects of Selina's life that are omitted in her own muted account.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, we are encouraged to construct Selina through Margaret's diary viewpoint rather than her own voice.

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<sup>34</sup> Selina's first diary entry introduces the novel, dated 3 August 1873, but the narrative then moves to 24 September 1874 to begin Margaret's diary.

<sup>35</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Robert A. Fothergill points out that nineteenth-century ideas of decorum created self-censorious diarists from respectable people. *Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 34. It may be argued that Margaret has already absented herself from the realms of the



This leads to questions about the level of autonomy displayed in Selina's journal. Selina's essential absence from her own text is potentially in keeping with the receptivity and passivity required in her role as a medium between firstly her spirit control, Peter Quick and Mrs Brink's guests, and later between Ruth Vigers and Margaret. Owen observes that:

Renunciation of the conscious personality was the price paid for the authoritative voice. [...] The Medium's power lay in her ability to absent herself in order to become the vessel for spirit possession, and this was a species of power which must remain, apparently by definition, contained.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, despite the fact that Selina's diary has more of the verisimilitude of actual diary entries, she remains to a degree an enigma within her own text.<sup>38</sup> Her journal functions as a kind of secondary source detailing the practice of spiritualism to inform Margaret's account.<sup>39</sup> This allows Margaret's diary to dominate with an immediacy that commands readers' attention; we learn only background material and resolved events from Selina's narrative, but Margaret's written-to-the-moment narrative urgently drives the plot.

Further reasons might be suggested for Selina's obtuse personal writing. Deborah Martinson has discussed potential problems for women who write diaries with an awareness that these may be read by husbands. This leads to self-censorious writing, with those "cautious" of exposure' carefully concealing rather than revealing themselves in their 'private' texts.<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, this scenario can be exploited in fiction: for example, John Harwood's neo-Victorian novel *The Séance* (2008) illustrates that Nell Wraxham, a 'gifted medium' who supposedly freely confides in her diary, must find 'the perfect hiding-place' to secure it from her murderously inclined

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'respectable' when she begins her second journal and is, in fact, using the form to write herself in opposition to the ties of respectability that bind her.

<sup>37</sup> Owen, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> This point is noted by Armit and Gamble, who observe: 'in Selina's journals she exists *only* as voice'. Armit and Gamble, p. 154, original emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Both Selina Dawes and Selene Cook's diaries contain entries that detail the secrets and tricks of spiritualist practices; both explain, for instance, the process of making an object luminous with paint and muslin. See *Affinity*, p. 74; *Selene of the Spirits*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Deborah Martinson, *In the Presence of Audience: Self and Diaries in Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 1.

husband.<sup>41</sup> Yet, in fact, her diary narrative acts as a red-herring to support her escape into anonymity, which a later reader of the journal realises: ‘she had *meant* him to find it. I had been deceived; the journal was a fiction, and nothing in it could be trusted’.<sup>42</sup> Diarists are always at risk should their text fall into the wrong hands; Nell’s diary reader realises that Nell ‘had been so intent on creating her own illusion that she had not realised how the journal might be used against her’,<sup>43</sup> but even before incarceration in Millbank, Selina would have been aware of the panoptic mechanism that understands ‘visibility is a trap’.<sup>44</sup> She has much to hide and diary writing is consequently risk-laden, a fact understood by another neo-Victorian medium, Selene Cook in Pritchard’s *Selene of the Spirits* (1998), who takes care to secure her diary and at one point decides that ‘*it is wisest to consign what I have just written and confessed into the fire*’.<sup>45</sup> Any life based on masking and masquerade will not reveal the player behind the performance lightly.

Selina is consequently a shadowy presence in her own text, which may be symptomatic of her powerless role as a pawn for others to play at will. Her powerlessness would appear to contradict critics like Owen, who have argued that young Victorian female spiritualists achieved liberating freedoms.<sup>46</sup> Such critics claim that female mediums found freedom by speaking publicly through the séance, but this is not evidenced in Selina’s diary narrative (nor Pritchard’s, Glendinning’s, or Roberts’s). Selina has effectively been the property, or pet, of a string of women: Mrs Brink, Ruth Vigers, and, if her desires had been satisfied, potentially Margaret also. Just as in Roberts’s *In The Red Kitchen*, Flora Milk understands herself to be Minny Preston’s ‘pet, captured from the savage wilderness, tamed and trained to perform for the

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<sup>41</sup> John Harwood, *The Séance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 163; p. 153.

<sup>42</sup> Harwood, p. 245, original emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Harwood, p. 246.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 200.

<sup>45</sup> Pritchard, p. 121, original emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Owen claims that: ‘passivity, a vital element in the construction of femininity, became, in spiritualist hands, an invitation to power and subversion’. Owen, p. 209.

amusement of ladies and gentlemen in evening clothes',<sup>47</sup> and Pritchard's Selene Cook records, '*I have become an organ grinder's monkey*'.<sup>48</sup> Selina is also subject to her '*control*' (p.191, original emphasis) and must heed Vigers's rather sinister closing command, 'remember whose girl you are' (p. 352). This perhaps leaves little narrative space for Selina in her diary. She may appear to manipulate a sexual tension between herself and Margaret, but this is entirely at the direction of her spirit control. Ruth instructs: 'you must become a plastic instrument for the spirits' own hands. You must let your spirit be *used*, your prayer must be always *May I be used*. Say that Selina' (p. 261, original emphases). Moreover, Selina's vulnerability is illustrated as the spiritualist community (including Vigers) abandons her to imprisonment in Millbank. Ruth positions herself near to the prison and connives to secure her escape, but she nonetheless allows Selina to bear the burden of criminality for the misjudged séance disaster. Here, Selina loses her unmediated voice entirely.

Selina does, however, demonstrate her shady relationship with text and writing to Margaret. She inscribes 'TRUTH' (p. 167) on her own body, created as a disappearing mirage manifested by way of dinner salt and a knitting needle – a tawdry spiritualist trick. Margaret's diary proves a similar textual mirage. Selina echoes Margaret's own confessed thoughts back to her; these are lifted from the pages of Margaret's private journal and reported to Selina by Ruth Vigers, who shifts as sly cipher within the narrative – a form of epistolary 'medium'.<sup>49</sup> Margaret's love affair is just another of Selina's and Ruth/Peter's co-written fictions, another chapter in their book of spiritualist parlour games used to trick susceptible women at odds with society's prescriptive femininity.

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts, p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> Pritchard, p. 36, original emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Armit and Gamble discuss Ruth's presence as reader within the text to explain an otherwise inexplicable issue concerning the location and reading of the journals. They argue that this is the key manner in which the written word disrupts its own apparent stability. Armit and Gamble, p. 153.

Margaret is thwarted as both writer *and* reader as she attempts to rationalise an occult world that continuously resists definition by dissolving into shadows and suggestion. She investigates Selina, but finds only documentation of story and hypothesis. Succumbing to doubt, Margaret explores ways of trying to ‘read’ Selina by studying various narratives that record her occult career. She visits the ‘*British National Association of Spiritualists*’ (p. 127, original emphasis) and, drawing on the methods of her father’s scholarly tutelage, attempts to research the documents and testimony that detail spiritualist practice and newspapers describing Selina’s trial.<sup>50</sup> Initially sceptical, Margaret examines artefacts and reports for ‘Selina’s story’ (p. 224) and finds two conflicting versions to choose from: one an account of the rationale of legal processes and a second offering mythologising and adulation from spiritualist followers. Both are fallible.

Margaret is exposed to a variety of written messages that repeatedly foreshadow or illuminate the narrative action to signal ambiguous or falsified text. However, she ignores the more explicit textual signals and prefers to ‘read’ a more covert form of erotic transgression written within Selina’s steady ‘gaze’. For example, the crime ‘*fraud and assault*’ (p. 27, original emphasis) is clearly advertised on an enamel plaque that swings on Selina’s cell door to plainly inscribe a transgression for which Selina is publicly punished. However, reaching for a perceived sexual ‘affinity’, Margaret effectively shifts her vision from ominous textual warnings to become increasingly transfixed by Selina’s silent gaze. Selina (or Vigers?) astutely or ‘sensitively’ reads Margaret’s sexual orientation, not with mediumistic powers, but by inspection of Margaret’s diary and an understanding of a sexual tension palpable in her intense gaze.

The truth of Selina ironically ‘lies’ within the pages of Margaret’s own, personal, ‘private’ text. This is illustrated as Margaret imagines Selina, alone at night, in

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<sup>50</sup> Original emphasis. Pritchard’s expanded epistolary narrative incorporates reports from *The Spiritualist* and *The Medium and the Daybreak*, whilst Waters disseminates journalistic reports through Margaret’s diary narrative.

her cell and, unwittingly and with devastating irony, writes in her diary: ‘In one of those shadows *Selina* is lying. Her eyes are open, and she is looking at me’ (p. 117, original emphasis). *Selina* has been evading or ‘lying’ to Margaret and readers all along, a point observed by Armitt and Gamble, who understand that the difficulty of constructing a voice for *Selina* leads ultimately to the realisation that ‘the character we have constructed in the act of “reading *Selina*” turns out to be fake’.<sup>51</sup> *Selina*, in fact, proves to have been all along the ‘sharp little actress’ (p. 85) that she denied being.

#### 4. Reading: History/ Women

*Why do gentlemen’s voices carry so clearly, when women’s are so easily stifled?* (p. 229)

Waters sets her diary narrative explicitly within an argument that pits women’s writing against men’s autobiographical accounts, which supposedly equate to rational or reasoned representations of history. This dichotomy is accentuated by Margaret’s father’s work as a scholar and historian: indeed, Margaret begins her narrative with a form of ‘anxiety of influence’, as she wonders how ‘Pa’ would begin the story of Millbank:

I wish that Pa was with me now. I would ask him how he would start to write the story I have embarked upon to-day. I would ask him how he would neatly tell the story of a prison—of Millbank Prison—which has so many separate lives in it, and is so curious a shape, and must be approached, so darkly, through so many gates and twisting passages.  
(p. 7)

She concludes that he would not begin the story with ‘a lady and her servant, and petticoats and loose hair’ (p. 7), but this is exactly where the heart of Waters’s story lies. What does this say about Waters’s feminist project? Does she legitimise the ‘journal of the heart’ as a record of silenced women’s lives? The prison may represent the

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<sup>51</sup> Armitt and Gamble, p. 155.

architecture of rational masculine design, but does the diary represent the architecture of the irrational oppressed feminine mind?<sup>52</sup>

The diary has traditionally been understood by some as a feminine form of life writing. Rebecca Hogan explores this by asking the question, ‘Is the diary feminine?’, citing autobiography critics who position the diary as feminine and the autobiography as ‘somehow *masculine*’.<sup>53</sup> She pointedly conflates the letter with the diary to borrow Jane Gallop’s distinction: “‘Women write letters’— personal, intimate, in relation; men write books – universal, public, in general circulation’; Hogan develops this to state: ‘substitute diaries for letters and autobiographies for books and [Gallop] has captured perfectly the relative places and valuations of the two types of life-writing in contemporary criticism’.<sup>54</sup>

Alternatively, critics like Suzanne Bunkers are keen to appropriate diaries as forms that ‘affirm rather than deny female existence’.<sup>55</sup> She argues that ‘women’s diaries, journals, daybooks, deathbooks, letters [are] all part of the fabric of women’s experiences’.<sup>56</sup> This suggests a connection between the fragmented and episodic construction of the diary with ideas of *écriture féminine*, a desire to write the body, demonstrated in the disturbed record of Agnes Rackham in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2003), where body and diary narrative illustrate united incompatibility with patriarchal norms.

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<sup>52</sup> Kohlke argues that Margaret’s ‘would-be historical subjectivity stages itself in the shadow of her dead historian-father’. ‘Into History’, p. 157. Llewellyn explores this to understand tensions produced in Margaret’s diary: ‘Margaret draws a conscious distinction between the narrative drive which has emboldened her to undertake her diary and her need to find solace and peace from the tempers of her heart in logic, reasoning and a masculine view of the role of the chronicler of history’. Llewellyn, ‘Breaking the Mould’, p. 199.

<sup>53</sup> Rebecca Hogan, ‘Engendered Autobiographies: The Diary as a Feminine Form’, in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, ed. by Shirley Neuman (London: Frank Cass, 1991) pp. 95-107 (p. 95), original emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Hogan, p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> Suzanne Bunkers, ‘What Do Women REALLY Mean? Thoughts on Women’s Diaries and Lives’, in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. by Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 207-21 (p. 215).

<sup>56</sup> Bunkers, ‘What Do Women REALLY Mean?’, p. 216.

The diary, however chaotic in content, does potentially offer a writing process that is a self-reflexive ordering of personal experience. Yet the masculine logic that orders a discourse of hysteria nevertheless reaches its conclusion, with Margaret's second (and we can only assume successful) attempt to end her life. Margaret's second diary becomes another thwarted mission with aims and intents not realised. Masculine logic prevails for hysteria and women's writing: both silence the homosexual female voice.

Margaret's journal surrenders to the fate of her first diary and becomes an explicit record of her erotic obsession with Selina. Pa's 'Pa[triarchal]' writing can be seen to exemplify masculine history, whereas Margaret's messy emotional account details the state of a feminine mind when controlled, disciplined, and punished and, importantly, also befuddled with sedatives (typically, Margaret writes her diary late at night following her daily dose of chloral). Nevertheless, the diary daily unfolds inexorably towards Margaret's eventual recognition that her heart has indeed 'crept across [the] pages' (p. 241) of her story. Margaret's transgressive position cannot be contained in writing that imitates a masculine model. The diary cannot emulate her father's logic of writing; eventually its shape must surrender to the uncertain experiences of the writer.

Ultimately, Margaret's diary is destroyed and Selina's proves opaque. Neo-Victorian novels regularly tease readers with ever-receding evidence; this is apparent, for example, in *In the Red Kitchen*, as Flora Milk's written record is tantalisingly glimpsed in a box containing old photographs before being whisked away by a mystery claimant; or in Andrea Barrett's account of a doomed Arctic expedition, *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (2000), where an eagerly discovered diary proves disappointingly to be 'only a shell, two covers with just a few pages remaining, all the rest torn out'.<sup>57</sup> It is

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<sup>57</sup> Andrea Barrett, *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (London: Flamingo, 2000), p. 112.

therefore repeatedly demonstrated that neo-Victorian diarists fail to be either legible or read at all. Destined to remain unread, their ‘diaries’ indicate unexamined and unsubstantiated life histories that reflect partial material remains speaking as fragmented posterity.<sup>58</sup>

This is exemplified with a closer look at *Selene of the Spirits*, where a medium’s diary fails as evidence of psychic powers. Selene Cook’s diary is posthumously retrieved from its hiding place behind a loose brick wall and her erstwhile lover is able to read the factual entries that authenticate what he knows of her life.<sup>59</sup> The coded psychic messages she asked him to pass on to spiritualist investigators have, however, been washed away; the entries are ‘ruined. Unreadable’:

The handwriting itself was erratic, the backwards words taking on diverse styles as though written by someone with her eyes closed, climbing steeply over the page, then dropping off altogether. He began leafing quickly through the rest, a part of his mind considering this a possibly useful project, decoding her messages before the journal was given to the Society as she had asked—he was quite taken with this idea when he came upon a terrible, ruinous thing. After the first several pages in code, the rest became indecipherable, the ink washed away. Dampness, rainwater, had seeped onto all the pages, utterly destroying them. Whatever messages from the spirit world Selene had heard and faithfully copied down were reduced to inky smears, with here and there a word or letter faintly legible but, by itself, signifying nothing.<sup>60</sup>

The diary demonstrates lost evidence – a double obfuscation, as coded meanings become a faded palimpsest of fragmented traces. A medium’s ability to commune with spirits and the past does not translate into voicing or writing her own record. Or does it? ‘Inky smears’ may be traced and over – or re-written, just as the actual Florence Cook has been imagined and reproduced in neo-Victorian times. Pritchard and Roberts both

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<sup>58</sup> Sarah Gamble raises the ambiguous presence of Flora’s narrative in the novel and suggests that ‘the means by which her story has been transmitted is [...] uncertain, since the most obvious explanation – that Hattie has found [Flora’s] diaries and inscribed them in her own narrative – is raised only to be dismissed’. ‘(In)Between Locations: Space, Time and the Female Subject in Michèle Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen*’, *Feminist Theory* 7 (2006), 7-26 (p. 24).

<sup>59</sup> A form of diary discovery is replicated by Jamie Fuller: ‘As the walls of the now crumbling room were being torn down, one of the workmen chanced upon a small leatherbound book that had apparently been concealed behind a loose brick or in a crevice in the wall’. *The Diary of Emily Dickinson* (San Francisco, Mercury House, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Pritchard, pp. 207-08.



create stories from the recorded accounts of Florence Cook's relationship with William Crookes: Pritchard revisions a tragic love story, whereas Roberts imagines manipulative seduction. Waters alternatively adapts the sensationalism and suspense of the Victorian occult for her own agenda that 'queers' a relationship with spiritual trickery. It is evident, therefore, that historical traces may be augmented with critical investigation in stories that voice past women's experiences and memorialise silent lives.

### 5. Reading: The Panoptic Gaze

*She still kept her eyes upon me – now, however, I saw her gaze grow strange.* (p. 211)

*Affinity* exploits a paradigmatic tension between a panoptic principle of uncertainty and a level of confidence promoted by a narrative strategy of diary form to effectively undermine both.<sup>61</sup> Readers, encouraged by the unavoidable intertext of the non-fiction diary model, may initially believe they operate at a panoptic level to scrutinise the diarist's private thoughts.<sup>62</sup> Confessional diary mode generates faith in the private voice to blinker readers' full understanding of their confinement and collusion with the diarist's confiding voice. Abbott suggests that both writer and reader of fictional diaries are 'cloistered' within a 'bell jar of self-communion' and this allows authors to 'intensify our concentration on the central figure's private drama of self-awareness'.<sup>63</sup> It is perhaps this 'cloistered' narrative atmosphere that encourages readers to collude with Margaret's confessional text and imagine her illusory love story.

The gaze operates as a double relationship: who gazes and is gazed upon defines the balance of power between two people. In his discussion of panoptic power, Foucault argues that:

Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose

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<sup>61</sup> Abbot argues that the diary's 'collection of expectations has become a generic language that an author can use and a critic describe'. *Diary Fiction*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Martens points out that in diary fiction, 'the non-fiction model [is] always present'. Martens, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Abbott, 'Letters to the Self', p. 23.

internal mechanisms produce the relation in which the individuals are caught up.<sup>64</sup>

He explains that ‘the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen’.<sup>65</sup> Waters positions characters within this dyad. Most significantly, Vigers operates from the central tower of the panoptic mechanism that fixes Margaret so completely and Margaret is relegated to the ‘peripheric ring’ [where] one is totally seen, without ever seeing’.<sup>66</sup> Foucault explains the panopticon as

The instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception.<sup>67</sup>

Margaret’s diary, far from providing her with a private refuge, in fact, facilitates Vigers’s penetrating scrutiny. In line with the idea that power should be visible but unverifiable, Vigers is all along under Margaret’s nose, but as a member of the serving classes, she is effectively invisible to her mistress.<sup>68</sup> Thus, *Affinity*’s narrative architecture of ‘queerly segmented’ (p. 19) diary form entails readers in a distortion of a panoptic controlling mechanism.

The gaze and the diary can therefore be read as paradigmatic structuring devices in the novel. For readers, the two separate, alternating diaries potentially reflect panoptic architectural structuring, which Foucault explains as an ‘enclosed segmented space, observed at every point, [...] in which all events are recorded’.<sup>69</sup> An essential paradox is at work in the novel, however: as the panoptic principle relies on the understanding (or suspicion) that one is potentially observed at all times, the diary

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<sup>64</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 202.

<sup>65</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 202.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 202.

<sup>67</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 214.

<sup>68</sup> This is a variation of Wilkie Collins’s foregrounding of servants in sensation fiction, where Lyn Pykett suggests, ‘the high visibility of servants in plot terms derives from Collins’s exploitation of their invisibility in class terms’. *Wilkie Collins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 119.

<sup>69</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, p. 197.

should, in theory, work from an ordering principle that directly opposes this relation. The diary is a text founded on the allure of secrecy, written in private and intended only for the eyes of the writer. A trusted textual embodiment of self, it should theoretically protect, not punish. However, Waters configures Margaret's diary as the agent of her downfall. With its boundaries breached, subject to Vigers's all-seeing gaze, it becomes ultimately an injurious document, recording and delivering Margaret's punishment. Just as her body betrays her to reveal a sexual secret written plainly in her gaze, the diary also turns traitor to collude in her exposure. A united arsenal of body, gaze, and diary illustrate that there is no space, textual or spatial, for Margaret to inhabit freely or safely. This lesbian continues to remain disembodied in Waters's neo-vision, unable to write herself into being and destined to remain muted.

The deception of Margaret is based on her belief in an 'affinity' between herself and Selina, an idea fostered by Vigers and Selina via the medium of Margaret's diary. The two diarists are initially differentiated by one point: Margaret allies herself with her father's rational search for knowledge, whereas Selina occupies the superstitious realm of a spiritualist hinterland. However, this becomes increasingly redundant as a correspondence that sees both subjected to an authoritative gaze insisting upon punishment and reform reinforces their similarities. Selina tells Margaret: 'all the world might gaze at her, it was a part of her punishment' (p. 64) and Margaret recognises that, as a diagnosed hysteric, this is indeed her own position outside the prison. During the nineteenth century, there were strong associations between spiritualism and hysteria (very often linked to deviant sexuality). Owen claims that 'sexuality and hysteria were intrinsically linked' and, additionally, that 'medicine formulated an entire pathology of mediumship and presented it to the world as a malfunction of femininity'.<sup>70</sup> These ideas

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<sup>70</sup> Owen, p. 147; p. 151.

are all contained within the novel to circle back to social panics and fear of what Owen suggests is ‘femininity gone awry’.<sup>71</sup>

Deemed a hysteric, Margaret attempts to challenge her resulting position of observation and confinement and her efforts to empower herself by visiting Millbank meet with some initial success. She remembers ‘how I had walked from the prison into the clear air after my first visit and imagined my own past being buckled up tight, and forgotten’ (p. 68). However, at some point, Selina succeeds in inverting the power balance by turning *her* pitying gaze upon Margaret. Margaret recognises this and, with dismay, realises, ‘I had come to her, thinking only of her, and she had thrust my own weak self at me again. She looked at me and *her* eyes had pity in them!’ (p. 88, original emphasis). Margaret is horrified to find herself effectively slipping sideways into a role that she already occupies so completely outside the prison walls.

Thereafter, Margaret becomes captive under the power of Selina’s panoptic and mesmerising gaze, which appears to penetrate her secret self. Selina claims that her spiritualist powers enable an all-seeing ability which can read the hidden corners of Margaret’s psyche. Yet she lies; in fact, Margaret’s diary is breached to become a facilitator of surveillance and betrays its role as confidante. Mediated access to Margaret’s private journal enables Selina’s panoptical gaze and allows her to violate the most private areas of Margaret’s life. Selina thus ‘evidences’ her occult powers and moves by whispered suggestion to position herself at the scene of Margaret’s writing:

‘*They*, [the spirits] you know, see everything. Even the pages of your secret book. Even should you write it’—here she paused, to pass a finger, very lightly across her lips—‘in the darkness of your own room, with your door made fast, and your lamp turned very low’.

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<sup>71</sup> Roberts depicts the ‘purity’ of Flora Milk stained by manifestation of Hattie King – ‘shameless, because she is a spirit’. Roberts, p. 122. Sophy Sheekhy in A. S. Byatt’s novella, *The Conjugal Angel*, appears an exception to sexualisation of the medium. She is represented as someone who ‘seemed to have no interest in that kind of thing. Part of her spiritual success might be due to this intact quality of hers. She was a pure vessel, cool, waiting dreamily’. *The Conjugal Angel*, in *Angels and Insects* (London: Vintage, 1992:1995), pp. 161-290 (p. 191).

I blinked. Now, I said, that was very odd, for that was just how I *did* write my journal; and she held my gaze for a second, then smiled. (pp. 111-12, original emphases)

Margaret, therefore, begins to accept the idea that she is caught in Selina's all-seeing paranormal gaze and, with Selina's encouragement, she fixes Selina as text within her diary. By suggestion, Selina materialises herself in Margaret's 'story'; Margaret writes: 'she is making me write the name here, she is growing more real, more solid and quick, with every stroking of the nib across the page—*Selina*' (p. 116-17, original emphasis). By repeatedly inscribing Selina within her diary, by naming her, Margaret makes concrete her desired relationship. As Margaret rereads what she has written, it seems less spiritualist mysticism and more irrefutable fact.

Margaret's utopian story of union with Selina as her 'affinity', a meeting of mind and body, becomes a charade – a variation of '*Fraud & Assault*' (p. 27, original emphasis). Like Charlotte Fisher (branded 'an impious female charlatan') in Glendinning's *Electricity*<sup>72</sup> and Flora Milk (deemed 'corrupt. Evil'), Selina is unmasked as a fraudster, able to access the innermost thoughts and emotions of Margaret via confidence trickery and connived access to her private papers.<sup>73</sup> Margaret's diary scripts a drama for Selina to perform – a masquerade with Ruth Vigers acting as stage director – a role she performed so well as the spirit control, Peter Quick.<sup>74</sup> Assisted by the medium of unseen 'invisible' letters, the planned deception of Margaret is executed by the medium and 'her *control*' (p. 166, original emphasis) to effect Vigers's 'sly and dreadful triumph' (p. 341). Thus by wholesale distortion of epistolary relations, Margaret is catastrophically undone.

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<sup>72</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Electricity* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), p. 232.

<sup>73</sup> Roberts, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Quick is a pseudo ghost intertextually resonant of a Victorian fictional ghost, Henry James's Peter Quint of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). This point is also noted by Catherine Spooner in an article entitled: "'Spiritual Garments': Fashioning the Victorian Séance in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*", *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), 351-68 (p. 364), and by Mark Wormald, 'Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians', in *British Fiction Today*, ed. by Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 186-97 (p. 195), and by Heilmann, 'Doing It With Mirrors', p. 26.

## 6. Reading: A Ghost in the Panoptic Machine

*And all the time Ruth sits & watches.* (p. 174)

Ruth Vigers is ostensibly voiceless in a surface narrative that allows only Margaret and Selina to speak. She is nevertheless always present in Margaret's story: Waters positions the maidservant loitering at every narrative turn of Margaret's crooked path towards disillusionment. Following each crucial scene, Vigers can be located malingering at the edge of narrative events, 'only watch[ing] with her black eyes' (p. 174). Yet Vigers's social invisibility allows her to disappear completely beneath the radar of Margaret's narrative: she is the 'faceless gaze'. As Selina observes on first meeting Ruth, she operates as a lady's maid should, silently and unobtrusively, 'like a ghost' (p. 119).<sup>75</sup>

Readers are 'cloistered' within the claustrophobic atmosphere of Margaret's diary and Vigers is able to operate and move within the narrative unrecognised. Bentham evoked "the sleepless eye" of constant surveillance',<sup>76</sup> and we repeatedly see Vigers restlessly shifting in the room above Margaret, 'the creak of Vigers's bed' (p. 314) signalling the ghostly author[ity] of both their destinies. Yet our gaze is averted to a more compelling focus that sees Selina through Margaret's epistolary vision.

Vigers is the master of observation and the gaze. She operates her own form of clinical gaze to diagnose the trembling, excitable young women who attend Mrs Brink's séance sessions for orchestrated, erotically charged, same-sex contact. Similarly, Vigers watches Margaret and recognises a familiar malady for which she prescribes Selina as remedy. If power has its principle in 'gazes', it is evident that Ruth Vigers 'steals' the gaze that Margaret mistakenly believed to be hers. Despite (or because of) the desirability of this coveted gaze as a form of property, it is always subject to ideas of

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<sup>75</sup> One might argue that this again challenges Castle's apparition theory, because here is a lesbian figure who is empowered by invisibility.

<sup>76</sup> Janet Semple citing the historian of Millbank prison, Arthur Griffiths's *Memorials of Millbank and Chapters in Prison History*, 2 vols (London: Henry S. King 1875) I, p. 34. Semple, *Bentham's Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 143.

ownership and bondage. Witness the ‘velvet collar, with a lock of brass’ (p. 294) that Margaret believes Selina ‘spirited’ to her as a pledge to their love. More honestly, it reveals Margaret to be Selina’s (and Vigers’s) puppet, captive and led where she knows not. Again, the diary becomes the medium that transports this ‘gift’, transmitting material ‘evidence’ to join Selina bodily with Margaret in her text.

Margaret’s diary works in a complex tripartite way to rehash pre-meditated suggestion. Illusion and desperation lie behind the ‘affinity’ that Margaret longs to materialise. Margaret finds her private thoughts reflected back to her as a doubling of her own private diary discourse. She details a fantasy relationship developing between herself and Selina within the pages of her journal; Vigers and Selina then work together to manipulate the tools of epistolary discourse, a subterfuge that sees Selina ‘performing’ Margaret’s fantasy love affair. Margaret belatedly realises

That passion was always theirs. Every time I stood in Selina’s cell, feeling my flesh yearn towards hers, there might as well have been Vigers at the gate, looking on, stealing Selina’s gaze from me to her. All that I wrote, in the dark, she had later brought a light to; and she had written the words to Selina, and the words had become her own. (pp. 341-42)

Selina and Margaret are in effect co-writers of Margaret’s diary, which leads to the question: is Selina absent from her own diary because, as ‘an artful speaker’ (p. 138), her voice has in fact been disseminated by stealthy invasion of Margaret’s narrative?

I suggest that Waters subjects the diary in various ways to the panoptic power principle. The diary as a secret, self-addressed, and self-informing text is steadily undermined because of penetrating observation by outside control. In this way, the gaze and the diary work in tandem to demonstrate how who reads, who writes, and who interprets distribute textual power. The panoptic principle of the gaze is juxtaposed with the privacy of the diary to raise questions about textual manipulation and power within the author/reader relationship. Margaret attempts to empower herself through writing her diary; Selina is necessarily hidden within her diary narrative; but Ruth Vigers

clearly masters both the gaze that reads Margaret as body and text and the author[ity] that re-writes the narrative to her ordering. Vigers *appears* the most powerless character in the narrative, but she twists power relations by manipulating text and the gaze to re-write her own destiny, proving, as Armit and Gamble suggest, ‘how powerful the seeing but unseen woman can be’.<sup>77</sup> Vigers becomes the super-reader in a mediated, tripartite relationship. She constructs her own network of surveillance to read, write, and inspect text, with Margaret’s diary becoming the key medium in her elaborately coordinated fraud.

## 7. Reading The Self Reflected: Diaries and Mirrors

*I am afraid to gaze too hard.* (p. 116)

Ann Heilmann observes that neo-Victorianism ‘plays with mirrors to lure us into suspending disbelief’.<sup>78</sup> Mirrors are also regularly linked to diary fiction (Martens, Field, Abbott) and usually connect to diarists’ desire to see themselves through the agency of their diary.<sup>79</sup> Abbott states that diarists’ ‘solitude is a continual refrain among the keepers of such texts, particularly as they seek in the variable mirrors of their diaries some genuine image of themselves’.<sup>80</sup> This is problematic in the cases of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) and Katie Roiphe’s *Still She Haunts Me* (2001), as the novels’ protagonists look in the mirror and see only their monstrous alter egos reflected. Grace Marks and Charles Dodgson see who the text questions they *might* be – murderess or monster – a verdict that is interrogated, if not resolved, in diaries, which supposedly ‘mirror the soul’, or allow one to read oneself reflexively. Waters’s apposite writers are, like most neo-Victorian diarists, positioned in a structure that undermines

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<sup>77</sup> Armit and Gamble, p. 158.

<sup>78</sup> Heilmann, ‘Doing It With Mirrors’, p. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Abbott argues that a mirror is a ‘predictable’ presence, and ‘a standard piece of equipment [...] (usually somewhere in the diarist’s room)’ that connects to the diarist’s desire to see himself through the agency of his diary. *Diary Fiction*, p. 25. Trevor Field also states that, ‘from the very earliest examples, writers of diary fiction have been intuitively aware of the vital link between the intimate journal and imagery of mirrors’. *Form and Function in the Diary Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 154.

<sup>80</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 45.



the more usual function of the personal diary to mirror oneself back with a self-reflexive, clear understanding.<sup>81</sup>

*Affinity* adheres to the mirror trope in varied ways. Firstly, Waters conventionally presents Margaret in a room with a mirror, but she also uses mirrors to extend the notion of the gaze as possessive. Significantly, an entry in Selina's diary details Ruth Vigers leading Selina to the mirror to gaze at her proprietarily: 'don't you look like a proper young lady, and awfully fit for a gentleman's eye?' (p. 175). Most notably, however, Margaret imagines a likeness between Selina and a print of a Crivelli painting on her wall that depicts a figure carrying 'a looking glass' (p. 52).<sup>82</sup> This image becomes a muse for Margaret as she nightly writes her journal. It provides a *mise-en-abyme* mirror image to further illustrate Selina's control, because she, in fact, holds the power to reflect Margaret's authorised homosexual image back to herself.

Beset by uncertainty, but still seeking an identity that reflects her father's rational empiricism, Margaret gazes before *his* mirror 'looking for him in it—looking for anything in it from the days before he died. There was only myself' (p. 202). She ponders a theory reported by him, that 'an invalid should not gaze at their own reflection, for fear their souls would fly into the glass and kill them' (p. 202). Later when Margaret makes the disastrous decision to collude with Selina's escape plan, she sees herself reflected in Selina's eye, an illustration of her now complete capture within the power of Selina's gaze: 'then I saw her eye, and it was black, and my own face swam in it, pale as a pearl. And then, it was like Pa and the looking-glass. My soul left

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<sup>81</sup> Armitt and Gamble suggest that the diaries in *Affinity* 'are self-affirming and, as such, we are at no time actively encouraged to challenge the truth-value of any of the material inscribed in them'. Armitt and Gamble, p. 152.

<sup>82</sup> There does not appear to be an actual painting entitled *Veritas* by Crivelli. This is perhaps in keeping with the elusiveness of Selina, who is shadowed beneath the imprinted desires of others. However, there is a Carlo Crivelli painting entitled *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels* that has been subject to a process called a reflectogram, which retrieves 'for the public gaze' an 'underdrawing' that is hidden concealed within/beneath the actual painting. Tim Radford, 'Old Master bargains - two for the price of one: Infra-red vision reveals Renaissance artists' hidden drawings', *Guardian*, 26 August 2002 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/aug/26/artsandhumanities.arts>> [accessed 10 August 2010]. Significantly, Margaret first imagines her Crivelli print to illustrate an angel and it is this image that she aligns with her vision of Selina.

me—I felt it fly from me and lodge in her’ (p. 280). As Selina predicted, their ‘flesh is the same’ (p. 275), represented by the diary and its seamlessly covert co-authorship.

This union – emotional and textual – is secured by the gaze, as Margaret submits to the mesmeric power of both her desire and desired self, captured and configured in Selina’s gaze. Superstition and folklore have traditionally suggested that mirrors have the power to entrap the soul and lead to death.<sup>83</sup> Relinquishing her soul to Selina pre-emptly Margaret’s imminent death. Waters suggests similar dangers for those who too closely examine their reflected selves, whether through the mutual homosexual gaze, or textually via self-reflexive autobiography/diary. Both may lead to self-destruction of text and writer.

Potential for mirrored self-knowledge is significantly undermined by a pastiche, Dickensian-style trope which sees Margaret perpetually groping her way through the thick, choking, and ‘seeping’ (p. 126) London fog. Unfortunately, she mistakenly believes that she negotiates this haze to remain as ‘sharp as ever’ within her space – her own ‘dome of gauze’ (p. 126). Her restricted vision satisfies her, but symbolises how, isolated with her diary, she is perpetually circumscribed and muffled in silent introspection. This can be extended to the reader’s position; Abbott’s ‘bell jar’ or ‘space’ of diary fiction provides only restricted vision with generic suggestion fostering its own diffuse veil of gauze.<sup>84</sup>

## 8. Conclusion: Reading: Invisible Letters

*Not a letter, not a word?* (p. 103)

Letters penetrate the panoptic structure and enable a divisive narrative strategy. The unseen correspondence between Selina and Ruth Vigers becomes the occluded intertext that tells the actual same-sex love story of the novel. Only one letter is presented in full

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<sup>83</sup> See Myrriah Levin, ‘Mirror’ <<http://www.madstone.com/Pages/mirror.html>> [accessed 7 December 2009]

<sup>84</sup> Abbott, ‘Letters to the Self’, p. 23.

in the novel: Margaret's final missive to Helen. This can be read as symptomatic of the epistolary ambiguity in the novel. Margaret composes her farewell note to be read after she has 'eloped' with Selina to Italy. She sends it, however, before her escape is accomplished: significantly, she watches Vigers 'carry it, very carefully, to the post' and understands 'now there is no recovering it' (p. 315). This letter will reach its intended destination even if Margaret does not. It is clear, however, that this 'very curious letter' (p. 315) may leave Helen unenlightened, as it effectively substitutes seamlessly for a suicide note, an observation demonstrated by the following extract:

I wish you will not hate or pity me, for what I am about to do. There is a part of me that hates myself—that knows that this will bring a disgrace on Mother, on Stephen and on Pris. I wish you will only regret my going from you, not cry out against the manner of it. I wish you will remember me with kindness, not with pain. Your pain will not help me, where I am going. (p. 315)

Margaret does say that she has been led by 'someone marvellous' to a 'dazzling place' (p. 316), but this remains highly ambiguous as, following a first attempt on her own life, Helen and her family have long been concerned for the fragile state of Margaret's mind. Presumably, following her departure, her family will not, as she suspects, 'turn my passion into something gross and wrong' (p. 316), but will once again find ways to rewrite Margaret's story and minimise damage to their reputation.

Selina cannot be detected or read in Margaret's letter and neither does it incriminate Ruth Vigers. This is in keeping with the elision of Margaret from public record. As she prepares for escape, she finds herself 'distant', 'separating myself', 'growing subtle, insubstantial' (pp. 288-89); looking down, she observes: 'my flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!' (p. 289). This image is perplexing if one again considers Castle's claim that twentieth-century lesbian authors have materialised the lesbian in fiction as a new 'affirming presence'.<sup>85</sup> Castle further claims that a new understanding of past homophobic literature is available, making visible a

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<sup>85</sup> Castle, pp. 64-65.

‘surreptitious erotic power’ to signal an (extra-textual) ‘fall into flesh’.<sup>86</sup> Yet despite anticipating escape, Margaret is specifically represented as physically diminishing – she paradoxically feels her flesh ‘streaming away’. Does this evidence Waters’s rejection of Castle’s optimistic (or simplistic?) project of lesbian recovery and historical fiction? Thomas Mallon’s claim that ‘no form of expression more emphatically embodies the expresser: diaries are the flesh made word’ is again rehearsed, yet, Margaret is emphatically presented as unable to write herself bodily as enduring text.<sup>87</sup>

Margaret’s letter is ultimately powerless to communicate her position. However, Vigers’s secret exchange of letters with Selina effectively controls the novel’s textual universe. These are silent texts within the novel, yet they freely manoeuvre all players in the drama.<sup>88</sup> Margaret makes no reference to these in her diary because, until the final denouement, she has no knowledge that they exist. Letters are supposedly subject to the panoptic principle, intercepted, and inspected by the chaplain’s office before delivery either in or out of the prison. Pains are taken to emphasise to Margaret that Selina is sealed off from mediated traffic with the outside world as the one prisoner who ‘*never had a letter!*’ (p. 81, original emphasis). Margaret believes this knowledge better equips her to understand Selina’s ‘solitude and silence’ (p. 82), but eventually Margaret, on learning the truth, begins to understand the vital role the letters have played in her deception:

‘Letters,’ I said. Now I think I began to glimpse the whole, thick, monstrous shape of it. I said, There were letters passed, between *Selina* and *Vigers*?

Oh, she said at once, there had always been those! (p. 337, original emphases)

A mystifying atmosphere of spiritualism and suspicion, manufactured myth and generic ambiguity clouds epistolary events and disguises the vital letters that are paradoxically

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<sup>86</sup> Castle, p. 65.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One’s Own: People and Their Diaries* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p. xvii.

<sup>88</sup> The key characters involved in Margaret’s deception are all carriers of letters (or mediums of epistolary transaction) i.e., Mrs Jelf, Selina, and Ruth Vigers.

contained within and driving the plot, but physically absent as overt textual devices. It is these that ultimately undermine Margaret as a constructive writer. Margaret's private text becomes part of a larger network of writing that breaches the policing observation of her family and in a wider social context challenges the supposed invincible panoptic control of the prison. Waters subverts the diary as a confessional self-authored private document, but she allows letters a private triumph.

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## Chapter Three

# A Deviant Device:

### Diary Dissembling in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

*Are you like me? Do you like reading trials?*

Wilkie Collins  
*The Law and the Lady* (1875)<sup>1</sup>

*The author of the diary and the diary itself are, of course, imaginary.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky  
*Notes from the Underground* (1864)<sup>2</sup>

Sarah Waters's swindling diary and letter writers are invented, but neo-Victorian writers also revisit actual Victorian crimes and criminals. Contemporary novelists echo sensation fiction's parasitical relationship with crime-reporting by re-employing or imagining documents. This chapter examines Margaret Atwood's 'fictional excursion' into the 'real Canadian past' in her 1996 novel *Alias Grace*, which exposes contradictions in the story of an infamous nineteenth-century murderess.<sup>3</sup> The novel's fragmented polyphonic narrative includes a secret diary-style voice that fosters ideas of deception and ambiguity to deny resolution for enduring questions of guilt or innocence and illustrates that 'a murderess is not an everyday thing'.<sup>4</sup> *Alias Grace* is a pastiche of Grace Marks's story, which demonstrates that 'the past is made of paper', but the historical record is confusing and contradictory.<sup>5</sup> The novel pieces letters and a diary-style narrative into a patterned patchwork of voices that jostle discordantly side by side in search of narrative authority. I argue that the novel is a self-contradictory and

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (London: Penguin, 1998 [1875]), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes From The Underground* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992 [1864]), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', in *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970-2005* (London: Virago, 2006), pp. 209-34 (p. 225). Georges Letissier addresses scope and diversity in post-Victorian material by suggesting a 'difficulty' that writing is not 'merely confined to England', but concerns former British colonies too, chiefly Australia and Canada. He cites Atwood as one Canadian writer involved in this project. 'Dickens and Post-Victorian Fiction', in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 111-28 (p. 113). Grace Moore similarly argues that 'revisionism has, in recent years, become a much more global phenomenon'. 'Twentieth-Century Re-Workings of the Victorian Novel', *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), 134-44 (p. 137).

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Virago, 2006 [1996]), p. 104. All other references to this text will be given parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 225.

therefore self-explanatory metafiction, for which a form of diary models reading and interpretation strategies, even as it preserves Grace's secrets unread. Atwood claims that Grace's story 'is a real study in how the perception of reality is shaped'; voice and the diverse roles of writer and critic are therefore key preoccupations for Atwood as she debates processes that effectively effaced Grace's legibility.<sup>6</sup> This chapter investigates how letters and diary form shape readers' perceptions of Atwood's fictional reconstruction of historical event and considers whether a deviant diary-style permits Grace Marks to become primarily an *alias* for Margaret Atwood to deliver her authorial polemic. It could be argued that the work manages with some irony to advertise this ambiguity on every cover of the novel: Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*.

In a crowded narrative of discordant voices, Atwood manages to isolate Grace's covert commentary as a confiding, private voice. This is written with immediacy suggestive of diary form and presented within a diary-like space as a self-reflexive voice in an initially dated structure. Intimations of diary form in Grace's covert commentaries have been noted by Gina Wisker, for instance, who understands Grace's first-person narrative 'to be less a set of thoughts and a straightforward factual memory than a form like an inner diary, an (actually) unspoken journal'.<sup>7</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney also comments that 'Grace is 'alone, either thinking, or perhaps, since she and Atwood are both careful to tell us that Grace can read and write, actually writing her own story'.<sup>8</sup> If we accept the common consensus that diaries are typically secret, self-addressed texts responding to a need to record one's subjective experience, then it is evident that Grace's private voice adheres fundamentally to the diary 'paradigm'.

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<sup>6</sup> Laura Miller, 'Blood and Laundry: An Interview with Margaret Atwood' <<http://www.salon.com/jan97/interview970120.html>> [accessed 20 June 2008]

<sup>7</sup> Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood's 'Alias Grace': A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, 'Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics', in *Margaret Atwood: Works & Impact*, ed. by Reingard M. Nischik (Suffolk: Camden House, 2000), pp. 157-65 (p. 161). Atwood notes in her 'Author's Afterword' to *Alias Grace* that Grace was 'certainly literate, as the warden's journal depicts her as writing letters' (p. 539).

Offering further evidence for diary form within the novel, Grace admits to writing letters and also mentions ambiguously that she can write for just a ‘short time [...] *each day*’ (p. 488, emphasis added). However, her private record makes no reference to the fiction of writing – she has indeed ‘left no marks. And that way [...] cannot be followed’ (p. 398). Atwood’s novel, in fact, bears similarities to what Lorna Martens calls “quasi-diary fiction”, where writers borrow elements of diary form without necessarily incorporating ‘explicit references to writing’.<sup>9</sup> Martens identifies the early twentieth century emergence of such fiction as ‘a kind of first-person fiction similar to diary fiction – particularly inasmuch as it maintains a clearly periodic narrative scheme, yet fundamentally different because there are no explicit references to writing’.<sup>10</sup> I suggest that it is, in fact, crucial for Atwood’s metaphysical project that Grace be protected from textual production within the novelistic world. Grace may appear to confide her private thoughts within a confessional diary frame, but her private account is preserved from ‘explicit references to writing’ in order to avoid complicity with text that has only constructed and misrepresented her with always ‘the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place’ (p. 79). Consequently, her private voice (and Atwood’s address) is deliberately positioned outside warring textual voices that manifest confusion and contradiction in historical records.

The complexities of creating text that is not text or records that do not record are challenging. Atwood’s attempt to unstitch and unfasten Grace from contradictory fabrications in a crowded textual arena must, I argue, rely necessarily on strictly abstract ideas of text and, in so doing, Atwood indeed fully realises Martens’s idea that ‘diary form [is] an empty structure with an abstract potential’.<sup>11</sup> This abstraction is nevertheless initiated by more prescriptive defining characteristics of a diary evident in

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<sup>9</sup> Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Martens, p. 195

<sup>11</sup> Martens, p. 195.



Grace's account. Valerie Raoul's point that 'entry headings are the most immediate signal of "diary form", and often are not maintained beyond their initial usefulness for concise indication of period and place, as well as of the model'<sup>12</sup> is evidenced in Atwood's first chapter 'Jagged Edge', which states, 'It's 1851. I'll be twenty-four years old next birthday. I've been shut up in here since the age of sixteen' (p. 5). Following a reproduced ballad and sketches of Grace and McDermott in chapter two, the third chapter recommences beneath another dated heading: '1859'. Grace's diary-like entries are thereafter periodic and dated anew from the first visit of Dr. Simon Jordan, an American proto-psychoanalyst; she states, 'this is the ninth day I have sat with Dr Jordan in this room' (p. 111).

Grace conforms to many stereotypical traits of the diary writer. For example, she reflects Bernard Duyfhuizen's claim that a diary has an 'inherent logic of isolation and alienation' – a form that is therefore concomitant with imprisonment – 'a place where you have a lot of time to think, and no one to tell your thoughts to; and so you tell them to yourself' (p. 186).<sup>13</sup> She speaks, as diarists do, 'in the present of present emotions' and her narrative adheres particularly to H. Porter Abbott's 'theme of solitude', which is emphasised amid community gossip and an epistolary exchange network of medical 'expertise'.<sup>14</sup>

Suggestion of a diary garners specific advantages for Atwood's project. A fiction of privacy is fostered by diary associations, lending cachet to Grace's voice and securing privilege among the hierarchy of competing accounts. Magali Cornier Michael has suggested that *Alias Grace* offers a 'curious levelling out of the authority of all the

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<sup>12</sup> Valerie Raoul, *The French Fictional Journal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 16; p. 45.

texts it presents'.<sup>15</sup> However, I propose that, although Atwood does ostensibly suspend textual hierarchy in the novel, evidence of authorial authority within Grace's diary voice allows Grace's voice to rise above any levelling process entirely because her voice is zoned separately as an abstract but heteroglossic representation. A 'private' voice engages readers dialogically from a position that is informed or framed by pseudo-diary connotations, which are most significantly 'linguistic and stylistic peculiarities' of diary form that suggest sincerity or confession.<sup>16</sup> Thus Grace punctuates her private thoughts with assurances of confiding sincerity that include the reader whilst excluding Jordan; she states, for instance, that she does 'not give him a straight answer' (p. 113), or explains, 'I say I can't remember' (p. 116), or confesses deliberate obfuscation, 'but I don't say this. I look at him stupidly' (p. 43).

I want to suggest that diary strategies filter Atwood's critical point of view and continually unsettle Grace's autobiographical story. Grace is presented as a story-teller with 'strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives'.<sup>17</sup> This tension between confession and withholding is represented by voicing Grace in two distinct Bakhtinian-style narrative zones within the novel.<sup>18</sup> A substantial amount of narrative space is devoted to a detailed account of her life story, but her autobiographical discourse is continually undermined by a parallel voice. Grace dictates her life-history to Jordan, the visiting American Alienist, who notes that ostensibly, 'every button and candle-end seems accounted for' (p. 215). However, a private diary-style voice illustrates processes of selection and recollection that undermine the apparent veracity of her oral account. Atwood's veiled suggestions of diary form

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<sup>15</sup> Magali Cornier Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47 (2001), 421-47 (p. 421).

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 259-422 (p. 321).

<sup>17</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin argues that 'a character zone is the field of action for a character's voice, encroaching in one way or another upon the author's voice'. 'Discourse', p. 320.

demonstrate intent to introduce ideas of sincerity and confession that promote collusion with Grace's confiding voice.

Atwood does not let readers lose sight of the fact that the reality of Grace's crime (or innocence) can never be known. It is largely Grace's diary voice that exemplifies doubt as the heart of the novel by reinforcing uncertainty with its deviancies and elisions or outright confession that what Grace narrates 'is not quite true' (p. 228). The only 'fact' which Atwood allows is that Grace's part in the murders can never be determined with any certainty; as Jordan comes to realise, 'what he wants is certainty, one way or the other; and that is precisely what she's withholding from him' (p. 375).

In Atwood's novel, a fundamental commitment to doubt prohibits her from fully representing a confession or denial from Grace (much as readers might hope for resolution or answers), so she presents her telling a story – a historically accurate and feasible life-story, but a story nevertheless. A private diary-style voice invites confidence in Grace as confiding narrator, but ultimate denial or frustration of intent does not answer readers' curiosity, only the larger purposes of Atwood's postmodern arguments. Abbott claims that a 'diarist's energy' promotes a 'reciprocal participating role of the text in the tale of its fictive author', but Grace's diary is reserved from a reciprocal role, as her energy is primarily devoted to self-protection and pious persuasion.<sup>19</sup> The diary is a metafictional device functioning as a form of soliloquy that allows Atwood to emphasise Grace's point: 'just because a thing is written down, [...] does not mean it is God's truth, I say' (p. 299).

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<sup>19</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 39.

## 1. Historical Accounts

*I die more often than many.*<sup>20</sup>

For her novel, Atwood draws on the story of an infamous double murder that took place in 1843 Toronto when a sixteen-year-old servant girl achieved widespread notoriety for her suspected part in the crime. Grace Marks and her fellow employee, James McDermott, were found guilty of the murder of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Grace and McDermott were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. However, Grace's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment because of her extreme youth. She served nearly thirty years in Kingston Penitentiary, Toronto and was pardoned in 1872. She was then transported to New York State and thereafter, no record of her life exists.

One nineteenth-century writer became a particularly authoritative commentator on Grace's story. Susanna Moodie was a pioneer author who recorded her impressions of Grace in her work *Life in the Clearings* (1853). Moodie first visited Grace in Kingston Penitentiary and later witnessed her short incarceration in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. Moodie's sensational accounts (reported from memory) are, however, deemed unreliable, and she is suspected of inflaming sensational interest in Grace. Atwood has a long critical relationship with Moodie that began with her publishing in 1970 a series of poems, entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and a later television play based on Moodie's reports of the murder. Revisiting Moodie's discrepancies provoked Atwood to write *Alias Grace* in 1996 and, for this research, she returned to the paper trail that documented Grace's story (earlier she had relied solely on Moodie's accounts). However, she found that the available information was partial and frustratingly contradictory.

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter', in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997). No page number.

Atwood acknowledges that her path to writing *Alias Grace* was paved by earlier encounters with Moodie's writing. For Atwood, Moodie was a critical immigrant and detached observer, a point noted by Moodie scholar and novelist, Carol Shields, who observes that 'Moodie is a Crusoe baffled by her own heated imagination, the dislocated immigrant who never fully accepts or rejects her adopted country'.<sup>21</sup> Moodie is nevertheless, as Faye Hammill points out, long established in the canon of Canadian literature. Hammill notes that Atwood's 'consciousness' of her own writing 'position in a Canadian tradition' and certainly Atwood's complex relationship with Moodie manifests itself in some of the tensions in *Alias Grace* as Atwood stakes a claim to visit, revisit, and cumulatively layer a revisioned Canadian history.<sup>22</sup> Moodie, according to Atwood, wrote books that 'purport[ed] to tell the plain truth', but this is more 'plainly' a bankrupt idea in postmodern times, when historical objectivity is seen as an impossible goal.<sup>23</sup>

Marie-Luise Kohlke believes that we should interrogate our knowledge of the Victorians and Atwood clearly does this by questioning Moodie as the source of her original understanding about Grace Marks.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, Atwood revisits earlier incarnations of Grace to write back not just to Moodie, whose inaccuracies and flights of imagination influenced all later commentary, but also to herself and the development of her own artistic voice. Atwood explains: 'as for Susanna herself, I suppose she was my youthful Ms. Hyde, and I was the Miss Jekyll through which she manifested herself – made of my anti-matter, a negative to my positive, or vice versa'.<sup>25</sup> It is evident that *Alias Grace* is, in part, Atwood's attempt to purge Moodie as the unruly Hyde who

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<sup>21</sup> Carol Shields, 'Afterword', Susanna Moodie's *Life in The Clearings Versus The Bush* (Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 1989 [1853]), p. 340.

<sup>22</sup> Faye Hammill, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "That Moodie Bitch"', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 29 (1999), 67-92 (pp. 68-69).

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction to *Roughing It in the Bush*', in *Curious Pursuits* (See Atwood, above), 71-94 (p. 76).

<sup>24</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), 1-18 (p. 13).

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Writing Susanna' <<http://www.owtoad.com/susanna.pdf>> [accessed 10 June 2008]

earlier influenced or threatened the coherence of Atwood the artist. Atwood's pastiche of Grace Marks's story pays what Ingeborg Hoesterey might term 'negative homage' to Moodie.<sup>26</sup> Moodie's role as unreliable witness and historian becomes part of the fabric of *Alias Grace*, as Atwood stitches a new story onto the old.

Moodie's unreliability is woven into Atwood's narrative by means of the fabricated red peonies that serve a symbolic and intertextual function throughout the novel. Atwood sustains an engagement with Moodie throughout *Alias Grace* by transforming Moodie's key misinterpretation or 'mishearing' of Grace's reported admission that Nancy Montgomery's 'bloodshot and blazing eyes' (p. 220) haunted her. Atwood transforms eyes to peonies (lies?) in her text and these flourish as unwelcome weeds in Grace's carefully tended diary narrative. The peonies symbolise Atwood's implicit intertext with Moodie's sensational account, reminding the reader that history is verbalised, misinterpreted, subjective, and, in Atwood's case, explicitly revisioned as fiction.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. Authorial Intention and Diary Form

*It shows how little they know  
about vanishing: I have  
my ways of getting through.*<sup>28</sup>

Atwood is keen to deny any hierarchal legitimacy for historical documents that pertain to Grace's story. Yet a diary atmosphere tempts readers to suspect that Grace's confessional voice might eventually answer pressing questions concerning her guilt or innocence. Her detailed and seemingly veracious autobiographical account is undercut by disclaiming diary commentary, with potential for confession always undermined by

<sup>26</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> This agrees with Hayden White's denial of a 'naïve' view that regards narrative as a 'neutral "container" of historical fact'. *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University, 1999), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'A Bus Along St. Clair: December', in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997). No page number.

the postmodern deal Atwood strikes to destabilise historicity. Two voices, two world views, and two languages appear in *Alias Grace*: one of the nineteenth century, the other of Atwood's postmodern world, with her 'scepticism about absolutes' and authoritative questioning of historical accounts taking priority.<sup>29</sup> The present interrogates the past, not as event or reality, but as historiography, which is consequently undermined by Grace's diary persona, which raises questions, but is ultimately wedded to concealment and protection of her secrets.

Therefore, even as allusions to diary form promote ideas of confession and sincerity, they are frustrated by Atwood's prioritised allegiance to undermine writing, text, and historical documentation. Similarly, in Charles Palliser's epic neo-Victorian novel, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1991), the reading of Mary Huffam's pocket-book is frustratingly delayed and obfuscated. It lies at the centre of a complex narrative structure, and is, as Palliser explains, long awaited as 'the crucial text for resolving the mystery in his mother's account', but the vital pages are burned by John at his mother's request.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is absence that really lies at the centre of the reader's protracted search for meaning and resolution. As Palliser observes 'the linchpin of the whole novel is a gap, a dizzying void of exactly the kind that John constantly fears to find beneath his feet'.<sup>31</sup> John's frequent freefall into physical peril is replicated therefore by lack of the usual resolution and answers that would be provided in a Victorian novel. The diary, which might be expected in a nineteenth-century text to contain and reveal secrets, only frustrates and denies a traditional resolution for the novel. It is also clear that, to paraphrase Abbott, there can be no meaningful recovery of Grace with the craft of writing or personal documentation from within Atwood's melee

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<sup>29</sup> Anne Humpherys, 'The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Bratlinger and William B. Thesing (London: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 442-57 (p. 447).

<sup>30</sup> The book lies, as Palliser explains, 'at the literal centre of the novel – the middle of the middle section of the middle Chapter of the middle Book of the middle Part'. 'Author's Afterword', to *The Quincunx*, p. 1214.

<sup>31</sup> Palliser, 'Author's Afterword' *The Quincunx*, p. 1214.

of competing texts: 'it's as if [she] never existed, because no trace of [her] remains' (p. 398). Unwritten, elusive, and irrecoverable, Grace is protected in a private zone, or perhaps more pressingly, Atwood protects *her* own authorial voice from textual complicity with the patched assembly of historical voices that write and rewrite Grace.

The dialogic nature of Grace's diary-like zone allows Atwood's critical commentary to be located (if we read as Martens suggests, 'carefully and suspiciously'), but this commentary is ultimately sequestered from reference to writing within the fictional world in order to carry Atwood's project to its inevitable aporetic conclusion.<sup>32</sup> Any mimetic document created within the fictional world would necessarily submit to the logic of the novel's interrogation and denial of textual authority. Thus the diary, voice-but-not-text – 'no marks' (p. 398) – effects a postmodern challenge without implicating Atwood in the instability of textual representation. Suggestions of a diary allow Atwood to debate the nature of writing; as Abbott observes, 'for the real writer, implicated behind the fictive one, diary fiction can be a writer's laboratory in which the chemical interchange between kinds of writing and kinds of being is exposed'.<sup>33</sup> Atwood's 'unwritten' diary proves an aphorism within a multi-voice plot: a concise statement that refracts her principle to subsume textual authority for a broader critical debate that examines how meaning is shaped or distorted by narrative processes.

Atwood therefore signals diary form only to diverge from notions of 'rules', which Martens argues any literary form can be seen to represent. Martens explains:

Readers expect an author who chooses a particularly literary form to stick to the rules and the rules in turn suggest more or less expedient ways of playing the game. If an author breaks the rules signalled by the form or makes peculiar moves, the reader's attention is alerted by the uncustomary procedure. The odd use of form demands an explanation. It acts as a signal to the reader to search for meaning. Within the context of a known formal structure, an irregular move can generate a meaning that is not explicitly stated.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Martens, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> Martens, pp. 194-95.



Atwood has manipulated autobiographical forms in other works. The conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for instance, reveals that Offred's dystopian account has all along been a secret diary, transcribed from cassette recordings; Iris Chase Griffen, the narrator of *The Blind Assassin* (2000), also begins her account as a form of diary, which turns out to be not her story at all. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood adheres to some of Martens's 'rules' for fictive diary writing – namely, a day-to-day time scheme and a first-person voice – but she breaks the rules by invoking diary association only to withhold the fiction of writing. This signals an 'odd use of form', which indeed demands explanation.<sup>35</sup>

Atwood has, in fact, critiqued how diary form works in fiction. She asks, 'for whom does the [diary] writer write?' and concludes that 'only very occasionally is the answer specifically *no-one*'.<sup>36</sup> Citing Hjalmar Söderberg's 1905 Swedish diary novel, *Dr Glas*, she suggests Dr Glas's claim that he writes for no-one is:

A likely story, and it *is* a likely story – we, the readers, believe it easily enough. But the truth – the real truth, the truth behind the illusion – is that the writing is not by Doctor Glas, and it's not addressed to no one. It's by Hjalmar Söderberg, and it's addressed to us.<sup>37</sup>

Söderberg's motifs and technique reappear in *Alias Grace* as further evidence that Atwood has borrowed a diary-style voice for Grace Marks. Intertextual connections with Söderberg's novel are evident in the theme and structure of *Alias Grace*: both novels have predominant themes of sex and death and feature a doctor who, in the grip of erotic fascination, contemplates a murderous act. Atwood observes that 'unanswered questions puncture [Söderberg's] diary text' and notes that collage-like snippets in Glas's diary text anticipate *Ulysses* and a stream-of-consciousness technique.<sup>38</sup> Atwood

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<sup>35</sup> Martens, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with The Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 126, original emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating*, p. 127, original emphasis. Söderberg's novel is the subject of two historical fiction revisions: Danny Abse's *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr. Glas* (2003) and Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius* (2008).

<sup>38</sup> Atwood, 'Introduction to *Doctor Glas*', in *Curious Pursuits* (see Atwood, above), pp. 257-61 (p. 260).

argues that Söderberg's use of disturbing dreams and sinister flowers anticipates the surrealists. Most specifically, she argues that Söderberg's motif of red roses reveals some of the interconnections in the text.<sup>39</sup> I will argue later that Atwood's red peonies serve a similar function, as Atwood adopts a modernist style within the diary to simulate an unrepresentable interior history.

Unanswered questions, disturbing dreams, and sinister flowers, together with emphasised text and stream-of-consciousness techniques, all reappear in *Alias Grace* and can be read as signs of heteroglossia in Atwood's novel. Atwood makes Grace's double-voicedness most apparent in her internal diary voice, where deliberate deviation permits, as Bakhtin suggests, 'another's inner speech to merge in an organic and structured way with a context belonging to the author'.<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin claims that the authorial hand is stylistically evidenced in the text with, for example, 'ellipsis, questions, exclamations', or as indicated in my introduction to this thesis, '*provocative questions from the author [...] with ironically debunking reservations*'.<sup>41</sup> Grace's diary exhibits such evidence with two voices that produce a questioning and continually countermanded account. For example, Grace wonders:

What is Dr. Jordan doing and when will he come back? Though what he is doing I think I have guessed. He is talking to people in Toronto, trying to find out if I am guilty; but he won't find it out that way. (p. 441)

And an extended question and lack of answers section suggests a possible but unresolved narrative:

Did he say, I saw you outside at night, in your nightgown in the moonlight? Did he say, who were you looking for? Was it a man? Did he say, I pay good wages but I want good service in return? Did he say, do not worry, I will not tell your mistress, it will be our secret? Did he say, You are a good girl?

He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep.  
[...]

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<sup>39</sup> Atwood, 'Introduction to *Doctor Glas*', p. 261.

<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin's examination of the work of Ivan Turgenev, significantly the author of *The Diary of A Superfluous Man* (1850), adduces 'examples of an intrusion of the emotional aspects of someone's else's speech into the syntactic system of authorial speech'. 'Discourse', p. 319.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse', p. 319, original emphasis.

Did I push him away? Did he say I will soon make you think better of me? Did he say I will tell you a secret if you promise to keep it? And if you do not, your life will not be worth a straw.

It might have happened. (p. 343)

By following Bakhtin's idea of tagged message from author to reader, it is also evident that italicised emphases might provide Martens's 'entrances into the text'. So we may ask: who, in fact, emphatically whispers, '*hush hush*,' or '*talk to me*', or '*I live in Hope*'? (p. 344, original emphases): Grace or Atwood? Atwood's repeated return to Grace's past suggests that she lives in hope of surmising answers to her questions; failing this, the novel becomes her latest mediumistic attempt to circumvent Moodie's historical account and negotiate and re-negotiate her own understanding of the dead.<sup>42</sup>

Signs of dissembling within Grace's internal diary voice illuminate the crux of Atwood's postmodern position, as diary ideas effectively elevate Grace's/Atwood's views to become an authoritative but delegitimising voice. Abbott suggests that diary form provides 'an imitation of a drama of composition. The real author is implicated at one remove' and, he further claims, 'in diary fiction, one is encouraged by the form itself to let go of the perspective of the other. We are restricted to a document that emanates from *inside* the story'.<sup>43</sup> I argue that, set apart from an *outside* cultural alliance of gossip and psycho-babble, diary ideas voice Atwood amid Grace's slanted asides to clarify Atwood's multi-dialogic project from *inside* Grace's story.

Resonating with A. S. Byatt's claim that ventriloquism 'became necessary' when writing *Possession: A Romance* (1991) to bridge a 'gulf' that she perceives has opened between literary criticism and the texts it examines, Grace is supplied with 'speeches' that voice Atwood's critical position from a disguised source. Within Atwood's novel, Grace indeed likens her role to that of a ventriloquist's dummy:

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<sup>42</sup> This is a hypothesis that Atwood explains in her book of this title: 'to go to the land of the dead, to bring back to the land of the living someone who has gone there – it's a very deep human desire, and thought also to be very deeply forbidden. But life of a sort can be bestowed by writing'. *Negotiating*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>43</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 50; p. 24, original emphasis.

There are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their wooden doll. (p. 342)

This is, of course, a critical swipe at historical commentators, but I suggest that Atwood's views on doubling and the concept of 'the Author as severed part' are also illuminating in this respect. Her debate that the author is a 'slippery double' or 'disembodied hand', 'dexter and sinister' is echoed in Grace's dreams: 'I looked down at my own hands, and I saw that there were two of them, on their wrists, coming out of the sleeves as usual, and I knew that this *third hand* must belong to some other woman' (p.115, my emphasis).<sup>44</sup> Who might this 'other woman' be? As Grace hints at daily writing, Atwood also perhaps admits that her spectral authorial hand controls the narrative and hints that her character's 'quasi-direct speech' is always a transmission regulated by the author.<sup>45</sup> Moodie may have claimed to write an 'eye witness' or first-hand account, but, her report, according to Atwood, was 'third-hand' (Author's Afterword, p. 538). Atwood now displaces Moodie to actively acknowledge her 'third-hand' reclamation of Grace's story as postmodern narrative territory.

New Historicists argue that textual production always involves sequential 'hands', as event is processed into historiography.<sup>46</sup> *Alias Grace* illustrates this process by exploring how Grace is first 'read' and written through a lens of Moodie's nineteenth-century ideology and now re-produced in novel form as Atwood's postmodern vision. Diary form's particular affinity with ideas of heteroglossia highlights inevitable distortions that arise as reality is transformed into writing. Significantly, Atwood does not suggest that her interpretation and writing is 'fourth-hand' or sequential to Moodie; rather, the metafictional arguments of the novel broadcast *Alias Grace* from the same ontological platform as Moodie.

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<sup>44</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating*, pp. 36-8.

<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse', p. 320.

<sup>46</sup> See Hayden White, *Figural Realism* for a discussion on the relations between literary discourse and historical discourse.

This prompts a return to Atwood's identification of Moodie as the criminal Hyde to her Jekyll and raises the question, what exactly is Moodie's crime that makes her so monstrous a double? *Alias Grace* answers this question by explicitly admitting Atwood's narrative to be 'third-hand', in contrast to Moodie, who, in Atwood's view, frames writing dishonestly. Moodie is thus tried and sentenced by Atwood for the 'crime' of textual misrepresentation, and *Alias Grace* becomes the vehicle that allows Atwood to redress Moodie's influence on her own earlier, self-confessed 'naïve' artistic project. Simultaneously, Atwood claims an enlightened plane of figurative and metaphorical integrity for her evolved writing as she recognises and performs a metafictional unreliability.

Grace's hands reflect the ambiguity of her status as guilty or innocent. They appear complicit in her demure performance – 'I have my hands folded in my lap the proper way' (p. 23) – and later appear 'washed as white as snow' (p. 75). But their potential as the strangling hands of a murderess inescapably haunts the text with the knowledge that 'on the palm of [her] hand there's a disaster' (p. 345). DuPont, in his previous incarnation as the peddler Jeremiah (a shape-shifting trickster who succeeds in fooling nearly all Grace's commentators), examines them to read her (mis)fortune and his verdict of 'sharp rocks ahead' (p. 179) foreshadows later events.

### 3. Unreliable Diary Performance

*I said I created  
myself, and these  
frames, commas, calendars  
that enclose me.*<sup>47</sup>

Grace's diary space diversifies performativity and unreliability in the novel. Most fictional diarists are unreliable first-person narrators. This is the norm. But Atwood

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<sup>47</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Solipsism While Dying', in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997). No page number.

reveals multi-layers of fallibility that emphasise the metaphysical heart of her project as an examination of wholesale textual unreliability. We read Grace knowingly (unlike Sarah Waters's Margaret Prior) reading herself in the texts and reading responses of others within her diary space to comment, 'a lot of it is lies. They said in the newspapers that I was illiterate, but I could read some even then' (p. 30). Contradictory readings of Grace are incorporated, addressed, and ultimately undermined as subjective and unstable interpretations. Grace's diary thus refracts unreliable historical accounts that compete for meaning in the novel, but also demonstrates *her* unreliability within and without the diary frame. In addition, dreams and hallucinations penetrate the diary space (possibly unbidden) to introduce a more covert and complex unreliability that breaches private diary boundaries.

Unreliability, as Ansgar Nünning points out, reintroduces the notion of authorial intention. He explains:

Rhetorical approaches to narrative remind us that the projection of an unreliable narrator, far from being hit or miss, presupposes the existence of a creative agent who furnishes the text and the narrator with a wide range of explicit signals and inference invitations in order to draw readers' attention to a narrator's unwitting self-exposure and unreliability.<sup>48</sup>

Thus reading Grace's private diary illuminates her duality and, with careful and duplicitous reading, readers may respond to 'signals and inference' to overhear a heteroglossic authorial commentary amid Grace's performance. Atwood quotes Northrop Frye: 'the reader does not hear, he overhears'.<sup>49</sup> We 'overhear' – hear a person speak without his/her knowledge – what is whispered between the lines: the character communicates one intention, but the author can slip another to be 'overheard' by a close listener (reader). Atwood argues that overhearing is an inherent part of the story-telling process, as 'we listen before we can read. [...] An overhearing of things we aren't

<sup>48</sup> Ansgar F. Nünning, 'Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (London: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 89-107 (p. 104).

<sup>49</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating*, p. 126.

supposed to hear'; we 'patch together for ourselves an order of events, a plot or plots'.<sup>50</sup> This creative process of overhearing is acutely contrasted with Moodie's careless (or deliberate) *mishearing* and consequent misrepresentation or 'overblown rendition' (p. 357) of event as factual.

Before Jordan's arrival, Grace has been largely compelled to silence and become consequently 'skilled at overhearing' (p. 6), much as Selina Dawes has mastered the gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999). This skill allows her to 'read' herself in the response of others and she continually responds to circumstances that call 'for a different arrangement of the face' (p. 513). Ann Gaylin argues that 'eavesdropping is an act of interpretation' and, as a performer, Grace has learned 'to keep [her] face still' (p. 29) before choosing an appropriate response to perform.<sup>51</sup> However, a tone of defiance enters her diary space to belie the humble, repentant, or sometimes 'stupid look' (p. 45) that she practises for public display. In this respect, as an undisguised, deliberately unreliable narrator, Grace models how she should be read, with dramatic irony revealing one meaning shackled to another.

Initially, Grace takes a (stereo)typical diaristic opportunity to address the contradictory publicised versions of her character that Atwood found so puzzling.<sup>52</sup> Like any self-reflexive diarist, she looks into a fortuitously available mirror and records her self-scrutiny:

Sometimes when I am dusting the mirror with the grapes I look at myself in it, although I know it is vanity. In the afternoon light of the parlour my skin is a pale mauve, like a faded bruise, and my teeth are greenish. I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a

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<sup>50</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction: Reading Blind', in *Curious Pursuits* (see Atwood, above), pp. 109-22 (p. 113).

<sup>51</sup> Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel: From Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Atwood says that 'all commentators agreed that Grace was uncommonly good-looking, but they could not agree on her height or the colour of her hair'. 'In search of *Alias Grace*', p. 226.

brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (p. 25)

Subject to the lurid gaze of the sensationalist press, Grace is unable to recognise herself and privately cannot reconcile her reflection with so many competing versions of her character. Martens claims that the ‘speaking self looks unto itself, as into a mirror, and portrays what it sees there, the subject of the utterance, in words’, but Grace does not muse on personal ideas of self, describing only an impressionistic view of skin and teeth colour, and instead portrays her constructed and contradictory public pluralities: multiple ‘utterances’ or narratives that collectively create a ‘celebrated murderess’ (p. 25).<sup>53</sup> This is similar to L. E. Usher’s *Then Came October* (2008), where another Victorian suspected murderess is accused of a split personality and tested by diary evidence; Edith Carew sees an alien and false persona in the mirror, a part to be performed: ‘Mrs Walter Hallowell Carew. How I admire her composure. But then she is composed, isn’t she – of layer upon layer of lies’.<sup>54</sup> Readers are similarly invited to look with Grace into the mirror, to see only a reflected, faceted face of notoriety, more layers of lies than any unified creation of Atwood’s. Without narrative confirmation or denial for readers, Grace could be any of the definitions reflected in the mirror, or indeed none of them.

Atwood suggests that diary form is itself ‘a reflecting surface, a mirror in which one sees oneself. It’s hard and impermeable, but easily shattered; and, from certain angles, it’s transparent’.<sup>55</sup> We might therefore expect the diary to provide some angle of ‘transparency’, but Grace provides only inescapable open-endedness and choices for

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<sup>53</sup> Martens, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> L. E. Usher, *Then Came October* (York: Harbour Books, 2008), p. 245.

<sup>55</sup> Atwood, ‘Introduction to *Doctor Glas*’, p. 259.



readers who peer over her shoulder into the diary/mirror. Grace's diary voice engages an either/or dialogue that remains unresolved to the very end of the novel, which raises Martens's point that 'a diary entry communicates an implicitly relative single opinion, and a fleeting opinion at that. [The diarist] can be as inconsistent as he wishes', or, as Jordan observes, 'knowledge of guilt, or else of innocence: either could be concealed' (p. 374).<sup>56</sup>

It is debatable whether Grace's diary voice is the disorderly double that undermines any autobiographical project or the reason and rationale for her performance. Grace, in fact, continually flags up performativity and deception with asides and comments that illustrate how she is always selecting, shaping and constructing her oral story. Grace explains that she has to 'think up things to say' (p. 79) to Dr. Jordan to add interest when her dictated story appears to be flagging, and that she might selectively 'go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour' (p. 410) to interest him. More explicitly, she confides as previously noted: 'this is not quite true' (p. 228); 'but what I say to him is different' (p. 113); 'I say I can't remember' (p. 116). These selection processes organise her oral story, but at times tensions between performativity and powerful, unwelcome memories create inconsistent energies that compete in Grace's underground account to threaten her control. At these points an unstable mix of reserve and emotion implodes to find release in the 'bold' (p. 173) voice of another – her alias – Mary Whitney.

This doubled voice finds expression outside the diary in a climatic scene of hypnosis which stages a 'revelation' that Grace is innocent. Here in an occasion 'reeling out of control' (p. 465), Jordan witnesses the 'voice' of Mary Whitney, claiming that she 'borrowed [...] for a time' Grace's 'earthly shell. Her fleshly garment' (p. 468). Yet it is apparent throughout Grace's diary asides that it is she who, in fact, borrows Mary's

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<sup>56</sup> Martens, p. 187.

voice to ventriloquise tensions that might belie a pious public performance. Throughout the novel, a variety of explanations are proffered for Grace's altered state of consciousness and attendant doubled voice: '*dédoublement*' is suggested by Jordan, '*double-consciousness*' (p. 471) by DuPont, while Verringer acknowledges '*auto-hypnotic somnambulism*' (p. 501), but speculates that two hundred years ago it would have been 'a clear case of possession' (p. 470).<sup>57</sup> Yet Grace's diary voice demonstrates that doubling, or necessary lies and evasions, are required to ensure that her public 'face' maintains an inscrutable self-possession.

Grace strives for restraint within the fictional world, as it is, of course, imperative to her petition for freedom that she proves her sanity. In this respect, Grace and *Affinity*'s Margaret Prior are similarly under pressure to control their emotions. As Sally Shuttleworth points out, in the nineteenth century, 'the test of sanity for women rests almost entirely in the realm of emotional restraint'.<sup>58</sup> In later times, temporary insanity would be encouraged as a mitigating plea in cases like that of noted classical scholar John Selby Watson, who bludgeoned his wife to death in 1872 after nearly thirty years of marriage. This crime is explored by Beryl Bainbridge's novel *Watson's Apology* (1985), which intercalates a range of documents to reconstruct events that led to what became known as the Stockwell Tragedy. Watson's commuted sentence relied on expert testimony of temporary insanity, but any chance of Grace's release depends on her demonstrating a sane and sustained command of herself; such control of herself and her story is revealed in her diary as laboured: 'it's not easy being quiet and good, it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when you've already fallen over; you don't seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength' (p. 6). Unexpectedly therefore, at times tensions rise to the surface, as Grace is compelled to voice opinions at odds with her outer performative modesty. At these pressure points,

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<sup>57</sup> Original emphases.

<sup>58</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 50.

she *allows* Mary ('a person of democratic views', p. 39) some space in the diary to voice what Grace herself resists expressing directly. I suggest that this is not symptomatic of relinquished conscious thought, but agency on Grace's part, as she reinforces her case for victimisation with Mary's support.

For example, Mary's voice graphically enhances Grace's diary discrediting of prosecuting 'witnesses'. Dr. Samuel Bannerling's condemnation of Grace is rigid and unwavering: he denigrates her as 'an accomplished actress and a most practised liar' (p. 81) and 'a devious dissembler' (p. 38). He actively rejects Reverend Enoch Verringer's plea that Grace is a 'poor woman' who should 'have an opportunity of meditating on the past, and of preparing for a future life' (p. 502). However, Bannerling's credibility is tested, as Grace explains he assaulted her: 'take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard, *Mary Whitney would have said*, but all I could say was Oh no, oh no' (p. 38, my emphasis). Grace may not have voiced a defence, just as Mary (a voiceless victim in her lifetime) could not defend herself, but now Grace invokes Mary as supporting witness to her own defence, conducted as diary soliloquy, and Bannerling joins the list of discredited witnesses.

Grace continues to demonstrate self-awareness of her public position by refracting and neutralising potentially damaging perceptions of herself through the medium of her diary. To paraphrase Bakhtin, her consciousness of self is constantly perceived against the background of others' consciousnesses and her words about herself are structured under the continuing influence of others' words about her.<sup>59</sup> For example, Atwood filters the prison keepers' voyeuristic and misogynistic crude commentary through Grace's diary perspective:

I like a bit of spirit in a woman, says the one, Or a whole bottleful says the other, gin leads to sin, God bless it, there's nothing like a little fuel to make the fire burn. Drunker the better says the one, and out stone cold is the best, then you don't have to listen to them, there's nothing worse than

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<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 207.

a squalling whore. Were you noisy Grace, says the other, Did you squeal and moan, did you wriggle underneath that swarthy little rat, looking at me to see what I'll say. Sometimes I say I won't have that kind of talk, which makes them laugh heartily, but as a rule I say nothing. (p. 73)

Thus Atwood demonstrates the predominant and distorting interest in Grace's sexuality to be salacious and prejudicial. Similarly, idle gossip is denigrated as Grace surreptitiously 'listens in' on Dora, the maid – 'full of gossip' (p. 443) – freely prattling about Jordan and Mrs Humphries. Grace surmises what defamatory commentary Dora might in turn report of her:

And I think to myself, if that is what she says about those she works for, behind their backs, then, Grace, what will she say of you? I catch her looking me over with her small pink eyes, and devising what sensational tales she will tell her friends if any, about taking her tea with a celebrated murderess, who ought by rights to have been strung up long since, and cut into slabs by the doctors, like butchers dressing a carcass, and what was left of me after they'd finished done up into a bundle, just like a suet pudding, and left to moulder in a dishonoured grave, with nothing growing on it but thistles and nettles. (p. 353)

This chanted litany of clichéd charges appears to be opportunistic sensationalising when Grace imagines Dora's 'untrustworthy' (p. 352) verdict and sentence. Atwood thus manages to address and undermine the influence of gossip and fabulation with the aid of Grace's collusive diary voice by re-orienting outside perspectives within a frame of Grace/Atwood's cynical perspective. As Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997) also illustrates, an embedded 'sideward glance', evident in Grace's satirical reports, disabuses outside commentators of empirical or factual power by demonstrating the influence of rumour and malice in the formation of their 'evidence'.

A more complex disempowerment is addressed by the Governor's wife's scrapbook. Here Grace reads text (and herself in that text) as part of a collected narrative of crimes, collated, pieced and patched to the Governor's wife's design. As one of his wife's 'accomplishments', Grace is permitted to assist in the Governor's household; however, any philanthropy towards her is undercut by the Governor's wife's penchant for the shocking and sensational. She likes to 'horrify her acquaintances' (p.

29) by displaying Grace as a living embodiment of her scrapbook collection of murderous criminals. Believing that she gauges Grace's response, the Governor's wife invites Grace to look at the scrapbook, but, as a regular eavesdropper on tea-party scandalising, Grace, in fact, astutely gauges the required re-arrangement of face and consequently offers an appropriately contrite response:

She showed the scrapbook to me herself, I suppose she wanted to see what I would do; but I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears and was now a changed person. (p. 29)

A representative selection of external views upon Grace is therefore refracted through Grace's internal diary. In Bakhtinian terms, the anticipated responses of others are accordingly wedged in for Atwood's polemical blow that addresses and destabilises the historical record.<sup>60</sup> Grace's diary voice invites sympathy as public views are refracted through it and disabled by it to appear subjective hearsay and scandalous sensationalising. Similarly, Atwood devolves historical accounts of factual value and communicates her view that 'after all, the writers-down were, and are, human beings, and are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases'.<sup>61</sup>

Nünning argues that unreliability is not so much a character trait of a narrator as an interpretative strategy of the reader.<sup>62</sup> The diary, therefore, becomes vital for Atwood's postmodern agenda; not only does the device encourage faith in Grace's account, but Grace's self-confessed unreliability within the diary frame also emphasises classic postmodern debates of contingency and undecidability. Atwood exposes Grace as a consummate dissembler *within* the diary as well as outside the frame by manipulating a classic tendency for diarists to describe the room in which they write.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 214.

<sup>61</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 225.

<sup>62</sup> Nünning, p. 95.

<sup>63</sup> Abbott claims that a diarists will always 'at least once in the course of his entries, [... look] in the mirror and describes what he sees there'. *Diary Fiction*, p. 15.

Grace typically obliges, but her description illustrates a flexible relationship with diaristic veracity. She begins the entry to the chapter 'Fox and Geese', with the following information:

Today when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire. (p. 275)

Any commitment to a sincere diary voice might accept this as a faithful 'record' of her environment. However, Grace immediately undoes the romantic idealised scene to explain:

In fact I have no idea of what kind of a sunrise there was. In prison they make the windows high up, so you cannot climb out of them I suppose, but also so you cannot see out of them either, or at least not onto the outside world. (p. 275)

The prosaic, unaesthetic reality of her situation is 'a light without shape, coming in through the high-up and dirty grey windows, [...]. Just a swathe of daylight the same all the way through, like lard' (p. 275). Grace's revelation that she extends an embellishment of 'truth' within her diary frame demonstrates that she is a fantasist and storyteller *throughout* the novel. As a result, her private narrative begins to loosen generic ties to sincerity and authenticity and the diary's anchorage to veracity comes adrift.<sup>64</sup> Grace's creative distortion is emphasised as she proceeds to distort a well-known ditty, 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son', only to acknowledge that her version differs subtly from the received version:

I knew I'd remember it wrong [...] but I didn't see why I shouldn't make it come out in a better way; and as long as I told no one what was in my mind, there was no one to hold me to account, or correct me, just as there was no one to say that the real sunrise was nothing like the one I'd invented for myself. (p. 276)

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<sup>64</sup> Gillian Siddall suggests, 'since we take Grace's opening comments, cryptic though they be, at face value, [...] it is shocking to discover that we have been seduced by a narrative that Grace has fabricated for her own purposes. Yet, paradoxically, while this revelation at the end of the passage evokes in us a sense of betrayal, a sense of having been taken in by what we thought was a direct communication to us, it also invites us to be her confidante/e'. "'That Is What I Told Dr. Jordan ...': Public Constructions and Private Disruptions in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', in *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 81 (2004), 84-102 (pp. 92-93).

It becomes clear that, much as Grace later alters her quilt pattern (and the narrative of this) ‘a little to suit my own ideas’ (p. 533), she is not averse to tailoring and fabricating her private text if reality is unpleasant or unaesthetic, or simply, if it improves the story.<sup>65</sup> Reserving privacy ensures unreliability is something to be detected rather than advertised.

Grace’s diary can never be representative because, in conventional terms, she has no unified self to express. Saint or sinner? The question remains unanswered because questions of duality are not contested, but actively fostered by her ‘private’ voice. Such contradiction and performativity prompts a final mirror reference from Abbott: ‘does the diarist catch herself in her mirror or does she use it to put on her make-up?’<sup>66</sup> This is clearly an issue for Grace, as she creates and debates a range of potential public faces that she must adopt to satisfy or undo various expectations and assumptions of her character. It is within the space of her private diary voice that she (or Atwood) either come closest to unmasking performance, or paradoxically, demonstrate the extent of her painted disguise.

#### 4. Dream or Hallucination?

*In the dream I said  
I should have known  
anything planted here  
would come up blood.*<sup>67</sup>

Within the fictional world, questions of guilt or innocence depend on Grace’s conscious recollection of the murder as the only surviving witness. Atwood plays with reader response to these questions and employs the red peonies to suggest that both co-exist as

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<sup>65</sup> See Fiona Tolan, for a feminist discussion of striptease as the impulse to strip, expose, and deconstruct which she claims fetishises clothing, concealment and revelation as the novel’s alternative metaphor to patchwork. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 222-50.

<sup>66</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 47.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Atwood, ‘Dream 1’, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997). No page number.

possibilities between the lines of Grace's diary.<sup>68</sup> As the leitmotif of the novel, they appear as story/dream and their malevolent appearance is invariably linked to Grace's memory and sanity. They represent the intrusion of Moodie's historiography and repeatedly 'crop up' in Grace's accounts to demonstrate that anything new written about Grace will always be dogged or haunted by Moodie's words.

The peonies and their dream context escape the boundaries of Grace's private diary voice to dangerously infiltrate her public story. Grace's dream is, in fact, told in three different spaces in the novel. It appears in her autobiographical account, her private diary space, and also in the ambiguous narrative space that begins the novel. This space can be read as the opening diary section; it is dated 1851, some years before Jordan's arrival, yet it puzzlingly concludes with Grace stating, 'this is what I told Dr Jordan, when we came to that part of the story' (p. 7). Later, Grace again recounts the dream, but time has now fast-forwarded to 1859. 1851 is, however, significant as the year that Moodie visited the asylum and 'recognised the singular face of Grace Marks' to consequently evidence her 'eye-witness' report of Grace's insanity.<sup>69</sup> Kuisma Korhonen, revisiting Hayden White's history/literature debate, reiterates that 'historical time is, by definition, the time of writing, the time of written time and written documents'.<sup>70</sup> Jordan indeed notes that 'time is not running at its usual unvarying place: it makes odd lurches' (p. 339). Atwood's location of historical time for Grace's story is, not the time of the event, but the time of translation of event into writing and accordingly sees the first irruption of the peonies that become the informing metaphor of the novel.

The peonies are a fulcrum or axis in Atwood's novel where fiction and history

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<sup>68</sup> The peony is named after Paeon or Paeon, a student of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing. The rod of Asclepius is an ancient Greek symbol that consists of a serpent coiled around a staff.

<sup>69</sup> Susanna Moodie's *Life in The Clearing Versus The Bush* (Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 1989 [1853]), p. 271.

<sup>70</sup> Kuisma Korhonen, *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 9.



intersect. They focus the debate on fact and fiction and, as the primary metaphor of the diary narrative; they illustrate the crux of undecidability on which Grace's crime rests. The novel, in fact, begins with a ragged dream sequence featuring the peonies and it is this which ventures most closely to the murder itself or to Atwood's imagination of the event.

The flowers are metaphorically united with quilts and fabric in the text, as they always re-appear 'made of cloth' (p. 6). They symbolise the absent centre or text[ure] that lies at the heart of the hermeneutic struggle in the novel. Dark red, 'like satin' (p. 5), they are emblematic of a story that is both slippery and seductive. They bring to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which also features a nineteenth-century diarist languishing with her imagination and nightmare visions in a barred room guarded by a doctor. Gilman's delusional diarist believed she was freeing the 'creeping women' from behind the incomprehensible yellow wallpaper with its 'strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus'.<sup>71</sup> Is Grace similarly delusional when she resists 'the slow gardening that takes place in silence, with the red satin petals dripping down the wall' (p. 344)? Do the peonies endanger her bid for liberation as they drift their psychic petals into her carefully controlled story? Or do they simply remind us that all textual representation of Grace can only be fabricated into story? The answers to these questions are indeterminate. Furthermore, the aberrant peonies communicate the impossibility of Grace determining her own memories and truth, as 'the soil for [the peonies] is emptiness, it is empty space and silence' (p. 344). By extension Atwood employs metaphor to furnish the gaps that prompted her to *imagine* Grace's story. Empty space and silence feed Grace's fictive imagination, Atwood's novelistic imagination, and ultimately readers' imaginations.

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<sup>71</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (London: Virago, 1998), pp. 34-35.

The flowers feature in Grace's life history as she describes to Jordan her memories of arriving at the Kinnear residence. Reworked and distorted, the scene appears three times with slight linguistic changes. A dream version of the event opens the novel:

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. Nancy was cutting them. She wore a pale dress with pink rosebuds and a triple-flounced skirt, and a straw bonnet that hid her face. She carried a flat basket, to put the flowers in; she bent from the hips like a lady, holding her waist straight. When she heard us and turned to look, she put her hand up to her throat as if startled. (p. 5)

White discusses Freud's theories of dream recognition and explains how a self-censoring voice may be taken unawares.<sup>72</sup> This is substantiated in *Alias Grace*, as interpolated additions or subtractions subtly alter the original version of Grace's arrival at Kinnear's home.

I would suggest, however, that repetition amplifies the minor differences. Of course, the inconsistent accounts illustrate that story can never be recounted with mimetic exactness, but also, one particular variation provokes curiosity. The omission from the third version of: 'when she heard us' (p. 5) hints perhaps at some admission of guilt on Grace's part.<sup>73</sup> Grace acknowledges that Nancy was in fact startled at the sight of an unspecified 'us'. Is this Grace and Kinnear arriving at the farm, or has the constructed scene merged with a more sinister memory of murder? Does Nancy here turn and register a fearful response to Grace and McDermott's later murderous approach? In the first version, Nancy is physically present with 'hips' and 'waist'; she 'turn[s] to look' (p. 5, emphasis added); her face is hidden by a straw bonnet, absent in Grace's first version, but she is nevertheless present and aware. In the third version, however, Nancy only 'turned' and Grace, McDermott, and the crime (?) consequently disappear. Possible culpability is significantly eliminated from Grace's public story,

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<sup>72</sup> White, *Figural Realism*, p. 105.

<sup>73</sup> 'She was carrying a flat basket, to put the flowers in; and then she turned, and put her hand up to her throat as if startled' (p. 364).

which is always dictated with a shrewd eye towards her petition for release. Here, Grace tailors her dream as she earlier reframed the outlook from her prison window. Yet the private diary version admits and permits doubt.

The dream carries the burden of event and historiography throughout the novel and it is only in a dream state that Grace approaches her memories of the murders, much as Charles Dodgson in Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001) crosses a physical threshold with Alice in his dreams. However, a form of self-censorship, or what Freud terms, 'secondary revision', is demonstrated in Grace's altered accounts.<sup>74</sup> Interpolations and additions evidence censorship at work and a process of preference and selection that minimises disconnectedness in the dream. As White suggests,

This interpretation, addition, subtraction, or remoulding presupposes a certain psychic distance from the dream experience, and moreover, a heightened psychic consciousness, an interplay of the sleeping and the waking worlds, where the critical faculties of the dreamer are brought into play, and the dream features are refashioned in the service of such waking values as logical consistency, propriety, consistency, coherency, and the rest.<sup>75</sup>

The interpolations evident in Grace's repeated versions remodel the dream with a strategy that White claims seeks to remould it into something like a daydream. However, I will shortly suggest that daydreams signal a lapse for Grace which must be avoided if her performance is not to be compromised. This theory suggests that Grace tries to reform a more dangerous psychic dream state to protect herself from *her* memories, rather than to secure protection from the imprisoning actions of others.

Grace's diary voice may, therefore, speak with authority to outmanoeuvre those who with 'greedy pleasure' (p. 32) would peel back her protective layers in search of an 'authentic' confession, but her internal monologue remains always ambiguous and idiosyncratic. Within her private zone, Grace speaks mostly with a rational and controlled tone, but the narrative also disintegrates at times into a fragmented internal

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<sup>74</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1999 [1913]), p. 95.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Figural Realism*, p. 106.

monologue that ambiguously suggests a drift in and out of conscious recollection of the murders. It is uncertain whether Grace is dreaming or hallucinating within the diary frame, but it is clear that, as she approaches disturbing memories, any cautious narrative calculation fractures to spontaneously disrupt the diary's guarded façade. At these fracture points, the red peonies invariably blossom from underground to bruise her narrative self-control. I argue that, at these junctures, Atwood refracts her authorial frustration in the heteroglossic and disorderly flow of Grace's tumbled reserve.

The diary illustrates Bakhtin's "sideward glance" [that] manifests itself above all in two traits characteristic of the style: a certain halting quality to the speech and its interruption by reservations'.<sup>76</sup> This is evident in the macabre chapter, entitled 'Hearts and Gizzards', where Grace arrives at the point where she must recount events immediately preceding the murders. As her memory returns to the fateful day, Grace mentally resists the inevitable unfolding of events and the coherence of her diary voice begins to dislocate into fragmented paragraphs, distorted recollections, and an invading stream-of-consciousness style. Grace confronts fractured memories and debates: 'It might have happened'; 'He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep'. These are immediately followed by questions: 'Did she say?'; 'Did I let him do it?'; 'Oh no. Surely I did not say that' (p. 343). In this way, Grace's wealth of reservations, concessions, and loopholes deny coherence to emphasise inconsistencies in her diary account that reveal Atwood's hidden polemic to deny answers or resolution.

The physically stratified paragraphs in this diary section are bound together by the repetition of an ambiguous, short, closing sentence, 'I think I sleep' (pp. 344-45), which emphasises Grace's inability to determine whether her thoughts are memories or 'waking dreams' and the distinction between diary and public voice becomes increasingly imprecise and undecidable. As her recurrent dream or disruption of blood-

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<sup>76</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 205.

Sir. They said I was awake' (p. 365). Here it is implied that private dreams cannot threaten her sanity, but waking dreams are markers of hysteria or insanity that resulted previously in Grace's spatial shift from prison to asylum. Potentially therefore, if Grace's dreams can escape the privacy of the diary, they can threaten her petition for freedom. However, Jordan does not have the careful listening or intuitive reading skills that Grace practises; she notes the gulf in their communication: 'I try to put things as clearly as I can. It's as if he is deaf, and has not yet learnt to read lips' (p. 282). He is neither listening to her carefully nor reading her closely and continues to sideline the possibility of hallucinations, preferring to hark after a dream scenario that will allow his experimentation with proto-psychoanalytical theories. In this respect, Jordan's admission that 'he has never known much about flowers' (p. 70) protects Grace. The diary is closed to him and he fails to read metaphorical traces of its narrative in Grace's public voice.

A diary selfhood is created for Grace: one that she might have seen when she looked into the mirror, but chose consciously not to reveal. As Shuttleworth observes,

The condition of selfhood is dependent on having something to conceal: it is the very *disjunction* between inner and outer form which creates the self. The egoist who acts without self-consciousness is self-less. Awareness of an audience, and of one's ability to baffle their penetration, constitutes the essential basis of selfhood.<sup>78</sup>

By concealing knowledge – baffling an audience and frustrating its penetration – Grace actively preserves her 'self' from further deconstruction. In contrast, Dr. Simon Jordan blindly suffers from what Shuttleworth explains as the nineteenth century's 'new moral vice of egoism'.<sup>79</sup> Worse, *he* is put on trial for the twentieth/twenty-first-century vice of seeking absolute 'truths'. This necessitates that his delusions be ironically exposed and letter exchanges are crucial to demonstrate his expulsion from textual authority.

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<sup>78</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 38, original emphasis.

<sup>79</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 37.

## 5. Letters and Quilts

*I see now I see  
now I cannot see.*<sup>80</sup>

Appearing alongside Grace's diary-style voice, letters advertise a more conventional position in Atwood's eclectic pieced and patterned narrative. Grace's restriction to an abstract, diary-like space renders her largely exempt from agency within the novel's web of interrelated texts, but she does belatedly join the textual exchange to write just two letters. Dr. Simon Jordan, on the other hand, dominates epistolary exchange, as Atwood employs letters to challenge the 'powers of life and death' held by him as a member of 'the dark trio – the doctor, the judge, the executioner' (p. 94). He may be elevated, as Shuttleworth claims nineteenth-century medics were, to 'new eminence: the arbiter of normalcy, and licensed interpreter of the hidden secrets of individual and social life', but his personal correspondence reveals less than eminent familial, professional, and social relations, and some dark secrets of his own.<sup>81</sup>

Readers are invited to emulate Grace and 'overhear' Jordan's epistolary voice.

Atwood claims:

For the reader, the fictional exchange of letters among several individuals provides the delight of the secret agent listening in on a wire: letters have an immediacy that the past tense cannot provide, and the lies and manipulations of the characters can be caught *in flagrante delicto*. Or this is the idea.<sup>82</sup>

Insight into various letter exchanges that involve Jordan, either directly or indirectly, undermines his scientific integrity; his private correspondence reveals flaws and contradictions. A picture emerges that destabilises the professional mask, which he (not always successfully) endeavours to present to Grace. Epistolary dialogics, evident within letters and extended to extra-diegetic addressees, demonstrate a fallibility that

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<sup>80</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Resurrection', in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997). No page number.

<sup>81</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating*, pp. 129-30, original emphasis.

weakens Atwood's fictional representative of the empiric science that categorised Grace.

As a fictional addition to Atwood's collected historical commentators, Jordan is, at least initially, unequivocally affiliated with documentary power relations in the novel. It is certainly evident that letter writers in Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* and Waters's *Affinity* have more agency than the diarists. Considering fictional letter-writing in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48), Terry Eagleton argues that 'to "correspond" is to implicate a set of political questions: Who may write to whom, under what conditions? What parts may be cited to another, and which must be suppressed? Who has the authority to edit, censor, mediate, commentate?'.<sup>83</sup> Ostensibly, Jordan has the authority to do all these things. Letters to his peer, Dr. Edward Murchie, detail ambition, goals, and objectives, which are at first communicated with bold and confident agency, despite privately expressed doubts.<sup>84</sup> Drawing on Michel Foucault, Shuttleworth claims that the 'gaze of the clinician' was one of 'active agency' and Jordan reveals plans for such agency: he will 'probe down below the threshold of [Grace's] consciousness' (p. 153) and, despite understanding that she will 'be a very hard nut to crack' (p. 61), he will try to 'open her up like an oyster' (p. 153).<sup>85</sup> However, his plans are doomed to fail (much like his associative word games), because Grace is a puzzle that he cannot solve: he cannot assemble the pieces to create the narrative he wants. Grace may concede that his questioning and writing produce in her 'a feeling like being torn open; [...] like a peach' that is 'too ripe and splitting open of its own accord' (p. 79), but just as her diary has an impenetrable inner core that protects her secrets, the heart of the peach reveals, not the fleshly secrets Jordan desires, but 'a stone' (p. 79) that will not yield to his interrogative penetration.

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<sup>83</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 50.

<sup>84</sup> 'He feels none of the jaunty hopefulness he has just expressed [to Murchie]. Instead he is uneasy, and more than a little dispirited' (p. 63).

<sup>85</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 40.

Jordan is dazzled by the prospect of writing his own book, yet this ambition is overwhelmed by an increasingly immediate desire to see Grace proven innocent: 'the difficulty is that he wants to be convinced. He wants her to be Amina. He wants her to be vindicated' (p. 374). To this end, he leaves behind his own theories and puts faith in the 'evidence' of his own eyes witnessing Grace's 'possession' by Mary Whitney's spirit. Disregarding earlier doubts that Jerome DuPont has the 'intense gaze of a professional charlatan' (p. 95), Jordan adapts and shapes DuPont's diagnosis to 'bridge' or suit his own covetous agenda. He is thus unequivocally affiliated with historical commentators who subjectively created Grace as a mass of self-serving contradictions: demon, siren, or, for others, an innocent victim.

While Grace is allocated her private textual space, a combination of third-person voices and omniscient narration constructs her interrogator. Grace's diary may protect her within and without the fictional world, but Jordan's letters expose him to dramatic irony and reader scrutiny. Both have secrets they wish to conceal and Grace's diary voice is complicit with concealment, but Jordan's epistolary exchanges are self-deceiving and therefore revelatory of his private character. It becomes clear that, just as confusion and uncertainty invaded Grace's diary, they also infect Jordan's letters, which submit to 'brain-sick ramblings' (p. 490). His story begins to elide with Grace's dream-state confusion and any claim to authority consequently disintegrates.

Jordan's last letter in the novel follows Grace's position of uncertainty and contradiction, as he explains his own 'present tumultuous and morbid mental state' (p. 491) to Murchie. Echoing Grace, Jordan explains that he is now troubled by disturbing dreams or hallucinations, and can at times hardly distinguish whether he 'was awake or asleep' (p. 490). This 'grey area' of consciousness allowed fact and fiction to co-exist as possibilities in Grace's diary and concomitantly bestowed on her the benefit of doubt, but doubt only discombobulates Jordan's authority, both medical and epistolary.



His disintegrating self-control dissipates the slender boundaries that separate doctor and patient. He begins to falter, ‘as if she is drawing the energy out of him’ (p. 38) and ultimately this dissolution permeates his letters to illustrate a messy fall from empiric grace. As the rational and the mystical begin to converge, Jordan’s letters concede ‘a wild goose chase, or a fruitless pursuit of shadows’ (p. 490). His infatuation with Grace deludes him to privately imagine her as his only potential wife. He rejects this as ‘madness, of course; a perverse fantasy, to marry a suspected murderess’ (p. 453). With his scientific objectivity so comprehensively demolished, it is clear that any information that might disrupt his preferred narrative will either be discarded or (most certainly) sidelined. His consequent yearning to put faith in ‘mystical voices’ (p. 473) that might exonerate Grace cannot be reported as this would only discredit him in scientific circles. Ultimately, he is, therefore, left in the same position as Grace – with a text that can never be *written*. He confesses to Murchie that he cannot determine whether he has been,

An unwitting dupe, or what is worse, a self-deluded fool; but even these doubts may be an illusion, and I may all along have been dealing with a woman so transparently innocent that in my over-subtlety I did not have the wit to recognise it. I must admit – but only to you – that I have come very close to nervous exhaustion over this matter. *Not to know* – to snatch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalising whispers – it is bad as being haunted. (p. 490, original emphasis)

He is, in fact, unable to write any account of his experience at this stage, as he admits to Murchie: ‘I may tell you the whole story; although it seems to me at present less a story, than a troubled dream’ (p. 490). As Grace has earlier privately mused in her diary

When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (pp. 345-46)

Jordan’s experience cannot be organised as text because, as Grace’s diary demonstrated, dreams particularly resist transformation or reconstruction as linear and logical text.

Grace's 'diary' did allow her to communicate the symptoms of her trauma, but letters are less accommodating for this purpose. Yet parallels between Grace and Jordan are nevertheless stitched firmly together, as Atwood reinforces Grace's point that story belatedly follows experience and is perhaps only recoverable with a postmodern embrace of story.

Apart from Jordan's radical transformation, the remaining letter writers' positions are static at the close of the novel: Grace still protests her innocence and Verringer still champions it, just as Bannerling continues to assert her guilt. Jordan's intervention has had no discernible effect on their positions and Grace's release, some twelve years after Jordan's sudden departure, is also independent of any intervention on his part. He has been powerless within the novel and his ignominious exit from letter exchange is symptomatic of this. At this stage, he loses his textual voice to his mother, who, eager to advance her epistolary influence all along, now moves to assume letter-writing authority. In this respect, it becomes clear that epistolary voice is more easily usurped than diary voice. Jordan is disempowered by his mother, as she appoints herself his emissary. Jordan earlier noted that correspondence with his mother comprises 'lies and evasions on his side, and on hers, plottings and enticements' (p. 340) – a reversal of his relationship with Grace. However, his 'plottings and enticements' fail and his eventual loss of memory and sudden retreat from the realm of textual exchange allows the formidable Mrs Jordan to victoriously colonise his epistolary space.

Initially, Jordan's letters to his mother skirt an outright rejection of her proposed pattern for his life, which she cuts and shapes in her letters to accommodate *her* ideals and expectations. Mrs Jordan is critical, carping, disapproving, pious, dominating, and interfering, a meddling matchmaker who persists in recommending her chosen bride, Faith Cartwright, as 'a charming young woman, everything one might wish for, [...], which is worth so much more than flamboyant good looks' (p. 58). This plain and

potentially very satisfactory daughter-in-law leaves Dr. Jordan uninterested: ‘what does he care about Miss Faith Cartwright and her endless and infernal needlework?’ (p. 340). Faith’s ladylike stitching can never fascinate Dr. Jordan as Grace’s complexly stitched quilt patterns do. Yet, as he is blind to the metaphorical significance of flowers, he is also unable to fully understand the symbolic value of quilts. He fails to understand, for instance, that meaningful scraps of clothing piece memories together to form narratives. Grace allows and acknowledges *some* memories by stitching ‘keepsake’ (p. 534) scraps of cloth into her own quilt. Unable to participate fully in textual exchange, messages are nevertheless forwarded by Grace to an able and equipped ‘reader’ via this text[ured] medium.

Stitchcraft is thus an alternative mode of message delivery for Grace. But she does write two letters in the novel which, if not fully involving her in textual exchange, nevertheless demonstrate her entry into the writing arena. In her letters and her stitching, Grace ventures to piece stories about others, just as Atwood eavesdrops on the past to organise an (acknowledged) partial and incomplete reconstruction. Grace’s first letter, to Jordan, has her public face still firmly fixed as she tries to ascertain if he is continuing to petition for her release. Her second letter is a gossipy missive to her old friend Jeremiah and is more in keeping with her confiding diary persona. As she joins the letter writers of the novel, Grace appropriately reports hearsay or ‘idle gossip’ (p. 495) and Jordan’s sudden departure becomes the hot topic. Gaylin argues that ‘in the novel, eavesdropping figures the everyday experience of knowledge acquisition: partial, incomplete, imperfect. It represents our urge to make sense of the information and stories with which we are presented’.<sup>86</sup> Grace’s report of overhearing Dora’s version of events may contain elements of truth, but this is buried amid accumulated scandalous embroidering. Again, parallels with Grace’s situation are emphasised as Dora echoes

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<sup>86</sup> Gaylin, p. 9.

Moodie's sensationalising to detail Dr. Jordan's 'fearsome blazing eyes like a tiger's' (p. 494).

Grace sagely acknowledges that 'there are many who like to listen to a shocking tale' (p. 494) and Atwood thus turns the tables of gossip-mongering and resulting tall tales against the investigator himself, as stories of sexual violence and madness taint *his* reputation. Gaylin suggests that 'eavesdropping scenes therefore dramatise the ways in which identity is shaped by forces of rumour, innuendo, suggestion, and discussion'.<sup>87</sup> Now these forces deem Jordan a sexual aggressor, under suspicion of making 'improper advances' (p. 494) to Grace, while she shifts epistolary space to join the ranks of letter writers who report and debate a suspect's guilt or innocence. However, privacy is a privilege still denied to her, rendering any authentic response impossible, because 'any letter I might have they would be sure to open' (pp. 495-96).

Grace may not receive letters that address her situation with authenticity, but she does receive an alternative 'missive' from Jeremiah:

I received a bone button, addressed to me though with no signature, and the Matron said, Grace, why would anyone send you a single button? And I said I did not know. [...] I felt it must be you, to let me know I was not altogether forgotten. Perhaps there was another message in it also, as a button is for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them; and you may have been telling me to keep silent, about certain things we both know of. (p. 496)

Here is a message, not written, but communicated by an object of symbolic significance to Grace. Unlike the 'item[s]' (p. 281) that Jordan fruitlessly paraded before Grace, a button, with its needlecraft associations, proves an everyday item that can summon metonymically a narrative for Grace. As one button that *was* missing in Grace's autobiographical account, this message also enigmatically re-opens narrative for readers and re-awakens doubts about 'certain things' that must remain silent.<sup>88</sup> Just as a quilt

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<sup>87</sup> Gaylin, p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> See Jordan's comment (referred to earlier in this chapter), that in Grace's dictated account, 'every button and candle-end seems accounted for' (p. 215).

and Grace's doubled voice may be read in two ways, a button, as Grace points out, can do one of two things: open up a narrative or close it down.

As Jordan's and Grace's lives and stories become similarly patterned, it is progressively more significant that they construct, or piece together, a co-operative text in the sewing room. This environment sets the scene for Grace to weave or stitch the pieces of her story together. It is commonplace to liken writing to stitchcraft, with stories 'embroidered', tales 'spun', and narrators weaving, as Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'. Much is consequently made of the quilting metaphor as a structural and controlling intertext for *Alias Grace* in various critical responses to the novel. Most commentators focus on quilting as a 'cultural expression of women's work'.<sup>89</sup> Michael acknowledges that a resurgent interest and radical reassessment of the quilt as art was concomitant with the advent of the women's movement in the 1970s.<sup>90</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson argues that quilt titles and patterns in *Alias Grace* function as postmodern metafiction, a view supported by Jennifer Murray, and Earl G. Ingersoll explores how this metafictionality can be read as gendered.<sup>91</sup> What is significant for this discussion is that quilting and diary writing are long considered traditional female domestic activities and both are patterned forms constructed from assembled components which, when 'stitched' together, enable fragments to be pieced as a whole narrative. As Grace collates scraps of fabric to order and recall memories and fragmented experience, Atwood pieces the patchy textual information she found in order to rework her version of Grace Marks's story.

Scraps or patchwork, whether text or textile, must be bound together within some frame. This is achieved in the novel when Grace's various voices seamlessly

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<sup>89</sup> Earl G. Ingersoll, 'Engendering Metafiction: Textuality and Closure in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 31 (2001), 385-401.

<sup>90</sup> Michael, 'Rethinking History', p. 426.

<sup>91</sup> Sharon R. Wilson, 'Quilting as Narrative Art: Metafictional Construction in *Alias Grace*', in *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. by Sharon Rose Wilson (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 121-34; Jennifer Murray, 'Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 26 (2001), 65-83.

become one, as she assumes sole narrative control to conclude the narrative. By the close of the novel, to all intents and purposes, Grace's private and public voices become indistinguishable as diary, letters, and autobiography merge to relinquish generic integrity to Atwood's larger narrative project. Following her release, Grace extends the unwritten diary paradigm by admitting that she continues to write 'many letters' (p. 511) to Dr. Jordan in her head. He may have abruptly left the scene, but Grace continues to address her life-story to him in a letter-style with attendant diary-like asides unified in one account, which is ambiguously private and yet potentially public. She still requires an audience for a new and final act of performance that sees her draw all her modes of address together:

I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued. And so I tried. It was very strange to realise that I would not be a celebrated murderess any more, but seen perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly, or at least for too long a time, an object of pity rather than of horror and fear. It took me some days to get used to the idea; indeed, I am not quite used to it yet. It calls for a different arrangement of the face. (p. 513)

A new face or performance merges epistolary address, private diary confession, and oral life-history in service to Atwood's story-telling. It could be argued that Grace's diary voice absorbs her letter-writing and autobiographical voice, or, alternatively, that the private becomes part of a letter that, in true postmodern fashion, can never be delivered.

## **Conclusion**

*Alias Grace* explores the problems of processing event into story. Both Grace and Jordan face insurmountable hurdles when they try to recover and recount personal events. Memory is radically destabilised as both are said to suffer from some form of amnesia and the frailties and failings of memory to recollect events (particularly trauma) are therefore shown to be impossibly disjointed to the point of incomprehensible recall. Consequently, fragmented memories are shored-up with story but, as White points out,

‘stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found’, and as such they can only be true in a metaphorical sense.<sup>92</sup> White’s question whether this is ‘true enough’ is apparently answered in the affirmative for Atwood.<sup>93</sup> Within a framework of competing meanings, Atwood equates Moodie’s historiography and her novel as one ontological order. *Alias Grace* is a counter discourse that effectively exonerates Atwood from Moodie’s early influence, which Atwood perceived to be ruinously Hyde/hiding within her earlier writing.

Consequently, despite being subject to Roger Cardinal’s ‘diary impulse’, Grace debates only secretiveness and dissembling in her private voice.<sup>94</sup> Her magisterial open-ended diary statement, ‘it might have happened’ (p. 343), illustrates the possibilities for reworking events and the inevitable circling back to imagination and story. Atwood observes that multiple stories have been told about Grace and ‘for each story, there was a teller, but – as is true of all stories – there was also an audience; both were influenced by received climates of opinion’.<sup>95</sup> A postmodern ‘climate’ of critical opinion now invites readers to embrace a narrative of multiple truths and plurality of voices because, as Atwood points out, ‘the true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma’. Questions of guilt or innocence must thus persist.<sup>96</sup>

Therefore, division and duality structure Atwood’s novel, with suggestions of guilt *and* innocence patterning Grace’s ‘confessional’ diary narrative. Both positions flicker between the lines. Just as a quilt can be viewed in two ways, (as Grace notes to Jordan: ‘you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light’ [p. 187]), Grace’s diary offers two positions and reading one shifts the second narrative possibilities into shadow. Grace is therefore read oppositionally by either

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<sup>92</sup> White, *Figurative Realism*, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> White, *Figurative Realism*, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> Roger Cardinal, ‘Unlocking the Diary’, *Comparative Criticism*, 12 (1990), 71-87 (p. 71).

<sup>95</sup> Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 227.

<sup>96</sup> Atwood, ‘Author’s Afterword’ to *Alias Grace*, p. 539

concentrating on the pattern created by the light (innocent) pieces, or focussing on the dark (guilty) patches.

However, I have suggested in this chapter that diary form provides a third possible reading, which reveals Atwood's embedded critical address. Close examination locates a heteroglossic anti-interpretative commentary, which is 'stitched' into Grace's private diary. In this respect, it is significant that patchwork does not, in fact, become a quilt until it is layered and secured, either with button-ties, or more usually, discreet running stitches, which create a 'relief' palimpsestic pattern that overlays the piecing.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Atwood's critical commentary shadows Grace's multivalent story to throw into relief a carefully patched and patterned pastiche. Grace's diary voice may shadow and undermine her autobiographical story, but Atwood's voice shadows *this* to demonstrate that reality and story are mutually imprisoned in indeterminacy. The novel stages a contest of generic vying for the last word, but this is given to Grace, who absorbs letters/diary/autobiography in a multi-face[ted] and inconclusive conclusion. Ultimately, *Alias Grace* delivers an authorial message that will either satisfy a postmodern agenda or frustrate a historical one: 'nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved, either' (p. 451).

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<sup>97</sup> See Slavoj Žižek's book, *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* (2002) for an explanation of the Lacanian concept of *point de capiton* – a quilting or anchoring point that knots together signified and signifier.



red peonies emphasises, Grace's story is forever 'broken', with the jagged shards of memory resisting tidy reconstruction. Grace's questions are, I argue, akin to those that Atwood faced when she confronted the gaps, omissions, and mysteries of a non-unified historical account.

Grace is powerless to prevent her memories circling to this breaking point, just as Atwood's allegiance to indeterminacy renders her powerless to prevent her novel circling the event:

Soon it will be daybreak. Soon the day will break. I can't stop it from breaking the same way it always does, and then from lying there broken; always the same day, which comes round again like clockwork. It begins with the day before the day before, and then the day before, and then the day itself. A Saturday. The breaking day. The day the butcher comes. (p. 342)

Yet time and story '[keeps] going on, and it also goes round and around', always returning to the 'breaking day' (p. 342) in much the same way that all discourses about Lewis Carroll inevitably return to the 'golden afternoon' on the river as the genesis of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Similarly, Jackson's *The Underground Man* presents a diarist recording fragments of memory circling in uncanny returns and dream-like states to a past event that defines him (and the narrative) in ways not clearly understood. As Grace's recurrent 'dream' suggests, there is in fact only one day and only one story, but it has become splintered into incoherent facets that snag the seamless recall she lately exhibits to Dr. Jordan.

Grace's haunting memories and disturbing dreams threaten her sanity and narrative control. Her spell in the asylum was supposedly a result of 'bad dreams' (p. 365) that tormented her to the point where she became hysterical or, as Moodie reported, 'lighted up with the fire of insanity'.<sup>77</sup> Grace clearly informs Dr. Jordan that 'they put me away' (p. 365), not because she was suffering from bad dreams, but because she was in fact awake and hallucinating: 'they said they were not dreams at all,

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<sup>77</sup> Moodie, p. 271.

Chapter Four  
**Lewis Carroll and the Curious  
 Theatre of Modernity:**  
 Epistolary Pursuit in Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me*

*Having and holding, till  
 I imprint her fast  
 On the void at last  
 As the sun does whom he will  
 By the calotypist's skill.*

Robert Browning  
 'Mesmerism'<sup>1</sup>

*Hanging up looking glasses at odd corners.*

Virginia Woolf  
 'The Art of Biography'<sup>2</sup>

Examining how rumour and suspicion shape contemporary understanding of infamous Victorians is also the subject of Katie Roiphe's 2001 novel, *Still She Haunts Me*, which uses diary form to re-examine Lewis Carroll's now mythical relationship with his 'ideal child friend', Alice Liddell.<sup>3</sup> The novel – a pastiche or kaleidoscope vision of Carrollania – mediates a debate generated by Victorian secrets and retrospective suspicions. Examining Carroll's posthumous trial for crimes 'evidenced' by his mysteriously censored diary and his penchant for photographing children in what he termed 'their favourite state of nothing to wear', Roiphe imagines a diary that testifies for the prosecution and yet, paradoxically, also organises a mitigating plea for clemency and understanding. Ten embedded diary entries perform a type of narrative striptease, refracting popular elements of Carroll mythology to focus on flesh, voyeurism, and fetishism. Roiphe debates how contemporary commentators correlate photography – the 'black art' that produces 'the shadow made flesh' – with the mysteries surrounding

<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, *Poems by Robert Browning*, (Ipswich: The Boydell Press, 1973), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1942), p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> 'Letter to Alice (Liddell) Hargreaves, March 1, 1885', in *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, ed. by Morton N. Cohen (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 140. Carroll wrote: 'my mental picture is as vivid as ever, of one who was, through so many years, my ideal child-friend. I have had scores of child-friends since your time: but they have been quite a different thing'. Cohen, p. 140.

Carroll's mutilated or lost diaries.<sup>4</sup> This chapter therefore considers how fictional diary form conspires with the historically skewed gaze of the camera lens to interrogate revisionist ideas that trouble and taint the reputation of an iconic Victorian writer. Roiphe's fictional diary deflects charges of voyeurism with shadow readings that implicate modernity pruriently peering into a distant Victorian world.

Carroll provides a multi-faceted slice of the past – a medley of ingredients that invite postmodern play from contemporary pasticheurs. Like other writers, playwrights, and commentators, Roiphe rearranges fragments of text and images. Supplanting Alice's looking glass with the multiple inclined mirrors of a pasticheur's kaleidoscope, Roiphe assembles the scattered pieces of Carroll's life in a slightly altered pattern. Familiar tropes from the *Alice* stories – looking-glasses, tea parties, appetite and jam tarts, trials, dreams, mad hatters and white rabbits – are arbitrarily regrouped with Carroll's photographs and snippets of information raided from biographical, creative, and critical intertexts.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Rose argues that in pastiche 'the purity of the text gives way to the promiscuity of the inter-text and the distinction between originals and copies, hosts and parasites, "creative" texts and "critical" ones is eroded'.<sup>6</sup> Jumbling quotations from Carroll's actual letters with invented letter extracts, Roiphe's erodes and confuses distinction between originals and copies within and without a diary frame in order to deconstruct the elisions between art and life that characterise Carroll. Containing and redirecting sources and meanings in a deliberate style of 'ontological confusion' that Christian Gutleben claims is the hallmark of contemporary fiction, Roiphe deliberately

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<sup>4</sup> Katie Roiphe, *Still She Haunts Me* (London: Review, 2001), p. 9; p. 36. All other references to this text will be given parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> One critic suggests that 'in modern times, Lewis Carroll is behind only the Bible and Shakespeare in the number of times quotations from the Alice books appear in everyday published discourse'. Robert McCrum, 'Alice under the Magnifying Glass', *Observer*, 3 June 2001, section Observer Review, p. 18 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/jun/03/lewis Carroll>> [accessed 6 September 2009]. For a detailed introduction to the afterlife of *Alice*, see Kali Israiel, 'Asking Alice: Victorian and Other Alices in Contemporary Culture', in *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 252-87.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 226.

and playfully confuses invention and reality by colonising Carroll's riddling archival gaps with a re-imagined diary.<sup>7</sup>

Any incomplete archive invites speculation and creative colonisation of incomplete source materials. Carroll was a prolific diarist and letter writer, but covert censorship has generated gaps in his records that critics and writers have long laboured to fill. His remaining documents and surviving photographs are endlessly examined, reworked, and re-interpreted, but investigators perceive that they are continually thwarted by expurgated diaries and destroyed letters. Carroll's mythology is consequently a contentious critical network of debate, disagreement, supposition and speculation – in other words, a density of competing texts and meanings generated primarily by lost documents. As the original diary refuses to explain itself, or at least does not offer an explanation that satisfies scandalising supposition, commentators and critics combine Carroll's documents and fictions to create explanations and hypotheses that suit prescriptive agendas.

Roiphe extends the broken logic of these investigations for a fiction writer's response to an inviting and unresolved cultural breach. Spinning historical evidence into story, she clearly advertises her work with a subtitle: 'a novel of Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell', but tangles fact and fiction to blur and confuse the doubled myth of Carroll's muse and his fictional character in a narrative that Lucie Armitt observes 'tricks' us.<sup>8</sup> As a key narrative device, the diary forms a significant part of the novel's narrative artifice, affirmed by Dodgson himself: 'it was a tricky game, a diary. A completely and utterly private document that went to great lengths to explain itself to others' (p. 2). I suggest that ultimately in Roiphe's novel, the diary proves a form of

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Gutleben discusses the 'ontological confusion between invention and reality, fiction and history' evident in A. S. Byatt's *Possession. Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Armitt claims that 'an empathetic narrative structure has tricked us'. She argues that a 'bricolage effect of the competing narrative modes (fiction, biography, diary, letter) turns Roiphe's novel into a kind of literary scrapbook and, in the process, endows it with the authenticity of the souvenir'. Lucie Armitt, "'Stranger and Stranger": Alice and Dodgson in Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 15 (2004), 167-79 (p. 172; p. 169).

*reductio ad absurdum* – a device that illustrates the absurdity of untenable conclusions drawn from irredeemably absent documents.

Evoking Thomas Mallon’s observation that ‘the very word *diary* excites us with the promise of guilty secrets to be revealed’, Roiphe plays on expectations that Carroll’s censored diary entries would be confessional, secretive, confiding, and potentially guilty of suspected crimes of paedophilia.<sup>9</sup> However, despite revisioning a spectre of Carroll as ‘a stooped paradox [...] a sense of morality shattered by temptation’ (p. 167), Roiphe questions if he labours from a retrospective malaise suffered more acutely in contemporary times. Carroll, as Anne Clark points out, “‘collected” little girls’,<sup>10</sup> an appropriation that proves profoundly disturbing in today’s suspicious times, but, as Armitt notes, ‘ultimately, *Still She Haunts Me* interrogates the ghosts of our own society, Dodgson tak[es] shape in response to our fears’.<sup>11</sup> This viewpoint is shared by Will Brooker, who suggests that Roiphe’s story is ‘a late twentieth-century projection of attitudes towards the Alice–Carroll relationship; it has more to do with late twentieth-century conceptions of and expectations of these two figures than it does with social mores of the time’.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, sharp disjunctures between nineteenth- and late twentieth/twenty-first-century conceptions of childhood create a gulf of cultural misunderstandings – a critical chasm that Roiphe freely colonises.

Such tensions have divided commentators and a good deal of mud has been slung in two opposing critical camps. Leading scholar/biographer Morton N. Cohen claims, for instance, that revisionist Karoline Leach ‘builds her case on conjecture and surmise – and sometimes plain untruth’.<sup>13</sup> Leach counters that Cohen has a ‘curious

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One’s Own: People and Their Diaries* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p. 247, original emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Clark, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: J. M. Dent, 1979), p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Armitt, p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> Will Brooker, *Alice’s Adventures: Lewis Carroll in Popular Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> Morton N. Cohen, ‘When Love was Young: Failed Apologists for the Sexuality of Lewis Carroll’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 September 2004 <<http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25360-1908239,00.html>> [accessed 1 August 2009]

determination to portray Dodgson as a rigidly controlled sexual deviant'.<sup>14</sup> Renowned for courting anti-feminist controversy, Roiphe has written on such sensitive issues as date rape and AIDS; in this novel, she again risks censure by examining Carroll's relationship with his 'ideal child friend' to probe views that didactically brand him a paedophile or oppositionally sanctify him as the 'pure, white-haired reverend'.<sup>15</sup>

Broadly situated in Cohen's camp, Roiphe subscribes to his view that Carroll

sought to live a respectable life and succeeded. His stern rules of thought and behaviour insured rectitude even with his child friends. He convinced himself that his interest in these dryads was purely social, aesthetic, and spiritual, and if we see a hidden sexual force as well, we know, too, that he effectively suppressed it.<sup>16</sup>

Roiphe obviously does 'see' a hidden sexual force, but she slightly adjusts Cohen's view to controversially interpret radiance in Carroll's desire for Alice and exaggerate 'nobility' in his self-restraint. In novel form, Roiphe evidences an enduring interest in what she terms in her later work, *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939* (2007), 'wild unsensible [*sic*] emotion', exploring ways in which these are ordered and subdued with rationality and politics.<sup>17</sup> An interest in the 'clash between our more conventional longings and our rogue desires [...] fit together', she admits, as her 'obsessions'.<sup>18</sup> The private diary proves an appropriate vehicle for Roiphe's imagined emotional excess, as the form's well-known affinity with a sentimental and tormented confessional voice readily rehearses claims to readers' sympathy in a self-justifying and ultimately self-serving document.

Aesthetics of desire rinsed with self-restraint consequently pattern Roiphe's invented diary entries as she affiliates herself with those who acknowledge anxieties surrounding Carroll's child friendships, but choose to valorise his morality by

<sup>14</sup> Karoline Leach, *In the Shadow of The Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll* (London: Peter Owen, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Katie Roiphe, *Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century's End* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997). Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 530.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Rachel Egelman, 'Interview with Katie Roiphe', *Bookreporter.com*, 29 June 2007 <<http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-roiphe-katie.asp>> [accessed 18 April 2010]

<sup>18</sup> Egelman.

emphasising robust self-control and confessed yet contained desire. Beguiled by ideas of desire itself, Roiphe exonerates Carroll by dressing his relationship with his muse within affective language, describing ‘exquisite, melancholy [...] beautiful photographs’ and arguing for a ‘love’ that is ‘delicate and tortured and elusive; [...] intricate and complicated’.<sup>19</sup> Suggesting an attachment to what Charles Palliser calls ‘the exoticism of the past – fascinatingly similar and yet intriguingly different from our own period’,<sup>20</sup> Roiphe (like Byatt) reveals *her* desire to sympathise with and exoticise the past as some form of nostalgia, which needs explaining. As Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*,

This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. [...] The realisation of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire.<sup>21</sup>

Carroll’s perceived absence and the partial nature of his documents perpetually frustrate closure and generate mechanisms of ‘desire for desire’ that Roiphe plays out as diary confession.

Diary ideas therefore provide both a pattern piece in the Carroll myth and a narrative strategy in *Still She Haunts Me*. Roiphe incorporates diary ideas for a usual horizon of generic expectations and also evokes the cultural commentary that is peculiar to Carroll as a diarist. If the norm of diary fiction is, as Andrew Hassam suggests, associated with the word ‘diary’ rather than drawn from diary practice, then Roiphe marries general, generic expectations with more specific diary associations associated with the name or myth of ‘Lewis Carroll’.<sup>22</sup> In *Still She Haunts Me*, diary transparency – always an illusion in fiction – becomes an opaque and densely layered construct that

<sup>19</sup> Katie Roiphe, ‘Just Good Friends?’, *Guardian*, 29 October 2001, section G2, p. 8 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/29/gender.uk>> [accessed 12 June 2007]

<sup>20</sup> Charles Palliser, ‘Author’s Afterword’, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 1208.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Hassam, *Writing and Reality: A Study of Modern British Diary Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), p. 18.

thinly disguises Roiphe's point of view – her desire for desire – in diary heteroglossia. (At this juncture, I must make the point that for clarity, this chapter will henceforth refer to the historical personage as Carroll and Roiphe's fictional character as Dodgson). Roiphe's fictional character Dodgson's diary entries rework nonsense and riddles in self-reflexive rituals of confession to evidence H. Porter Abbott's suggestion that: 'for the real writer, implicated behind the fictive one, diary fiction can be a writer's laboratory in which the chemical interchange between kinds of writing and kinds of being is exposed'.<sup>23</sup>

This chapter examines Roiphe's interest in the kinds of writing – biographical, critical, and creative – that produce ceaseless speculation and diverse interpretation of Carroll's relationship with Alice Liddell.<sup>24</sup> Roiphe's pastiche of Carroll's artistry is refracted to expose Dodgson observing and confessing his desire for Alice using the languages of fiction, verse, and photographs. Roiphe therefore tests interpretations of Carroll within diary entries that imagine Dodgson's 'private drama of self-awareness' refracted through creative and critical agency.<sup>25</sup> This chapter will therefore first outline the myths that organise contemporary understanding of Carroll and his fractured archive before considering how Roiphe reviews the infamous river picnic as historical event and genesis of the *Alice* books. I then consider how Roiphe imagines Dodgson's fleshly appetite through dreams and fantasies of Alice before moving to examine the ways in which Carroll's photographs are interpreted through a contemporary critical lens that correlates diary gaps with controversial images. Finally, I conclude with a postscript addressing the novel's condensing of outside critical exchanges and debates to one

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<sup>23</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 159.

<sup>24</sup> Armitt argues that a 'bricolage effect of the competing narrative modes (fiction, biography, diary, letter) turns Roiphe's novel into a kind of literary scrapbook and, in the process, endows it with the authenticity of the souvenir'. Armitt, p. 169.

<sup>25</sup> H. Porter Abbott, 'Letters to the Self: The Cloistered Writer in Nonretrospective Fiction', *PMLA*, 95 (1980), 23-41 (p. 23).



representative voice: Mrs Liddell, who as empowered letter-writer authoritatively eclipses Dodgson's diary writing.

### 1. Unstable Evidence

Roiphe's cultural capitalisation on the mysteries and censorship of Carroll's mutilated diary demonstrates a most literal interpretation of neo-Victorian fiction's recovery of suppressed or silenced voices. Such revisionist desires fit hand-in-glove with Carroll's diary, with its advertised silences that subordinate content to lacunae. Silence most often equates with sexual secrets for neo-Victorian writers and Carroll's riddling documents and controversial photographs fuel a particular form of critical interest that is fundamental to the neo-Victorian project. I suggest that Roiphe's romanticising of Carroll's relationship with Alice as representative of their time is concomitant with what Mark Llewellyn identifies as neo-Victorian's relationship with 'the trap of "period fetishism"'.<sup>26</sup> Within a wider context of period fascination, this thesis concentrates such fetishism to the paper past of history to investigate how writers present ritualistic discovery and revelation of a past preserved or obfuscated in diary and letter fragments that stage *imagined* access to private Victorians.

Today, the story of Carroll's missing and mutilated diaries rivals the *Alice* books for cultural attention. At Carroll's death there were thirteen volumes of his private journal, an enormous collection of letters, a letter register, and of course, his extensive collection of photographs. Now it is believed that around thirty percent of his diaries (four volumes and seven pages of text), eighty percent of his letters and personal papers, and eighty percent of his photographic portfolio are unaccounted for. His letter register and four diary volumes are missing, while others have key pages defaced or removed altogether. It is generally agreed that this mutilation was carried out by two separate

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'What is neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), 164-85 (p. 168).

censoring hands, with some pages efficiently razored out and others more haphazardly cut with scissors.<sup>27</sup> With a keen interest in the gaps of history, neo-Victorian fiction places much emphasis on just this type of incomplete and unstable documented evidence. Burned, buried, and defaced, neo-Victorian documents regularly demonstrate a denial of posterity in Gothic-style destruction of textual evidence. Abbott suggests that in fiction, ‘the diary is erased, torn, scorched, tearstained, or in some other way marked by the pressure of events. The physical document itself expresses precariousness’.<sup>28</sup>

Such instability of documented information was evident in nineteenth-century fiction, where, for example, the secluded and impoverished spinster Miss Tina in Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers* (1888) confesses to burning ‘precious papers’ in order to save them from the ‘publishing scoundrel’.<sup>29</sup> Volatility continues in neo-Victorian novels like Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), where Agnes Rackham buries her diaries, only for her husband’s curious mistress to disinter them, before accidentally scattering the pages to the wind; or Margaret Prior in Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999), whose second diary suffers the same fate as her first— cast to the flames – ‘how queer, to write for chimney smoke!’.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) has a selective archivist, Ellen Ash, who buries some documents, but burns others and Palliser’s epic neo-Victorian novel, *The Quincunx*, details Mary Huffam’s persistently pursued pocket diary expurgated at her direction:

‘Burn it,’ she said.

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<sup>27</sup> The family protected the mystery to the end. Carroll’s nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, had access to all documents when he wrote the first biography shortly after Carroll’s death in 1898. Later, Carroll’s nieces, Violet and Menella Dodgson, guarded them with a ferocious privacy. There is a further twist that emanates from a scrap of paper known as the ‘cut pages in diary’ document. This, Leach claims, she discovered in the Dodgson family archive. It had been numbered and catalogued but was apparently unnoticed by researchers for more than fifteen years. It supposedly details events recorded in the destroyed diary pages. See Leach, pp. 50-51.

<sup>28</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, in ‘*The Aspern Papers*’ and ‘*The Turn of the Screw*’ (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 45-142, (p. 142; p. 125). The novella preface states that James ‘delight[ed] in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past’, p. 31, original emphasis. The story is ‘a final scene of the rich dim Shelley drama played out in the very theatre of our own “modernity”’, pp. 30-31.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2000), p. 348.

My chest constricted and I had to struggle to draw breath.

‘No,’ I cried.

‘Please, Johnnie.’

I shook my head, staring at her in horror. Was I destined never to know the truth about my origins?<sup>31</sup>

Deliberate destruction of texts often sparks phoenix-like riddles that arise from epistolary ashes. Roiphe fans the flames of suspicion to further complicate and confuse the Carroll myth with an imagined chaotic and conflicted private diary consciousness that is written in direct response to disorderly suspicions that hang over Carroll’s reputation.

From a neo-Victorian perspective, what proves most interesting about Carroll’s rather dull actual diary is its censored gaps. The remains of Carroll’s actual diary, in fact, reveal very little about him. As an episodic record of largely mundane brief entries, it appears an opaque construction devoted to reinforcing his commitment to God. This thwarts those hoping to discern or decipher diary secrets of a confessional or sexual nature; as Cohen observes of Carroll’s documents: ‘*seek as we may*, we find no outpourings of inner thought or feeling in confidence to a friend. Even his diaries replete with prayers, protestations, and self-chastisements, offer little introspection’.<sup>32</sup> Roiphe posits deliberate writerly obfuscation as a covert strategy with Dodgson self-reflexively observing:

So much of what he was writing was monotonous. [...]. Every entry breathed boredom. What was the diary but a demonstration of how banal his life was, how ordinary, how like everyone else’s life, certain starts and skips excluded, it really was? It reassured him, writing each page, that there was nothing interesting there. (p. 3)

This commentary on diary ambiguity – ‘certain starts and skips excluded’ – allows a doubled reading and evidences Cohen’s belief that Carroll’s ‘letters and diaries are laced with inferences that allow us, with today’s awareness, to deduce a fire raging

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<sup>31</sup> Palliser, p. 540.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 197, my emphasis. Carroll’s remaining diaries were received from the family by the British Museum in 1969.

beneath the surface'.<sup>33</sup> Banality is suggested to be a strategy – a concealment – as Roiphe predictably moves to detail heated fantasies and dangerously prurient imaginings – ‘subterranean strife’ (p. 221) – in the fictional diary that she writes for Dodgson. She exploits the actual diary’s gaps or ‘starts and skips’ to transform Carroll, apparently largely free from existential angst in the original diary document, into a stereotypical maudlin diary confessor of the type usually found in fiction and identified by Abbott:

The [diary] writer: what is he like? He is intelligent. He is sensitive. He is acutely introverted and self-conscious. He is alienated. He has no gift for social life. He is either in love or obsessed with the fact that he is not. He is poor. He is powerless. He is young, in his twenties or early thirties. He is alone. He is prone to melodrama. He is doomed.<sup>34</sup>

Carroll’s actual diary may not correlate with the more lurid versions of his life story – the document undoubtedly fails the tale for those who would construct a doomed melodrama – but this shadow narrative nonetheless finds mediation in a fictional diary: a neo-Victorian wonderland born of gaps and silence.

## 2. Sexual Secrets

The destroyed pages of Carroll’s actual diary are presumed to document the most contentious period of his life when the infamous rift with the Liddell family occurred. Despite (or because of) the fact that no-one can establish an irrefutable or documented reason for this breach, supposition and suspicion continue apace. The most commonly presumed explanation is that Carroll mooted marriage to Alice, a theory that remains conjecture with no factual evidence. Other critics have suggested that he was courting the children’s governess; there is a further branch of speculation that he was romantically involved with the children’s mother. The most compelling view for a contemporary audience, however, is one that implies a transgressive sexual secret.

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 221.

<sup>34</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, pp. 15-16.

The nuances of this sexual secret are much debated, with commentators divided on suspicions of paedophilia. Matthew Sweet, for instance, suggests that ‘from an early twenty-first century perspective, there seems to be a substantial amount of evidence against the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson’.<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, A. N. Wilson decides that, ‘voyeurism, we may be sure, is all that was at work with Dodgson’, a view aligned with Cohen’s that Carroll’s desires remained in the realm of fantasy.<sup>36</sup> Roiphe and Cohen absolve Carroll of any wrongdoing in different ways; Cohen refers to Carroll’s ‘deep attachment’ to Alice in guarded terms as ‘certain affection’ or ‘a kind of love’, and allows only the possibility that Carroll ultimately planned a future ‘holy union’ with the child.<sup>37</sup> Roiphe draws on diary sympathy, what Abbott calls ‘our privileged glimpse into the interior’, to expand Cohen’s cautious hypothesis and emphasise and realise Dodgson’s desire for Alice in the physical terms or ‘unholy’ union that Cohen studiously avoids.<sup>38</sup>

Fantasy and controlled desire are, nonetheless, Roiphe’s preferred position. Armitage perceives this as Roiphe’s moral bias, revealing her own verdict when she refers to Carroll’s ‘obvious real-life perversity’ and questions why Roiphe would excuse Carroll at all.<sup>39</sup> Roiphe suggests that Carroll should not be condemned because ‘truth’ cannot be determined. She thereby grants him a postmodern probation of undecidability and, using fiction as a platform, sets out the ultimately undecidable ambiguities of the case for and against Carroll, fixing him somewhere in between extremes of guilt and innocence:

Is it possible that neither view of him is correct – that he was neither the child molester nor the pure, white-haired reverend? It is possible that our crude categories, our black and white views of romantic feelings cannot contain someone like [Carroll]. It is almost impossible for us to contemplate a man who falls in love with little girls without wanting to

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<sup>35</sup> Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Random House, 2005), p. 156.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> Abbott, ‘Letters to the Self’, p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Armitage, p. 171.

put him in prison. The subtleties, for those of us still mired in the paranoias of the twentieth century are hard to grasp. When one thinks of a paedophile, one thinks of a lustful, over-the-top drooling Nabokovian love, but that is not Lewis Carroll. His love was more delicate and tortured and elusive; his warmth, his strange terrified passion, more intricate and complicated than anything encompassed by a single word.<sup>40</sup>

*Still She Haunts Me* considers this controversial viewpoint as a variation of historiographic metafiction's manifesto for 'truths in the plural, and never one Truth'.<sup>41</sup> The diary intervenes to refract Roiphe's sympathy for what she perceives are subtleties of desire lost to modern times.

Decrying a simplistic black and white view, Roiphe positions her novel/argument in more mellow sepia tones, suggestive of softer shades and shadows. Roiphe romanticises Carroll's relationship with Alice as 'delicate', 'elusive', 'intricate'; the novel diffuses his desire in preferred sepia subtlety:

There was something to be said for sepia that washed through photographs, the distinctive brown, with the faintest trace of green, that faded into rich cream. This was a colour that soothed and softened, slowed down and made melancholy the world around it. (pp. 141-42)

Roiphe's predilection appears to be for a 'soothed and softened, slowed down' view of the past – 'a perpetual stylized dusk' (p. 142), a refuge in sepia. Sepia tones ensure that the Victorians remain recognisably 'past' – differentiated and categorised – forever 'other' to equate with an evolved nostalgia that yearns not for place, but a state of mind that romanticises the past. David Lowenthal's suggestion that contemporary nostalgia's interest in the past is one of yearning to 'collect its relics and celebrate its virtues'<sup>42</sup> echoes Christopher Shaw's and Malcolm Chase's argument that 'the availability of evidences of the past' is one condition necessary for nostalgia.<sup>43</sup> Carroll's relics – his diaries and photographs – *are* available, if fractured evidence and Roiphe certainly

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<sup>40</sup> Roiphe, 'Just Good Friends?'

<sup>41</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 4.

seems to be in some way yearning for the past as a retreat from modernity; she isolates virtue in the desire that others deem vice.

Cora Kaplan identifies ‘more than a hint of nostalgia for a less sexually knowing and brazenly expressive society’ evident in the fiction she terms ‘Victoriana’.<sup>44</sup> Roiphe’s modified view of Carroll and Alice perhaps most importantly does not detract or distract from continued cultural engagement with his art and perhaps also evidences Armitt’s identification of ‘our own collective interests in salvaging the *Alice* texts from becoming corrupt(ed)’.<sup>45</sup> To this end, the novel valorises longing and unrequited desire as virtues to which we are somehow blind in contemporary times. Roiphe suggests we look again and, heeding Dodgson’s observation that ‘sepia was the perfect medium for eyes’ (p. 142), soften our gaze to rescue something that is scarred by scepticism and suspicion.

Roiphe does not reject Carroll from the definition of a paedophile as the condition of being sexually attracted to children, but suggests that we temper our views of his relationship with Alice Liddell by extracting, isolating, and elevating the strength of his desire as emanating from a cultural past deemed ‘other’ rather than reading it back through contemporary concerns. James R. Kincaid suggests that we must indeed understand the Victorian cult of the child as ‘shifting, various, and mysterious’ and wholly at variance with our own views on ‘child love’:<sup>46</sup>

So, what about the way we talk of child love? The talk is monster-talk, first of all, talk that is busy rejecting the paedophile that it is, at the same time, creating. It assembles in order to fling aside, imagines so that it might recoil in disgust.<sup>47</sup>

Suspicious and conjecture – ‘monster-talk’ – now bleed into all areas of Carrollian understanding; assembled by some critics as a monster to be dissected and categorised

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<sup>44</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> Armitt, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 63.

<sup>47</sup> Kincaid, p. 3.

under punitively revisionist terms, he intersects with Marie-Luise Kohlke's controversial suggestion that we may, in fact, 'enjoy neo-Victorian fiction at least in part to feel outraged, to revel in degradation and revulsion, *reading for defilement*'.<sup>48</sup> Degradation, revulsion, and defilement certainly shape the shadow story that puts Carroll on trial and Roiphe incorporates this sensationalist angle, only to mitigate this reading by exploiting conventions of diary sympathy.

Roiphe draws Dodgson's desire for Alice in from a cold critical climate by exalting desire and revisioning his yearning in shades of 'warmth',<sup>49</sup> as a 'rich desire [...] like sunlight' (p. 204). In interview, she argues:

To me, there is a nobility in a self-restraint so forceful that it spews out stuttering tortoises and talking chess pieces rather than focus on the matter at hand. There is something touching about a man who fights the hardest fight in the world: his own desire. You can feel the loneliness on the page. You can feel the longing in the photographs. You can witness the self-contempt in his diaries. How can one not feel sympathy for a man who writes in his diary, 'I pray to God to give me a new heart', but is stuck, in spite of his astonishing powers of invention, his brilliance, his immortal wit, with the one he has.<sup>50</sup>

Defying easy divisions, Roiphe certainly provides monster talk, but written in Dodgson's 'own' hand as diary confession, desire and temptation are mitigated by self-disgust and a striving for resistance. As well as pastiching Carroll's work, the diary entries are laced with a paean to his artistry – a rhythm of appreciation that chimes with Roiphe's identification of Carroll's 'astonishing powers', 'brilliance', and 'immortal wit'. She appears to echo arguments that suggest Carroll's repressed desire for Alice generated his great artistic works and the diary intimates that Carroll and Alice therefore inhabit a higher realm as 'part of the ether' (p. 36). To this end, Dodgson rhapsodises Rossetti's painting, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, which is deemed 'beautiful insofar as she is not of this world' (p. 31) to evoke ideas of union free from fleshly transaction – white

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<sup>48</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Sexsation and the neo-Victorian Novel: Orientalising the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Fiction', in *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Luise Orza (London: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 53-77 (p. 55), original emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Roiphe, 'Just Good Friends?'

<sup>50</sup> Roiphe, 'Just Good Friends?'



and light, pure and unearthly; the painting is reframed as diary mediation on aesthetic ideals, working towards freeing Alice from those more ‘sturdy [and] earthbound’ (p. 31).

In these ways, *Still She Haunts Me* skirts the outright denial of wrongdoing preferred by unequivocal Carroll supporters and avoids potential charges of naivety or blind nostalgia. Roiphe also distances herself from the camp of feminist critics who, she claims, put forward strident charges of child molestation to ‘darkly suggest that Dodgson was a paedophile. They have condemned the beautiful photographs he took and objected to his objectification of the immature female body, and read all sorts of rapacious nonsense into the Alice books’.<sup>51</sup> Yet Roiphe’s novel freely manipulates ideas of ‘the autobiographical stand’ (p. 212) in the Alice books and at one point presents Dodgson in a drugged delirium visited by ‘guests’ (p. 211) – the products of his own imagination – who ‘crowd’ his room ‘with his intentions, shaking and nodding and chattering’ (p. 212):

‘You fall into a grave and you don’t die,’ says the Hatter.  
 ‘Self spelled backward is flesh,’ says Humpty.  
 ‘Almost.’  
 ‘No one sees the autobiographical strand.’  
 ‘Confessions of St. Augustine by Lewis Carroll.’  
 ‘The sins and salvations.’ (p. 212)

Roiphe may here parody those who suggest Carroll wrote his story under the influence of opium, but the extract suggests a covert relief that Dodgson’s feelings for Alice will not be detected in his work. However, furtive desire, as a ‘hidden layer of life’ (p. 205), has, according to Valerie Raoul, authenticity as diary confession:

‘Confession’ usually implies the revelation of something not too much to one’s credit, and many fictional diarists attempt to adjust their image in this direction in the interests of ‘authenticity’ – their final defence. Others seek to justify themselves in the face of unaccepted accusation. They plead their cause as if before a judge, and their aim to improve their image is more obvious.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Roiphe, ‘Just Good Friends?’.

<sup>52</sup> Valerie Raoul, *The French Fictional Journal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 41.

The reference to St. Augustine and his famous *Confessions* reinforces Roiphe's desire to present Dodgson 'confessing' a worthy or admirable fight against his sexual nature and supports her preference to promote a romantic or spiritual rather than sordid revisioning of history. The diary works as what Mallon calls 'a pliable priest'<sup>53</sup> to pastiche what Cohen has identified as Carroll's 'guilty appeals' as Roiphe's attempt to 'adjust' Dodgson's/Carroll's image with a subtle re-patterning turn of the kaleidoscope lens.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. Event and the River of Alice

In a further refraction of Carroll's writings as confessional diary agency, Roiphe pastiches the historic day at the river: July 4 1862. Hutcheon's claim that 'postmodern novels focus on the process of event becoming fact' is evidenced as Roiphe processes event into Dodgson's private record and outside commentary.<sup>55</sup> On this day, Carroll, together with Reverend Robinson Duckworth, (the Dodo and the Duck), embarked on a river picnic with the three Liddell girls, Lorina, Alice, and Emily. Carroll entertained the children with a story, 'Alice's Adventures under Ground', which, at the behest of Alice, he subsequently wrote down to create *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Particular interest in this day lies, of course, primarily in its significance as a moment of creative genesis – a historical event that delivered both an iconic children's story to the world – but it also intrigues generations of myth makers as the locus of missing diary entries in Carroll's otherwise faithfully kept record. Much as the novel states that Carroll's fictions focus on the trial as the place where 'the story collects [...] like rain in a ditch' (p. 173), Roiphe's story rises and flows from the river excursion as an event that seeps into every aspect of Carroll's history.

Roiphe re-imagines historical event *and* the processing of this event into a diary entry that encloses Carroll's/Dodgson's story and contemporary suspicions. She keeps

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<sup>53</sup> Mallon, p. 209.

<sup>54</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 219.

<sup>55</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 73.

her narrative focused on the fluid processing of this event by ensuring that ‘the running river of Alice’ (p. 127) flows steadily and metaphorically throughout the invented diary entries. Hutcheon suggests that historiographic metafiction’s self-reflexive aim ‘points in two directions at once, toward the events being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself’.<sup>56</sup> Roiphe explains Dodgson narrating the day and the consequent elisions, amendments, and alterations that process event in three ways. First, the diary frames Dodgson’s transformation of event into storytelling, where a loosened hold on truth and reality is permissible and positive and illustrates Dodgson’s story-making processes with words ‘coming unpried from their meanings & spinning through bright air’ (p. 93). Story releases his mind to transform complex inadmissible emotions into nonsense and fairytale. This unfolds in sharp contrast to the hindered and ‘clotted’ (p. 72) speech of his adult conversations. Coordinating with the version beloved by heritage culture, Dodgson’s diary, on one level, records a hypnotic memory of the picnic party gently gliding down the river under clear blue sky and shimmering summer heat.<sup>57</sup> Time is the enemy here, it runs, tilts, as words fly, spin and the story alters pace to move along, not with leisure, but haste, as it forms and shapes event into immortality.

Outside the diary frame, a contesting narrative in free indirect discourse sees Dodgson acknowledge the unrecorded frustrations and difficulties of the ‘perfect’ day: ‘The whole trip already felt like too much to him, too much given away, too much nearly lost. He was tired. His back hurt from rowing’ (p. 96). This form of narration illuminates the diary record as constructed, tailored, and edited. The diary is emphasised to record only selective memory at work – a ‘capacity for instant nostalgia’ (p. 97), as Dodgson edits out ‘the most disturbing parts of life’ (p. 96) to undermine the

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<sup>56</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> One example of many is a tourist website called, ‘Enjoy England’, which advertises ‘Mad Hatter’s Tea Parties with Oxford River Cruises’ < <http://www.enjoyengland.com/ideas/heritage-and-culture/cinema-theatre-and-the-arts/alice-in-wonderland/things-to-do.aspx> > [accessed 10 August 2010]

authenticity of the diary record. This is illuminated by a third narrative omniscient intervention that explains Dodgson had

this capacity, this instant mental cleansing [that] allowed him to isolate the moment, to take out its more enjoyable elements and throw away the rest. So that he was left with what he later referred to as ‘that golden afternoon’. (p. 96)

Roiphe thus posits an editing process – the beating of gold to an airy thinness that distorts event into a ready-made nostalgic record, a diary entry that here more comfortably fits with the heritage version of event.

However, diary voyeurs motivated by the desire to penetrate private spaces may discern a further shadow narrative. Closer attention to language might produce a darker reading of the river idyll, ‘shot through with intentions and accents’, to evidence Dodgson’s fleshly desire for Alice.<sup>58</sup> As he records,

For a moment, I thought of the boat tipping over & everyone except Alice sinking slowly into the river.

Later we lay in the shade under the haycocks, Alice inches away from me on the grass, a layer of stickiness on her face, wetting the hair that fell across her forehead. She stretched out her legs. (p. 92)

Steaming and sweating with damp details intended to seep into porous minds, the ‘heat thick’ (p. 93) of the diary atmosphere embeds suggestion to produce ‘a layer of stickiness’ (p. 92) that binds event with contemporary mistrust. Roiphe indicates a ‘submerged personality’ (p. 172) and implies sexual suggestiveness loitering between the diary lines as ‘something darkening the edges of thought’ (p. 155). Such suggestion or doubled reading are progressively expanded as the bounds of Dodgson’s self-restraint are self-reflexively tested in subsequent diary entries that flesh out Alice’s physicality and Dodgson’s desire for her.

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<sup>58</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 259-422 (p. 293).

#### 4. Flesh and Appetite

Carroll's riddling diary has become fused with ideas of fleshly and transgressive desires: censored, mutilated, defiled, the diary represents the secrets some believe body and text shared.<sup>59</sup> Roiphe uses diary form to engage with the construction and scrutiny of Carroll's transgressive, 'monstrous' body, placing metonymical emphasis on diary description as 'fawn-coloured leather scratched, spines broken, pages warped' (p. 2). Dodgson's diary entries are preoccupied with flesh, extremes of beauty/temptation and revulsion/decay. In line with Mallon's idea of the diary as 'flesh made word', monstrous flesh intrudes into Dodgson's diary to potentially undo him and condemn him by his own hand.<sup>60</sup> The diary attests that flesh and physicality are problematic for Dodgson, as he records a loathed stutter, determined fasting, and denied appetite and perceives a mirror image that is physically monstrous to him.<sup>61</sup> On the day of the river picnic, Dodgson looks in his mirror (bringing Carrollian intertextual resonance to what Abbott identifies as the 'standard' mirror scene in diary fiction) to see a modern-day monster manifested in a retrospective looking-glass.<sup>62</sup> A 'hideous', 'bedraggled', 'greenish', 'piggish', 'hooded eyes', 'ugliness' (p. 91) stares grossly back at him: an abject body. Margaret Atwood's Grace Marks may have seen, but not understood the competing constructions of herself reflected in the looking glass – 'female demon' *and* 'innocent victim' – but Dodgson recognises a demon and sees 'the self delivered monstrous & grossly physical' (p. 91).<sup>63</sup>

Dodgson's mirror vision of a monstrous body infiltrates the diary text as he records himself a victim of 'animal' appetites. A faddy and abstemious eater in real life,

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<sup>59</sup> This is, I suggest, a variation on Hermione Lee's claim that the body parts of famous writers can become significant for biographers. *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> Mallon, p. xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Roiphe joins those who link Dodgson's stammer to hidden secrets. One diary entry is devoted to Dodgson's relationship with his voice coach, Dr. James Hunt. Here words are twisted and deformed, mangled into puzzles that defy ordering as 'thought clotted in mind' (p. 72).

<sup>62</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Virago, 2006 [1996]), p. 25.

Carroll recorded his fasts and struggles to starve his body, which Roiphe links to her fictional character's efforts to purge sinful longing: Dodgson 'felt the animal, the gross bodily greed, the mute desire, coiled inside him' (p. 167).<sup>64</sup> Mute desire nevertheless finds diary expression as Roiphe reverts to Carroll's story to deflect Alice's appetite to Dodgson: *he* finds the story: 'pages themselves swell with hunger – eat me, drink me' (p. 157). As torment accelerates and storytelling recedes, his sub-conscious engulfs him in dreams of consuming 'an Alice-shaped biscuit' that he eats 'headfirst' (p. 157). Yet he denies and decries appetite and describes food as repellent – 'yellow', 'greasy', 'sugary', with 'heaviness' and 'bloody juices' (p. 156). He fasts 'to simplify the craving', wishing to 'shed the layer of fat – the curves of stomach and hips – the pocket of flesh around [his] waist' (p. 156). As Mick Jackson's Duke longs to escape the constraints of his aging body in *The Underground Man* (2007) and *Affinity*'s Margaret Prior finds her transgressive flesh melting away, Dodgson similarly wishes to transcend corporeality: 'If only one could rid oneself of flesh entirely [...] become something else entirely' (p. 156).

Irrevocably neither body nor text is 'entire', as Roiphe envisions drastic textual self-castration. Outside the confessional diary frame, Dodgson states that 'he was particularly adept at controlling his appetite. He was not the sort to indulge' (p. 81) and within the diary's confessional atmosphere he explains a process of regulation where, alternately defensive and repentant, he delineates fleshly temptations but then carefully excises the pages that detail unwelcome desires. Roiphe pre-empts familiar reactionary calls to castrate paedophiles by presenting Dodgson expurgating diary text in a clinical severing that arrests appetite with textual/body castration: 'he took a straight razor out

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<sup>64</sup> Phyllis Greenacre argues that Carroll 'was abstemious, eating and drinking little [...]. He was somewhat appalled by the healthy appetite of some of his little girl friends'. 'The Character of Dodgson as revealed in the Writings of Carroll', in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses*, ed. by Robert Phillips (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), pp. 316-31 (p. 320). William Empson also asserts that Carroll 'would see no reason to deny that he connected overeating with other forms of sensuality'. He does not elaborate what these 'other forms' might be. 'Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain', in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses* (see Greenacre above), pp. 344-73 (p. 352).

of the drawer and ran it down each offending page; it cut with a pleasing violence, slicing through the tiny cottony threads, neat but somehow flesh like. A surgeon of himself' (p. 2).

Diary and body are thereby conjoined as absent: 'unsaid passages, unspoken frames of mind. Missing bits of bone and cartilage' (p. 2), a removal of pages that represent the very unsaid and unspoken 'frames' that tantalise today's voyeurs and lever open spaces for colonising discourses. Roiphe's identification of Dodgson as the hand that removes the famous diary page indicates a parting of company with Cohen who, when asking the question, 'but who wielded the razor?', asserts confidently that Carroll 'would never falsify [the diary] mutilate it, or destroy a jot of it'.<sup>65</sup> Roiphe's opposing illustration of Dodgson destroying diary text suggests an excising of the desiring body to thereby contain Dodgson's 'hateful fantasies' (p. 147). Censored and therefore contained and controlled as impotent diary confession, Dodgson's expurgation illustrates Abbott's view that 'the diarist, through the agency of [his] writing, can effect an evolution as a human being or, through the same agency, impede or prevent it'.<sup>66</sup> Roiphe's preference is clearly evolution: the diary and its destruction enclose and neutralise fleshly desires as 'cut pages from the diary' (p. 4) to render confession undone rather than undoing. Desire remains a contained composition of textual fantasy.

### 5. Alice: Fleshly Fantasies of a Dream Child

Dodgson's diary records contempt for his own flesh, but fascination for Alice 'as God designed her – *Mirabile dictu*' (p. 176). The diary thus contains two bodies: one monstrously repulsive: repulsed, and castrated, alongside another alluring in physical perfection. Alice is materialised or pastiched in seven out of ten diary entries in all her

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<sup>65</sup> Morton N. Cohen, 'Lewis Carroll: "Dishcoveries" – and More', in *Nineteenth-Century Lives*, ed. by Laurence S. Lockridge, John Maynard, and Donald D. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 112-24 (p. 115).

<sup>66</sup> Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, p. 43.

diverse cultural guises: as photographic image, dream child, a phantom conjured from thin air, as Dodgson's fantasy, a storybook character (together with John Tenniel's illustration), and finally naked in Dodgson's presence, as some suspect she may have been.

Fleshly fantasies of Alice immerse the ten diary entries in a fantasy/dreamscape of desire and self-recrimination. Contradicting Wilson's view of Carroll as 'a dry old stick of a man', Roiphe saturates Dodgson's diary in a humid atmosphere of tormented longings.<sup>67</sup> The diary is not so much underground as underwater, for Roiphe extends the river metaphor to record fantasy and dark dreamscape waters – 'bewilderingly bad dreams' (p. 69) that dissolve the lines between fact and fiction. The diary invites readers to gaze at Dodgson swimming in fast-flowing rivers of imaginings and tests our susceptibility to suggestion – our appetite for the salacious. For example, an entire early diary entry is devoted to Dodgson's glimpse of Alice's just-vacated bath where Dodgson records his fantasy of a lingering present/absent Alice: a mirage conjured amid the steamy atmosphere:

I saw a half-open door. The bath was still drawn—a large oval bath—  
[...]  
I felt close to her—wrapped in her—the steam rising up & enveloping  
me in heat. Her hair sticky damp & plastered to her face—her skin hot—  
beaded with droplets—her palms pruny & prickled from soaking. The  
bath gave her to me more vividly than I could have conjured her myself.  
(p. 64)

Just as society conjures Dodgson as a deviant from his photographs and razored diary pages – a 'half-open' book – Alice is here spectrally glimpsed through the emphasised 'half-open door' (p. 64) as fleshly temptation shapes potential for a provocative double reading.

The diary entry invites readers to step over the threshold to glimpse an imagined guilty consciousness. There is, however, nothing sexually explicit in the language that

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<sup>67</sup> Wilson, *The Victorians*, p. 158.



describes this [non]encounter, but desire and suggestion hang in the clammy air. Readers now witness Dodgson transfixed by an image of Alice, drawn and shaped bodily as an absent presence ‘recently vanished’ from ‘a room caught in a state of longing’ (p. 64). Becoming spectators in a form of peep show, framed and mediated by diary form, we are implicated as voyeurs, albeit twice-removed – watching Dodgson, watching Alice – with the paradox that she is not there at all. What is materialised is not essentially Alice, but the heat and saturation of Dodgson’s unsatisfied desire for her realised as ‘the distilled essence of loneliness’ (p. 72). Just as Carroll’s diary frustrates with Alice’s absence, readers of this scene materialise Alice with recourse to imaginative reading between diary lines.

This glimpse through a half-open door is part of impeded uncovering that reveals and obscures Alice in equal measure. Roiphe’s diary entries engage a form of narrative striptease that begins with Dodgson pondering the ‘difficult aesthetic problem—how to take the flesh out of a woman—the fat, the curve—& leave the beauty of soul’ (p. 31) and ends with a final entry that undresses Alice to reveal her as imagined by Dodgson (and also diary voyeurs). Intermittent diary entries interrupt the narrative to stage an unveiling where Alice is first described costumed by Dodgson’s diary as ‘beggar girl, Chinaman, gypsy’ (p. 36), in opposition to the fetters of ‘lace and ribbons—the wide-sleeved muslins and velvets in which her mother wraps her’ (p. 37). Later, as just discussed, she is wrapped in nothing but steam and fantasy, only to be materialised in a dream of pre-Raphaelite nakedness.

In a further narrative striptease of Alice’s various cultural layers, Roiphe pastiches and uncovers Tenniel’s simulacrum. This unveiling both frustrates and reassures Dodgson that *his* Alice is not yet visible:

My fingers fumbled with the portfolio strings.  
And then came a great confusion—I experienced it in the opening—like  
unwrapping a gift—the mind for a moment confronted with what it wants.  
[...]

I can smell the leather as I open it & lift the layer of paper from the drawings. Had he understood me? With a bewildering combination of relief & disappointment, I see that he has not—His Alice is not my Alice. (pp. 162-63)

Alice is thus emphasised as an amorphous figment for imaginative pasticheurs who invariably rearrange fragments of fact and fiction to create ‘Alice. Alice and another Alice’ (p. 143), glimpsed in a receding hall of mirrors or restless kaleidoscope pattern.

Roiphe realises an unveiling of Alice’s cultural layers, and finally clothes, as the closing diary entry stages Alice undressing in Dodgson’s studio: she ‘bends down & removes one of her boots’ (p. 175) and Dodgson ‘feel[s] her shaking off the last undergarments’ (p. 176). He and his camera record the scene:

And then I see her, a pearly perfect stretch of Alice, heavenlike and ... No, let me say for once what I truly see: delicate olive-tinted skin, a purplish bruise rimmed with green on her thigh, two tiny swells, a stomach slightly protruding, a red crease where her undergarments pressed into her stomach, ribs outlined, black eyes staring defiantly at the camera. (p. 176)

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, ellipses serve to anticipate the responses of others; readers’ responses are allowed or ‘wedged’ into the text.<sup>68</sup> This diary entry thus demonstrates two potential readings of the scene as Dodgson’s familiar ‘pearly’ shades of rhapsodising are abruptly interrupted by fleshly description, coloured in more livid shades of green, purplish, red, and black to displace a softer sepia image. Alice’s corporeal presence – skin, thigh, stomach, and ribs – is emphasised for a doubled reading of the scene. Lauren Hinton suggests in *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy* that ‘acts of seeing function as doublings of reproductions, which are secondary *projections* of the presence of the viewer generating sympathy’.<sup>69</sup> Controlling the bulk of the novel, omniscient narration labours to engender sympathy for Dodgson to introduce cautious and limited revelations from an increasingly confessional diary voice. The final

<sup>68</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 214.

<sup>69</sup> Lauren Hinton, *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 39, original emphases.

revelatory diary scene severely tests readers' sympathy, but nonetheless fulfils the desire Dodgson expressed in an earlier anticipatory entry that he might 'see' Alice:

See her, not through the accidental sag & drape of clothing, but truly see her—A little piece of walking art—Nymph in the garden—Fairy in the woods—Innocent frolicking—Smelling of grass & river wind & cat hairs—A stretch of milky stomach—Dark, dirty Alice, never managing to be straightened and neat like Ina or sweet little Edith—Olive skinned, Mediterranean—a changeling—Something that has flown or fallen from somewhere else. (p. 36)

In this description of artistic vision and mythology muddled and muddied with 'dark, dirty Alice', readers are again implicated as voyeurs of a divisive diary entry. The scene – expressed or confessed in his diary, Dodgson's 'sympathetic companion' (p. 2) – requires readers to negotiate a fine line to adjudicate: does he describe only aesthetic appreciation? Or paedophilic fantasy? Emphasising a perpetually hindered and partial view, we are encouraged to question what we see and how we look and accept that gaps impel an inevitable pastiching of supplementary viewpoints that meld fact with fantasy. Expectations of diary confession lead readers in a sequential unravelling that strips and exposes stereotypical expectations of both Alice and diary content. What Roiphe, in fact, uncovers is a perpetual return to the body of fantasies that frame and control our doubled understanding of Carroll and his (our) dreamchild today.

## **6. Dream turned Nightmare**

The status of 'dreamchild' encourages the possession or pastiching of Alice by collective and individual imaginations. Much as Byatt's fictional scholars are possessed by dreams of their desired Victorians, Alice and Carroll are possessed as pastiche characters dreamed up by imagination, fantasies, and supposition. Dreams are multi-faceted in the Carroll myth and a recurrent trope in fictional diaries. Roiphe capitalises

on such ideas with a ‘pseudo psychological’ approach that sees Dodgson pen a diary record of his dreams to classically condense and displace incident and fantasy. Echoing Grace Marks’s nightmares of ruinous red peonies and threatened diary control in Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Dodgson has similarly ‘unnerving’ (p. 82) dreams that reveal a subliminal modernist landscape in shades of red and crimson:

The dreams are worse. Last night we were on my red sofa, but it was not faded & shabby as it is in life, but richer crimson, plush & velvet & tufted & draped. [...] She smiles in a way I have never seen before. I lean down & kiss her cheek & the reds & the browns darken & her features shift—nose, mouth, eyes, sliding out of place—until her face is not perfect but monstrous. This is what I find so shattering about my dreams—they start out so pleasantly. I think if I had straightforward nightmares, I should find them less difficult. (pp. 81-82)

Once again a ‘faded’ and shabby sepia scene ‘is supplanted by a vivacity of unwelcome colours and textures that sharpen a dream landscape. Awash with confusingly fluidity, the diary records ‘good dreams dissolv[ing] into bad’ (p. 82). Two positions or readings muddy a desire for perfection and aesthetic purity in a fleshly landscape. Ambiguity, confusion, and contradiction swirl together in subconscious thoughts creating a subtext that mimics tensions that dredge Carroll’s reputation through murky waters. Ideas of perfection and loveliness are ‘darkened’ to confuse Dodgson in competing binary oppositions as he ‘wake[s] muddled; sin & virtue’, serenity & torment, thrown together & entwined until I barely know who I am’ (p. 82). Longing for an ideal is palpable throughout the diary, but this sequence moves from an emphasis on ‘perfection’ – mentioned four times in the first diary entry – to now transform beauty to monstrosity: dream to nightmare.

Sexual desire is again not made explicit in the text and must be interpreted or ‘read’ with recourse to circulating intertextual whispers from outside debates. Demonstrating and encouraging doubled readings, Roiphe later materialises another ‘dream child’ to pastiche an incident drawn from records of Carroll’s actual opportunistic meetings with potential child friends. Borrowing a comment made by

Carroll's first biographer (his nephew) that many of Carroll's friendships with children 'began in a railway carriage, for he always took about with him a stock of puzzles when he travelled, to amuse any little companions whom chance might send him',<sup>70</sup> Roiphe raids this Woolf-style 'fertile fact'<sup>71</sup> to conclude her novel in a loose form of postscript that revisions Dodgson in such a railway carriage:

The motion of the train rocked him as he tried to sip his cold tea. A small, curly-haired girl of around five passed through the corridor. He looked at her. She smiled at him, a large toothy smile, with dimples. [...] Her hair was amazing, a wild soft mass of reds, blonds, and browns. He reached into the suitcase and took out the bat and three puzzles he had stuffed at the bottom [...]. Her enormous tawny eyes were fixed on the bat. He held it up to her, and she went over to touch its face. He dusted it off with his handkerchief, and wound it up carefully. It trembled in the palm of his hand and lifting its wings, it flew. (p. 222)

This child echoes Dodgson's nightmare vision of a pre-Raphaelite Alice – a recognisably cultural cipher for enigma and desire – who 'darken[s]' and 'shift[s]' in his sub-conscious with 'longer and curlier' hair in bewitching 'reds & browns' (pp. 81-82). With a twist of perception this scene shifts into a slightly altered pattern to suggest Roiphe's familiar subtext. Here, Armitt indeed decides that Dodgson is 'sitting on a train reeling in another victim', but what is it about this extract that differentiates it from Collingwood's 'innocent' explanation of benevolent encounters?<sup>72</sup> Any darker dual meaning must be located in readers' minds to close gaps with contextual readings that import a narrative of taint and allegation.

## 7. Framing the Unseen/Unread

Commentators regularly try to contract distance and close gaps by reading frustrating absences in Carroll's actual diary in conjunction with his child photographs – a strategy

<sup>70</sup> Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007 [1898]), p. 202.

<sup>71</sup> 'Almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders'. Woolf, p. 197.

<sup>72</sup> Armitt, p. 178.

fully exploited by Roiphe. Just as diary gaps invite words and visual imagination, Carroll's photographs impel narrative explanation. The union of biography and image is illustrated in Byatt's *Possession*, where Roland Michell's uncomprehending examination of Christabel LaMotte's photograph demonstrates that a lack of mythological or biographical knowledge leaves the creative gaze only blank and unanimated. Roland may texturise his contemplation of images of Randolph Henry Ash with background understanding, but Christabel is unknown to him; he has as yet neither accumulation of biographical detail nor acquaintance with her texts that enable him to imagine her life; he has 'no clear impression of anyone in particular; it was generic Victorian lady, specific shy poetess'.<sup>73</sup>

Undoubtedly, the mythologies surrounding controversial photographs of Alice Liddell are sometimes entangled with damning modern-day interpretations of Carroll. Those who interpret sin and transgression in the diary gaps tend to cite Carroll's photographs of children as evidence against him; those who defend him explain Carroll's images by emphasising the cultural gap between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century understandings of childhood.<sup>74</sup> Closing a circle of critical connections, Catherine Robson suggests that

Photography and the child, as imagined at the midpoint of the nineteenth century, are caught up in exactly the same complex web of constructions. Variousy challenging the divisions between past and present, fantasy and reality, imagination and materiality, self and other, [... in] the case of Lewis Carroll more particularly, masculinity and femininity, photography and the Victorian child, are each other's perfect complements.<sup>75</sup>

As an unavoidable aspect of the Carroll myth, photography is a central intertextual reference in Roiphe's revisioned diary text.

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<sup>73</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession: Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 38.

<sup>74</sup> Carroll was a keen and renowned amateur photographer with little girls his favoured, but not exclusive, subject. See Douglas Robert Nickel, *Dreaming in Pictures: The Photography of Lewis Carroll* (New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 133.

Commentators, eager to redress his diary absence, try to fix Carroll elsewhere as an unseen but tangible presence in his photographs. Just as Alice is suspected as a missing presence in Carroll's destroyed diary pages, Dodgson is suggested as a haunting presence in his photographs – unseen, but lingering in sepia shadows – a spectre that Roiphe materialises from beneath his shrouded camera curtain to suggest a 'man on the periphery of his own longing' (p. 204). Referring to Roland Barthes's argument that the photograph is a 'certificate of presence', Hutcheon argues that 'the photograph presents both the past as presence and the present as inescapably historical'.<sup>76</sup> Somehow Carroll's photographs have evolved to become certificates of *his* presence, with the diaries as alternate certificates of absence, as scholars choose not to dwell on the wealth of epistolary material still available, but to obsess about relatively few absent pages, which fuel frantic efforts to locate him *somewhere*.

Armitt suggests that Carroll 'struggled to pin Alice down in a variety of mediums – fiction, photographs'; she proved 'endlessly elusive', a view echoed by Roiphe's novel that Dodgson 'is always on the edge of Alice, always about to reach her' (p. 123).<sup>77</sup> This is suggestive of Helen Groth's explanation of kaleidoscope 'charms', as 'the all too seductive sensation of looking at but not mastering a visual field that perpetually oscillates on the verge of dissolution'.<sup>78</sup> Although Carroll did conceptualise Alice in various shape-shifting guises, perhaps any sense of elusiveness is more our inheritance than his experience. Roiphe's Dodgson may claim that 'everything that flickered could be made permanent' (p. 8), but the images nonetheless evidence Barthes's suggestion that the photograph

becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to

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<sup>76</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 87.

<sup>77</sup> Armitt, p. 168

<sup>78</sup> Helen Groth, 'Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an "Age of Things": David Brewster, *Don Juan*, and "A Lady's Kaleidoscope"', *ELH*, 74 (2007), 217-37 (pp. 228-29).

speak, a modest *shared* hallucination (on the one hand ‘it is not there,’ on the other ‘but it has indeed been’): a mad image, chafed by reality.<sup>79</sup>

We will never have a clear, one-dimensional view of the past; the historical figures are dead and cannot be recuperated; they leave us with only images refracted through rumours, suppositions, and story – a kaleidoscope plurality that is most bizarrely hallucinated in absent diary pages.

Roiphe’s foregrounding of the photographed Liddell children renders it impossible to read the novel without the image colouring its reception. She develops this ‘paratextual authenticating role’ to invoke and describe one of Carroll’s most contentious photographs – ‘The Beggar Maid’ – not reproduced in the novel, but evoked in contending narrative description.<sup>80</sup> Described and framed as diary viewpoint and secondarily refracted in Mrs Liddell’s view outside the diary, contrasting views of the image illustrate that Carroll’s photographs are irrevocably splintered by provocative questions now asked of both child and man.

Roiphe explores ‘the past sliced into stills’ (p. 1) within and without the diary frame. In perhaps this most famous of Carroll’s child images (Figure 4.1), the ‘real’ Alice leans sullen and challenging, casually wearing her beggar rags with ‘cool scepticism’ (p. 11). This enigmatic image, a strange amalgamation of artistic vision and disquieting provocation (what Barthes might term ‘a strange stasis, the stasis of an *arrest*’), shadows the fictional Alice; it has stealthily gathered the potential power to supplement or displace Tenniel’s illustrations, his whimsy or ‘pastel fantasy’ (p. 163) of



Figure 4.1 Alice Pleasance Hargreaves (1852-1934) by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) 1858, ‘The Beggar Maid’.

<sup>79</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000 [1982]), p. 115, original emphases.

<sup>80</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 84.



blue cotton dress and neatly brushed fair hair.<sup>81</sup>

Roiphe's consistent evocation of the 'Beggar Maid' or 'Beggar Girl' photograph reminds that this image is synonymous with the Carroll/Alice debate.<sup>82</sup> All Roiphe's descriptions of Alice appear to stem from and reference this image, whether narrated as Dodgson's diary voice or from an omniscient perspective. For instance, Alice is introduced into the narrative with the following omniscient description of Carroll watching her playing croquet on the Dean's lawn:

His eye was drawn to the middle one. Alice. The least pretty. Not an inanimate doll-beauty like the others, but a dark, wild, tousled thing. Her legs and arms too long, sun-browned, her hair short for a girl, almost boyish and messy, sticking up, as if she had just woken up the front cut unevenly; [...]. Her face was pointed. Her eyes enormous and complicated and black.

And then there was the slightest trace of theatre in her stance. (p. 11)

'Dark, wild', and 'complicated', Alice is identified as the source of disruption that transforms the outwardly cool and reserved Dodgson to a fragmented, disorderly diary voice. Outside the diary frame, Alice is repeatedly represented by both Dodgson *and* her mother as 'messy', 'lopsided', 'dishevelled', unruly', 'unravelling', indeed 'a dark, wild, tousled thing' (pp. 11-14).

The image is explicitly refracted in the novel from the opposing perspectives of Dodgson and Mrs Liddell. Dodgson's description is framed in his private diary discourse, where he paradoxically directs an address to readers:

Consider the beggar girl—Look at the rags falling off her delicate shoulders—hand on hips, head cocked—look at how bewitching she is—her legs slender—her feet too long like a puppy's—stripped down to her essence—torn clothes, dirt—somehow more Alice than all of the lace and ribbons— [...]—Her eyebrows raised—slightly—she is ragged, bedraggled—her skin luminous but splotched with dirt—as if she has

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<sup>81</sup> Barthes, p. 91, original emphasis.

<sup>82</sup> This photograph graces the covers of numerous critical works on Carroll, including Will Brooker's text and Jennifer Green-Lewis's *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (1996). It also shares a split frame with Carroll on the cover of Leach's book. Green-Lewis includes the image in her list of twenty most popular Victorian photographs. Jennifer Green-Lewis, 'At Home in the Nineteenth Century: Photography, Nostalgia and the Will to Authenticity', in *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, (see Israel above), pp. 29-48 (p. 38).

seen the world—has seen more than an innocent who has barely left Oxford possibly could have. (p. 37)

The diary shades from Dodgson's confessional to a more explicit vehicle for Roiphe's argument, as she asks readers to interrogate the famous image more closely. An authoritative and directive commentary suggests readers 'consider' an unconventional and perhaps uncomfortable viewpoint. Dodgson's diary records Alice as fascinating, enticing, and importantly a 'knowing' body. In this respect, Roiphe sails uncomfortably close to arguments of invitation and cognisance.

Who in fact narrates this image? With an alliance of Bakhtinian theory and Martens's ideas of doubled diary voice, we may detect Roiphe's address to readers. 'Dirt' is repeated, but where does this lie? In Alice's rags? Her performative pose? Carroll's camera eye? Or the mind's eye of readers? Dodgson's statement, 'as if she has seen the world—has seen more than an innocent who has barely left Oxford possibly could have' (p. 37), closes his description by suggesting we consider a 'knowing' child pitted against the much emphasised representation of Carroll as a shy, stumbling, stuttering, Oxford aesthete, a view typified by Cohen, who authoritatively argues that Carroll was a

reticent Victorian, inbred Oxonian, upright cleric, rational mathematician – conservative, formal, controlled – Charles Dodgson presents a formidable figure, a prototype of his time and class, a sharp portrait of an age graven into a single human being. The rules he lived by never bent in the wind: conventions were the very motors of his life.<sup>83</sup>

This powerfully argued polemic for a rigid morality is both implied and challenged in Roiphe's novel from the standpoint of Alice's mother. 'Mrs Liddell was not enthusiastic about the beggar-girl photograph' (p. 39). The photographs confirm her suspicions of Dodgson: an early perception of 'something odd in his manner' (p. 42). She approaches the image from an entirely different stance than Dodgson:

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<sup>83</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 197.

The contrasts leapt out. The torn white dress, gaping at the chest and falling off the shoulders of its small model, seemed more conspicuous. [...]

Mrs Liddell studied the photo. Against rough stone leaned her dirty-faced daughter, draped in rags, torn, unravelling. She had one hand on her hip, the other compliantly cupped. Such a convincing urchin. But there was something else. The picture glowed with a joke that had just been told. She could see it in her daughter's eyes, laughter dying down. (pp. 39-40)

What do they see differently and *how* do they look? Dodgson defies diary expectations to pose a challenging address to someone. The generic frame is broken to invoke Hutcheon's suggestion that readers are made 'aware collaborator[s]'.<sup>84</sup> Dodgson demands we 'consider' and 'look'. His address is in the present, but Mrs Liddell uses past tense. She 'studied' the image to consider the past event of the actual taking of the photograph, whereas Dodgson asks us only to see the resulting image. Dodgson mentions 'dirt', whereas Mrs Liddell sees 'dirty-faced' to link this to something indefinable in Alice's 'look': the suggestion of 'laughter dying down', a variation on the collusion that Dodgson implies. Yet how can a picture 'glow with a joke'? With irony or parody perhaps, that suggests doubled meaning. In this respect, the earlier diary record of Dodgson's bathroom reverie is pertinent, for there he imagined an absent Alice, scrubbed, polished, and clean. The lingering steam 'wrapped' Dodgson in his fantasy of Alice with all 'dirt' washed out of sight. Later this image returns to foreground doubt and questions, as Hunt considers that Dodgson's nude photographs, '[offer] a man a hide-and-seek with himself: maybe this is not lust, maybe it is just the innocent frolic of a child stepping out of a bath' (pp. 202-03).

The conjuring of an absent Alice whether from an empty bathtub or from missing diary pages corresponds with spectral salacious images conjured from Carroll's photographs. Carroll used the wet plate collodion process that required underexposed glass plate negatives be immersed in silver nitrate where they '[wait] innocently in the

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<sup>84</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 85.

tray, floating like children in a bath' (p. 143). Echoing Barthes's understanding of the photograph as a form of hallucination, submerged images exist, but without the necessary chemical exchange, the paper remains vacant and the image unseen: it is both there and not there. Alice cannot be materialised or 'seen' as she is suspected in Carroll's diary, but the contemporary gaze nonetheless produces an elemental or chemical exchange that hallucinates or imprints an image from 'blank' pages. Such negative or reversal of tones 'exposes' Alice (and Carroll) to voyeuristic half-seen illusion.

Roiphe appropriates the 'Beggar Maid' photograph to exemplify such doubled readings and Alice's changeling status. There are many other more conventional images of Alice, respectably (over)dressed in the middle-class fashion of the day, but the diary explains this one to both illustrate Carroll's imaginative transformation of Alice and question how we interpret such a performative image today. As a changeling, Alice can be freely adapted to suit various purposes. Dodgson sees and emphasises a 'delicate', 'bewitching', and 'luminous' beauty, whereas Mrs Liddell sees her daughter 'dirty-faced' and 'unravelling'. Mrs Liddell sees rags, just as Dodgson does, but she sees 'torn' rags, suggestive of violence. Here 'compliance' is suspected by Mrs Liddell. She sees 'something wrong, something almost womanly and seductive in Alice's leaning back like that and she couldn't tell if it was coming from Alice or from the unseen camera' (p. 40).

Mrs Liddell reads with suspicion to perceive a subtext that imitates twentieth-century criticism. As chief witness for the prosecution, Alice's mother senses a tangible, diffused desire in Dodgson's photographs. She feels Dodgson's presence, so much so, that 'she wanted the outer frame of the photograph to expand to include Mr. Dodgson hunched behind his camera' (p. 40). Hunt also colours the images with critical views to similarly understand that 'somehow Dodgson managed to get himself into the

photographs. One could not avoid his thoughts. They were right there, wistful and furious and sepia-toned' (p. 201). Sepia tones, on one hand suggestive of soothed sensibilities, are now described by Hunt as potentially 'illicit': 'the dark greenish colour added an additional layer of illicitness to the pictures' (p. 201); 'otherness' becomes charged with exoticism and eroticism. With an emphasis on affective sensitivity based on instinct, 'a *feeling* of disturbance' (p. 197, my emphasis), Mrs Liddell imagines possibilities from the image: 'She felt the invisible potential of the situation' (p. 42).

It is invisible potential that Roiphe has made visible in the diary entries. Following the logic of striptease, Roiphe ultimately imagines Dodgson recording a nude study of Alice. Carroll did take nude photographs of children, most of which were destroyed on his instruction after his death, but there is no evidence that he photographed Alice in this way. Yet Roiphe imagines diary confession of a production scene and the resulting scandalous furore when the images of '*Alice sans habillement*' (p. 186, original emphasis) come to light and cataclysmically end Dodgson's association with the Liddell family. Later, when confronted with Dodgson's nude photograph of Alice, Mrs Liddell will retrace the novel's striptease to recover an earlier scene, where what was then 'the perfectly ordinary sight of Mr. Dodgson and Alice on the swing' (p. 111) develops sinister overtones:

She saw the expanse of stomach, silver in the light. Flesh of her. She remembered, such narrow thighs, such thin arms, the swing blowing the wind, blue dress billowing. The rags that had been there before and were not now. Slipped off. [...] Her own shame laid out for everyone to see. (p. 191)

Labouring to protect and fortify an insecure class history, Mrs Liddell 'was embarrassed that her middle daughter should seem so uncared for, even though she lived in a perfectly ordered house' (p. 14). An early description of Alice foreshadows 'the inevitable progression of disorder' (p. 14) that culminates in Mrs Liddell confronting photographs of Alice 'completely bare and divested of her secret' (p. 186).

Roiphe refracts the photograph through a kaleidoscope of multiple reflections – a complex pattern of changing shapes and tones in order to tell the story of the ‘Beggar Maid’ image. Illustrating different styles of gaze that ‘read’ the image, she also reveals the image patterned through a neo-Victorian lens. As an emergent technology in the nineteenth century, photography is a subject of interest to neo-Victorian novels like Helen Humphreys’s *Afterimage* (2001), Susan Barrett’s *Fixing Shadows* (2005) – ‘engaged in a little illicit photography’, and Michael Redhill’s *Consolation* (2006), which all focus on the processes of photography in detailed production scenes that challenge Victorian social and moral mores.<sup>85</sup> Roiphe, however, confusingly implies that Carroll’s and Alice’s production scene cannot be imagined – ‘there are times when one cannot see—the scene unfolding does not take form in the mind’s eye—a thick dust coating the lens’ (p. 175) – only to realise such scene in the final diary entry: ‘I set up the tripod slowly, suddenly old & weak & doddering. The light against the red sofa, with its swirling Japanese flowers. Alice is leaning back, chewing on her hair. She bends down & removes one of her boots’ (p. 175).

Implying that imagination alone fails to produce such a scene, Roiphe expands her pastiche to find simulation or substitution in a surviving photograph of a different Victorian child. Carol Mavor devotes a chapter in her provocative book, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (1995), to discuss a nude image of another child friend of Carroll’s, Evelyn Hatch (c.1878). Mavor explains what she sees: ‘she catches our eye and confronts us with her own gaze [...] as she lies before us sprawled as a tiny odalisque’.<sup>86</sup> She draws on Nina Auerbach’s discussion of the same photograph, which states, ‘some embarrassed viewers have tried to see no sexuality in these photographs, but it seems to me needlessly apologetic to

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<sup>85</sup> Susan Barrett, *Fixing Shadows* (London: Review, 2005), p. 111. Helen Humphreys admits ‘loosely imagined renderings’ of Julia Margaret Cameron’s studio scenes. ‘Author’s note’, *Afterimage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), no page number.

<sup>86</sup> Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1996), p. 11.

deny the eroticism of this beautiful little odalisque'.<sup>87</sup> If we revisit Dodgson's fictional diary entry that describes his nightmare vision of Alice, it would, in fact, appear to pastiche both this photograph of Evelyn Hatch (see Figure 4.2), and Mavor's and/or Auerbach's critical commentaries:

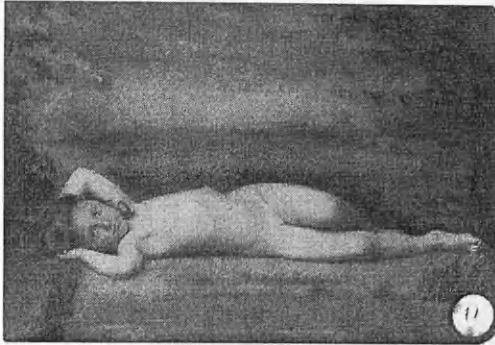


Figure 4.2 Evelyn Hatch (1871-1951) by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) 1879, no title.

May 27, 1862  
The dreams are worse. [...] *She lies like a tiny odalisque*, her arms folded beneath her head, her hair (somehow longer and curlier like someone out of Dante Rossetti or Burne-Jones) flowing against a pillow, her small hips curving to the side, bones protruding. (pp. 81-82, my emphasis)

Roiphe's pastiche elides Evelyn with Alice to demonstrate a refraction or patchwork of critical studies pregnant with overt and hidden parodies.

Significantly, Evelyn's/Alice's image appears to Dodgson again in a dream or nightmares, suggesting that images like this one haunt the subconscious to blur 'evidence' with dark imaginings. Codes drawn variously from nonsense, myth, image, and history merge as history retells the birth of nonsense, which leads to myth that draws on photographs for verification, reminding us of Dick Hebdige's argument that pastiche celebrates proliferating sources and readings rather than isolating and deconstructing the single text or utterance.<sup>88</sup> The diary frames a truly fragmented collage of repetitions and moves us deeper into a muddling mire of competing discourses that only foreground doubt and hesitation. Roiphe's allusion to this image is either in the spirit of parody or further demonstrates a critical and artistic pastiche.

Exploring what the novel terms 'a sort of subterranean marriage of their destinies' (p. 218), Roiphe illustrates that historical understanding of Alice Liddell is inseparable from Carroll's photographs – whether of her or others, both those extant and

<sup>87</sup> Nina Auerbach cited by Mavor, p 12.

<sup>88</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 191.

imagined. She also illustrates that these images are incestuously enmeshed with the *Alice* stories. Roiphe's Alice is fleshed out by a combination of diary description and reference to 'the permanence of the image' (p. 8). Alice's images may indeed capture the past, but they nonetheless continue to frustrate our understanding. Alice is 'caught [...] like a fly frozen in amber' (p. 200) but, stationary and sealed in her time, she is essentially unattainable – an object to view and interpret, but not reanimate. Discussing 'frustrations' in interpreting Victorian photographs, Jennifer Green-Lewis suggests that

The Victorians continue to exist in the absolute and paradoxical present of the photograph, always there yet gone forever; both in, and out, of history; always already dead – yet still alive. Yet, although much has been made about the distinctively Victorian characteristics of photography, how it so perfectly embodies the obsessions of the period, there is a far more obviously postmodern quality to the frustrations of our relationship with it. No effort, however extraordinary, will every yield access to a photograph and permit the viewer, Alice-like, to climb through its frame into another world.<sup>89</sup>

Offering no more clear answers than the diary gaps, we may be forever destined to puzzle over Carroll's photographs with unanswered questions, but Roiphe incorporates the frame of the photograph into a diary frame to imagine access 'into another world'. However, a *mise-en-abyme* of Chinese-box embeddings demonstrates that fiction may either parody and manipulate material and 'evidence' to suit prescriptive agendas or demonstrate the workings of a pastiche that borrows and reorganises materials to suit revisionary narratives. Gaps in our understanding of Carroll's photograph function in very similar ways to our perception of his missing diary pages: both impel and give free rein to an altered cultural imagination.

## 8. Postscript: Letters and Power

Letters provide a more complete and intimate record of Carroll than his diary. Yet Roiphe marginalises Dodgson as letter writer in her novel and positions correspondence

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<sup>89</sup> Green-Lewis, 'At Home', p. 31.



in opposition to censored, castrated, and disempowered diary entries. Roiphe may fully imagine Dodgson's diary entries, but she supplements imagined letters with sparse quotations from Carroll's actual correspondence.<sup>90</sup> The diary works to generate sympathy for a controversial view of Dodgson, but the letters testify for the prosecution as represented by Mrs Liddell. Reflecting her role as actual censor of historical documents, Mrs Liddell is empowered in the narrative as authoritative letter-writer and as reader and censor of Dodgson's letters to her daughter. Despite the 'featheriness of her existence' (p. 25), Mrs Liddell is always powerful in Dodgson's (and Roiphe's) drama. Recognising irrefutable evidence that 'her household was becoming disorderly' (p. 198), she unhesitatingly fixes Dodgson and his letters at the corrupt centre of this – a rotten core that must be excised – and she retaliates with her own epistolary artillery.

Letters contain and address the disorder that now begins to spill from the safe confines of a diary frame. Mrs Liddell's punitive pen opposes the disruption occasioned by Dodgson's photographs of Alice and confronts the diary confusion that these represent. Mrs Liddell's letter protects her house by banishing Dodgson and his coded correspondence. She curtails the progress of disorder with epistolary exactitude: '*It is no longer desirable for you to spend time with our family*' (p. 1, original emphasis). Her letter also effectively stills Dodgson's diary pen.

As authoritative letter writer, Mrs Liddell is intelligent, perceptive, astute, suspicious, aware, and all-seeing, whereas Dodgson's diary reveals a writer who is at times self-deceiving and blinded by obsession – 'an old Tiresias' (p. 176), without wisdom. He records his frustrations in an essentially powerless diary narrative, whereas she can and does write and deliver him into exile. Her letter is the most authoritative

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<sup>90</sup> There is confusion in Roiphe's 'Author's Note' to *Still She Haunts Me*: she states that 'the letters quoted in this book, with the exception of those on pages 94 and 193, are real' (p. 225). The two invented letters mimic Carroll's backward letters: '*tseraeD ecilA, I ma kcuts ni a rorrim. EsealP pleh em. sruoY yletanoitceffA, selrahC nosgdoD*' (p. 94) and also distort Carroll's famous habit of dividing kisses: 'I send you 1/two millionth of a kiss' (p. 193). However, a thrice quoted letter saying, 'it is no longer desirable for you to spend time with our family' (p. 1; p. 3; p. 206) is patently fictional. Without noting this anomaly, Brooker observes that 'the letter is fictional, but, of course, sounds suitably formal-Victorian'. Brooker, p. 183.

document of the novel; the narrative, in fact, opens with the announcement: ‘the letter came by the afternoon post’ (p. 1). The diary may half open the door for Dodgson’s imagination of Alice, but Mrs Liddell seals the threshold with her letter ‘folded like a closed door’ (p. 1).

Mrs Liddell provides ‘the look of another’ who, with epistolary force, overturns Dodgson’s ‘protected power equation’ to unmask and disable the voyeur. Kincaid argues that

Requisite to voyeurism is not just seeing, but doing so from a position of concealment, because concomitant with the insistence on seeing is the insistence on *never being seen*, which arises from the fear that the look of another will overturn the carefully manipulated and protected power equation, threatening to make the voyeur the object of the new viewer’s mastering vision.<sup>91</sup>

Critical attempts to master Carroll are pastiched in the character of Mrs Liddell. Dodgson first spies Mrs Liddell through his camera lens, but she turns *her* surreptitious gaze on him to watch him watching her daughter and in this way believes, like contemporary commentators, that ‘she sees through him’ (p. 25).

Carroll’s actual letters, in fact, offer a more transparent view of him than his opaque diaries. Letters to Alice may have been destroyed, but legions of them to other child friends survive. These reveal a side to his character that opposes his actual dull diary persona. Whereas his diaries detail a frequently penitent and repressed or stifled and humourless character, his letters reveal a sparkling wit and inventive epistolary ingenuity. However, they also illustrate that he could be manipulative and needy and, at times, petulant if his epistolary demands for attention were not met. He charms, persuades, and wheedles both child friends and their mothers for more time and attention and also badgers for parental consent to photograph little girls ‘with *carte blanche* as to dress’.<sup>92</sup> Roiphe ignores this angle, preferring to concentrate on the

<sup>91</sup> Kincaid, pp. 304-05, original emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Letter to A. L. Mayhew, May 27, 1879’, in *Selected Letters*, ed. by Morton N. Cohen, p. 88. Lindsay Smith argues that ‘a transference of his sense of transgression of propriety to an unhealthy suspicion on

inimitable entertainment value of letters that were constructed with codes, puns, and all manner of innovative, paratextual embellishments that ‘unwittingly’ earned Carroll, according to Cohen, ‘a place in the history of epistolary art’.<sup>93</sup>

Roiphe represents Alice receiving Dodgson’s riddling letters with delight:

He sent letters you had to hold up to a mirror. Letters you had to read with a magnifying glass. Letters made up of small pictures. Letters that made you feel that no one else could read them even if they tried. Only your cleverness, your unique quality of mind, could turn the nonsensical scribbling into alphabetical coherency. There was the flutter of fear that you wouldn’t understand them and then the relief when you did. And then the lingering sense, when you’d actually written out the translation, that there was something else there, still hidden. (p. 94)

Mrs Liddell, on the other hand, examines the unconventional letters with a critical eye and reads only a perversion of correspondence that concentrates on hidden messages:

She held up one letter that was written backward and meant to be deciphered in a mirror. Why all of these codes?

[...] *I send you 1/two millionth of a kiss*, she read to herself. 1/two millionth of a kiss! What kind of man divides a kiss into two millionths, she thought, as she tore the purple-inked page into pieces. He is not even a man, he is 1/two millionth of a man. It’s the single most depraved thing I have ever encountered, she thought, trying to hide himself behind geometry. [...]

A whole woman is too much for him, she thought. 3/8ths of a woman is not. (p. 193, original emphasis)

Mrs Liddell deciphers Dodgson’s codes with a suspicious adult eye. Notably, Roiphe infects Mrs Liddell with a disturbing fluidity of thought – a mind at one point ‘damp and tropical from reading’ (p. 56) – to suggest that, just as Alice identifies a ‘damp look’ (p. 178) in Dodgson’s eyes, familiar dark thoughts also muddy the river of her mother’s mind. What is one person’s genius is another’s ‘purple prose’. The representation of Dodgson and his letters in this novel reflects the duality and contradictions of his overall critical position. He and his writings, with their riddles,

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the part of a child’s parents typifies Carroll’s epistolary use of consent’. *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children, and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 100.

<sup>93</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 181.

looking-glass reversals and acrostic rhymes, can be either deplored as dangerously disordered or praised as imaginative artistry.

## Conclusion

Roiphe's novel explores ideas of Carroll and the mysteries of his diary and entails readers as voyeuristic diary snoopers who seek revelatory answers to retrospective questions. The novel emphasises Armit's point that, 'however hard we work to keep in mind the realisation that these pages are false, we *will* the false back into truth', thus implying that we impose our own ideas of what this should be.<sup>94</sup> This perhaps lies at the heart of neo-Victorian fiction's appeal for writers and readers. We search fiction for the real. Identification of actual Victorian personages communicates some disallowed core authenticity, with fiction supplementing a thin diet of historical fact. Roiphe's novel is about our construction of the Victorians – what we look for, what we hope to find, and how we rewrite the past by imposing our own ideas upon them. Roiphe's diary feeds the fevered imaginations that conjure a deviant portrait of Carroll. She uses the diary as a kind of iconotropic device to deliberately misinterpret an icon or myth of an earlier culture to suit a later one. Roiphe's fictive diary distorts evidence of Carroll's actual document as a record 'replete with prayers, protestations, and self-chastisement [that] offers little introspection' – textual evidence that opposes salacious story.<sup>95</sup> Materialising a fictional Dodgson in an imagined confessional diary frame simulates not Carroll's hidden voice and secrets but demonstrates readers pastiching an 'inner landscape' (p. 194) tainted with transgressive desire.

Roiphe's reputation for controversy and anti-feminist challenge may flirt with cultural anarchy, but her venture into fiction suggests a similar type of nostalgia to Byatt's is at work. Both writers evidence their desire to preserve a sense of spiritual and

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<sup>94</sup> Armit, p. 169, original emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, *Biography*, p. 197.

imaginative aura for nineteenth-century artists and their writings. Roiphe appears to subscribe to Byatt's point that 'we like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive'.<sup>96</sup> Roiphe's therefore embraces distance between past and present and celebrates the sense of otherness that envelops and seals period difference. Outside Dodgson's diary, the narrative asks for understanding with the following rhetorical question:

Is it better the way it is? To feel right next to his face the dusky olive skin, and not to touch; to feel the suspension of all desire, never to be acted upon, diffused; to remain forever in a state of anticipation, the emotion purified and clarified and refined by pain, by the long hours spent observing it and not inhabiting it. (p. 123)

Roiphe appears to ask readers to accept, as our contemporary condition, this state of suspense, of never knowing – only observing, to remain in a similar state to Dodgson: fixed in Zeno's paradox, 'stuck forever in that state of almost having. To remain in motion, going toward her and she toward him, though they are never going to reach each other' (p. 123). The gap must remain in place – breached, but not closed. As Anne Carson suggests 'a space must be maintained or desire ends'.<sup>97</sup> Roiphe therefore fills the gaps with impossible suggestion, only to ritualistically expurgate the diary text once again, evidencing Stewart's suggestion that 'nostalgia is enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself. Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss'.<sup>98</sup> Mystery and unknowability continue with speculation and the potential for narrative forever kept in motion because the destination is never reached.

Carroll and his silences are therefore a gift to story-tellers and literary critics. The debate expands and grows as contemporary theorists imbibe their own evolving theories to examine Alice and Carroll through a critically splintered looking-glass. The diary has an intimate relationship with the mirror, but it is more the ever-changing symmetries of a kaleidoscope lens, revealing 'a relentless exchange of images that never

<sup>96</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Stewart, p. 145.

quite come to rest in time and space', that Roiphe incorporates into a diary frame.<sup>99</sup> The real diary defies what some believe (or hope?) Carroll wrote, offering no confession of suspected secrets. Undoubtedly, if Carroll's diary had contained anything like Roiphe's imaginings, then he would today be confirmed and condemned as a paedophile. Intriguingly, proven cases of Victorian child-lovers generate less controversy and debate than the abundant suspicions and doubts engendered by Carroll's abruptly censored documents. What do we want from the Victorians – fact, 'truth', or a fading palimpsest on which to imprint our own ideas and fascinations? Roiphe suggests that 'the exact truth cannot be pinned down because the truth is not there. The truth is somewhere in between' (p. 203). In this case, Hutcheon's point that riddles and enigmas are perfect postmodern analogues renders Lewis Carroll the perfect Victorian for the postmodern imagination.

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<sup>99</sup> Groth, p. 218.

Chapter Five  
**A Dissident Diary:**  
 The Superfluous Other in Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man*

*Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.*

John Stuart Mill  
*On Liberty* (1859)<sup>1</sup>

*Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect; and to trace the course of one complete series of events.*

Wilkie Collins  
*The Woman in White* (1860)<sup>2</sup>

Katie Roiphe capitalises on the enduring fascination that famous Victorians hold in the contemporary imagination and, like A. S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, clearly subscribes to the avid neo-Victorian interest in sexuality. Such interest is not, however, notably evident in Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* (1997), which makes this novel of anomalous interest for the genre. This final chapter therefore examines a diary narrative that more particularly concentrates on nineteenth-century class relations. Jackson's novel is comprised largely of diary extracts, which appear under the repeated heading 'From His Grace's Journal'. There is no formal conceit of an editor for the diary, but entries are interpolated with accounts from various estate workers and community members to form a collective posthumous report. This chapter examines how a polyphonic narrative constructs a form of textual autopsy or case study and considers how conformist community discourse interrupts a non-conformist diary voice. With no paratextual devices explaining the diary as a found document, readers must evaluate a diary point of view in the context of interpolated community commentary.<sup>3</sup> Parallel

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Forgotten Books: www.forgottenbooks.org, 2008 [1859]), p.81 <<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ScTePJKjiTMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=john+stuart+mill+%2B+on+liberty#PPA6,M1>> [accessed 28 February 2009]

<sup>2</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1860]), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with, for instance, Susan Daitch's neo-Victorian text *L. C.* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1986), which cautions reading 'with an element of mistrust', p. 5; or Valerie Martin's 2003 novel

narratives debate the Duke's eccentricity and insanity whilst simultaneously subverting the potential tyranny of gossip and rumour to ask historiographic metafiction's big question: 'Whose truth gets told'.<sup>4</sup>

Neo-Victorianism understands the nineteenth century as a culture of centres and margins, yet *The Underground Man* distorts this understanding in two respects. The novel unusually generates sympathy for an eccentric aristocratic figure, rather than channelling this for those more usually marginalised by sexuality or deviance, or as lower-class and Jackson notably does not visit 'the forbidden land of Victorian sexuality' that Christian Gutleben argues is the topography of Victorianism.<sup>5</sup> Despite an insistent focus on the body, the novel sidesteps the customary neo-Victorian interest in sexual secrets.<sup>6</sup> The Duke is curiously asexual with a type of innocence that is rare in neo-Victorian fiction. He is cast in a re-imagined Victorian world that sees him adrift in a sea of wealth, privilege, and all attendant responsibilities of his aristocratic position. His diary record obsessively details his bodily functions (often in Gothic terms), but mention of sexuality – tortuous or otherwise – is eschewed.

Taking the eccentricities of the fifth Duke of Portland, William John Cavendish-Bentinck-Scott, as its historical 'point of departure', Jackson's novel is a pastiche work that traces an eclectic range of nineteenth-century diarists ranging from the European tradition of diary fiction to Victorian Gothic.<sup>7</sup> Jackson's diarist resonates with a nineteenth-century fictional 'type': a misfit or dreamer named by Ivan Turgenev in *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* in 1850 and later explored by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *Notes*

*Mary Reilly*, where the editor admits to taking 'various liberties with Mary's text to prepare it for publication' including omitting one surviving volumes. (London: Abacus, 2003), p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 123, original emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Gutleben claims this is 'one of postmodern narratives' favourite games destined to provide new, iconoclastic versions of an allegedly rigid tradition'. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> In his article 'The Afterlife of Victorian Sexuality: Foucault and Neo-Victorian Historical fiction', Jonathan Loesberg deems such interest the 'vice-like grip of th[e] story about sexual repression on our historical narrative about the Victorians'. *Clio*, 36 (2007), 361-89 (p. 361).

<sup>7</sup> Mick Jackson, 'Author's Note', *The Underground Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007 [1997]), p. 265. All other references to this text will be given parenthetically.



from *The Underground* (1864).<sup>8</sup> Neo-Victorian fiction bridges past and present with self-conscious intent to compare and contrast two time periods and emphasise either differences or similarities between then and now. In this respect, the title of Jackson's novel clearly indicates his intertextual borrowing and foregrounds engagement with those nineteenth-century writers who debated questions of conformity and the angst of non-conformity with the help of diary strategies. Echoing insanity from Gogol, Wertherian sentiment from Goethe, superfluity from Turgenev, a Gothic sensibility from Poe, and Dostoevsky's heteroglossia, Jackson's Duke is an underground man of some diversity – a pastiche character who suggests Hutcheon's idea of 'ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity'.<sup>9</sup>

The Duke resembles Dostoevsky's underground man who fretted his daily discontent in a personal diary to record: 'I am a sick man. ... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased'.<sup>10</sup> Jackson's Duke also believes that he is sick and his body is 'at war with itself!' (p. 121) and his diary is predominantly concerned with recording and debating his uncertain symptoms and potential cures. However, Jackson's alternative history emphasises difference within similarity by supplanting 'spite' with pathos and black comedy. This results in an imitative text that is also transformative, as Jackson elides parodic intent with pastiche practice. Humour distinguishes the Duke from the relentless negativity of the nineteenth-century model and helps exempt him from Lorna Martens's verdict that the Russian diarists were 'demonic amoral heroes'.<sup>11</sup> A heteroglossic diary narrative displaces the implicit

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<sup>8</sup> Further examples include Mixail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) and Ivan Goncharov's idle, daydreaming noble in *Oblomov* (1859). English fictional diarists that conform to the type include George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1888) and George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903). Henry Ryecroft, a man of morbid moods and preoccupations with nature, his diet, and health particularly resonates with Jackson's Duke.

<sup>9</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes From The Underground* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992 [1864]), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 108.

condemnation that Ellen Chances claims was evident in representation of the Russian superfluous man with authorial sympathy for the Duke's non-conformist eccentricities.<sup>12</sup>

The historical Duke of Portland has enduring notoriety as an eccentric, a mythology that stems principally from his unexplained passion for tunnel building beneath his estate.<sup>13</sup> Jackson develops documented stories of the Duke's eccentricities in ways that correspond with Gutleben's observation that 'the retro-Victorian novel proposes new visions and versions of what has become a mythology of the past'.<sup>14</sup> As Roland Barthes suggests, 'myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion' and Jackson inflects a Victorian Gothic style into his fictionalised version of the Duke's eccentricity.<sup>15</sup> As an enduring outsider to community gossip, the Duke communes with his diary to record both his maladies and his escapist imagination. The Duke's visions, dreams, and imaginative excesses may be symptomatic of non-conformity, but his point of view is validated by diary authority as the novel's privileged and sympathetic form of narrative.

Jackson uses humour and irony to articulate difference and diversity. The diary organises a gentle, self-reflexive style of comedy that guides a sympathetic reading of the Duke's muddling ways, with more pointed satire directed against conformist behaviour. Wayne C. Booth suggests that 'sympathetic laughter is never easily achieved. It is much easier to set up a separate fool for comic effects and to preserve your [hero] for finer things'.<sup>16</sup> I suggest that diary form aids the production of sympathetic laughter in various ways: as an expressive base, it coerces readers to read a confessional sincere voice sympathetically because, as H. Porter Abbott observes, 'the

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<sup>12</sup> Ellen Chances, *Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature* (Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1978), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> See Tom Freeman-Keel and Andrew Croft, *The Disappearing Duke* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Gutleben, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 246.

expressive text is assumed to be transparent. Through it, the emotion of the writer becomes that of the reader'.<sup>17</sup> In this way, diary characteristics expressively promote collusion with the Duke's perspective. Jackson variously shores up such pro-sympathetic generic feature by presenting the Duke in an apparent state of second-childhood, which lends the diary account a naive and vulnerable air of a self-confessed 'whimsical old fool' (p. 149), and further, amid a consolidated barrage of public accounts, one contemplative diarist's appeal for understanding creates sympathy for a lone and alienated position. Finally, neo-Victorianism's more usual interest in sexuality is eclipsed, as readers are invited to sympathise with the Duke's somatic complaints and to recognise continuing present-day concerns about decay and the aging body.

This chapter examines how *The Underground Man* organises a case history as individual community members – self-appointed diagnosticians – posthumously evidence the Duke's life and decline. As the Duke's sanity is in question, the case history incorporates a pastiche of medical discourses, including conventional medical wisdom, alternative remedies and cures, and hypochondria that ultimately all surrender to an overriding Gothic morbidity of body and diary narrative. Engaging a larger debate where conformity opposes non-conformity, diary discourse strategically deconstructs outside testimony to reveals its rootedness in class misunderstanding, envy, and hypocrisy. Like Margaret Prior in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), the Duke is subject to a policing public gaze that is alert to suspicions of aberrant behaviour. The novel's community of voices may interrupt the Duke's diary voice, but they do not colonise it. Rather the Duke's account frames their reports to ratify and verify his eccentric view of the world. I therefore investigate how one subjective, private diary voice illuminates and defends an eccentric point of view at odds with the conformist majority. Diary self-

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<sup>17</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 55.

reflexivity exposes the collective public voice as a gossiping network that effectively segregates the Duke as an outsider from his community.

### 1. Case History and Testimony

The diary entries extracted by an unknown and unseen hand, evidenced by their headings, ‘*From his Grace’s Journal*’, suggest that this text has become part of a posthumous report.<sup>18</sup> Case histories, confessions, coroners’ reports, and the seeing required of autopsy are all suggested by combining the Duke’s confessional diary with interpolated accounts or testimony from the local community.<sup>19</sup> In the Duke’s quest for somatic enlightenment, it becomes clear that his body is the property of the community. As the subject of a communal case study, his body and health are debated, subject to rumour, advice, and proffered remedies. Readers are invited similarly to examine a ‘body’ of textual evidence gathered from posthumous readings of the Duke’s body – a form of autopsy.

Autopsy, from the Greek *autopsia* (the act of seeing with one’s own eyes), is an examination of a body after death to determine the cause of death or the character and extent of changes produced by disease: it is a critical examination, evaluation or assessment of someone or something past. If the Duke’s diary is deemed his ‘flesh made word’ – that is, a textual representation of his body and its aging decay – then, following his accidental death, our reading, our perception, our ‘seeing’ calls for examination of the body/diary and evaluation or assessment of the past.<sup>20</sup> The diary narrates past events, whereas the accounts are implicitly concurrent with the temporal

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<sup>18</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> When discussing medical case studies, it is illuminating to consider Samuel Warren’s *Passages from The Diary of a Late Physician* (1832-37). Serialised in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, it caused considerable consternation for the Victorians, as Warren wilfully confused true stories – or medical case histories – with fictional imitations. The ‘diary’ mimicked clinical case history and its Gothic discourse anticipated Sensation Fiction. See Meegan Kennedy, ‘The Ghost in the Clinic: Gothic Medicine and Curious Fiction in Samuel Warren’s *Diary of a Later Physician*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32 (2004), 327-51.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One’s Own: People and Their Diaries* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p. xvii.

moment of inquest into the Duke's death. The Duke's diary is literally dissected by these interrupting accounts. Analysing his state of mind, those who testify take apart the Duke's textual construction of himself. Just as public voices dissect or anatomise the Duke's body after his death, readers are also invited to critically assess the diary as a form of case history.

In her study of Victorian illness, Athena Vrettos suggests that case histories are narratives that recreate the diseased body in the process of diagnosis.<sup>21</sup> Diagnosis, of course, requires a diagnostician and I suggest that Jackson assigns this role to readers. Readers are invited to assume the role of direct addressee for oral accounts and as a result become what Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as the 'superaddressee':

Any utterance always has an addressee (of various sorts, with varying degrees of proximity, concreteness, awareness, and so forth), whose responsive understanding the author of the speech work seeks and surpasses. This is the second party [...]. But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher *superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee). In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth).<sup>22</sup>

Jackson appears to presuppose the 'ideally true' reader as superaddressee – after all, any adjudication requires a fair-minded juror to come to the 'right' or 'just' decision – and the Duke's direct address to readers and Jackson's subtly orientated sympathy call for this.

The accounts appear as oral testimonies with two audiences: the implied (unseen) interlocutor or interviewer and the extradiegetic reader. The context is not

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<sup>21</sup> Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern McGee (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 126, original emphasis.

specified explicitly and rests on the word ‘account’, but, as Jacob Mey points out, ‘context is also a *creative* factor in the production of text’; therefore, without explication, context becomes a site of questioning and an openly creative factor for readers.<sup>23</sup> The presence of an interlocutor may be perceived in speakers’ addresses. But we are not directly influenced by the interviewer’s questions or responses, although we may perceive the type of questions asked from the responses given. The interviewees in turn pose rhetorical questions of their own that emphasise their social/class position or perspective. For instance, housekeeper Mrs Pledger asks, ‘What is one to make of that?’ (p. 198) to indignantly invite support for her sense of injustice rather than sympathy for the Duke’s absent-mindedness and the housemaid emphasises a marginal, usually unvoiced position by saying, ‘You’re quite sure it is all right for me to speak?’ (p. 231).

In this way, testifiers call for reciprocal understanding to support their reasoning and often ask that readers/listeners use their imagination to identify with their positions. Mr Bird, garden landscaper and tunnel designer, repeats, ‘as you can imagine’ and ‘well, you can picture the scene yourself, I’m sure’ (p. 18); groomsman, Mr Grimshaw, a man of morbid imagination, emphasises his subjective opinion: ‘I imagine’, ‘to my mind’, or ‘it’s my opinion’ (p. 26). A slanderous ‘Local Woman’ calls for no reciprocal imagination in her perfunctory account – hers is perhaps enough for all. Conversely, Mrs Pledger and postman Mr Hendley demonstrate little imagination themselves and plainly state their narrow and subjective opinions. The delegate maid’s imagination appears fanciful and over-developed; primed or ‘warned’ by Mrs Pledger of the Duke’s peculiarities, ‘that he was confused enough to begin with’ (p. 231), the maidservant reports the Duke’s eccentric behaviour and includes hearsay from friends and colleagues in her narrative for good measure.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob L. Mey, *When Voices Clash: A Study in Literary Pragmatics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), p. 38, original emphasis.

The integrity of witnesses is, in fact, dependent on their commitment to truth telling. There is a muted suggestion that this may not always be at the forefront of their testimony. The characters may self-proclaim their ‘honesty’ – Mr Bird’s interjection, ‘well, to be honest’ (p. 17), is repeated by the housemaid (p. 231); Mr Bowen, the stonemason, states, ‘to be honest’ and ‘If I’m honest’ (pp. 44-45), echoed by Mr Hendley (p. 169) – but does their phrasing emphasise honesty, or raise suspicions that one is not habitually honest? This reflects tensions between reportage and story, as Jackson opens up community testimony to doubt, which encourages readers’ alliance with the Duke’s confiding diary voice. Martens suggests that ‘in the case of fictional first-person narrative we have no actual person to contrast the validity of the self-expression to’.<sup>24</sup> Yet Jackson’s novel asks readers to compare and contrast the Duke’s diary with the various accounts that interrupt him. The narrative effect is one that asks readers to actively test the validity of all self-expression.

Readers are therefore required to be interrogative. As Bernard Duyfhuizen argues:

to engage a text of hybrid narrative transmission is to engage a narrative matrix that connects different voices and different acts of writing within what appears to be a unified whole, yet such hybrid texts also enact a competition for priority among the linked, enclosed, or alternated narrations.<sup>25</sup>

It transpires that, following his accidental death, the Duke’s diary, combined with community commentary or accounts, may very well be read as a form of autopsy or coroner’s report. Readers are unaware of this until the close of the narrative and the line between gossip and official report is therefore unclear on first reading the novel. But separating truth from gossip is a function of the Coroner’s procedure, as Ian Burney suggests:

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<sup>24</sup> Martens, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 123.

The inquest's peculiar liminality was recognised, and often celebrated, well into the nineteenth century, as an 1883 *Spectator* editorial amply demonstrates: 'The Coroner's Court is full of gossip, but it is sifted gossip, and it is much better that gossip should be sifted there than it should float around unsifted, to poison a whole countryside. [...] A Coroner's Court, which constantly, and with its gossipy way, sweeps away a rumour which otherwise would be miasmatic'.<sup>26</sup>

This sifting process suggests, therefore, that the Coroner's Court aimed to reduce the spread or contagion of gossip as disease or corrupting atmosphere in association with, (as Burney points out), "'English liberties", which served as a "framing discourse" for medical and non-medical commentators alike'.<sup>27</sup> The Duke's diary address functions as a frame within a frame and calls on readers to adjudicate with superaddressee responsibilities. In the absence of an acknowledged internal reader, the accounts appear addressed to extradiegetic readers. Reciprocation is invited and guidance for readers can be read in the heteroglossic diary text.

## 2. Diary vs. Gossip and Hypocrisy

Jackson interrogates gossip and tale telling as the collaborative and corroborative origins of an eccentric reputation. The interpolated accounts of the Duke's neighbours and estate workers verify his diary record either by positive affirmation or by illustrating that the Duke is subject to misleading or pernicious gossip. Jan B. Gordon suggests that 'gossip, by its very nature, is isolated and unenclosed'; it 'can never be recovered', yet Jackson encloses it in representative accounts that transform gossip to official testimony.<sup>28</sup> In order to provide a responding defence, the Duke's diary undergoes a similar transformation from private to public discourse as part of a posthumous official report. This works as testimony in different ways: firstly, the

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<sup>26</sup> Ian Burney, *Bodies of Evidence: Medicine and the Politics of the English Inquest, 1830-1926* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Burney, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Jan B. Gordon, 'Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative Tenant and the Problematic of the Gothic Sequel', *ELH*, 51 (1984), 719- 45 (p. 723).



Duke's diary counteracts gossip by actively addressing its anonymous base to make a direct appeal to similarly anonymous readers:

Once or twice I have overheard men talking, where the exchange of information has been driven not by benevolence but the profoundest spite. Nothing in the world moves at half the speed as a rumour with the scent of scandal to it. Have we not all been guilty, at one time or another, of repeating the words a better man would have kept to himself? Yet, to some people news of another's misfortune – whether true or purely speculative – is their bread and butter. (p. 112)

This address breaks the frame of diary self-reflection as the Duke invites readers to empathise with his viewpoint. Readers are drawn into the debate and encouraged to affiliate themselves with the Duke in opposition to those testifying outside the diary frame.

The Duke's status and eccentricity encourages gossip and divides him from the community. The diary illustrates that he is to some extent misunderstood and misread as a subject of public imaginative discourse. By illustrating that a collective, gossipy imagination creates its own fiction, the Duke's diary is counterpoised to defend his imaginative speculation on the workings of his world and body. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that, 'as subject matter, gossip impels plots' and suggests that storytelling does impose order and meaning, but distortion of events can leave victims of misunderstanding in its wake.<sup>29</sup> Creativity rather than veracity is emphasised in Jackson's view that 'communities are good at creating stories. They'll develop, amend, embroider in a way that writers do'.<sup>30</sup> This is graphically developed in the short, abrupt account, which is supplied by someone named only as 'A Local Woman' (p. 115). Such anonymity suggests that she may either represent one of many or perhaps personify the ubiquity of gossip (unimaginatively stereotyped as female). Gordon discusses

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Marianne Brace, 'Mick Jackson: Fables with a sting in the tale', *Independent*, 8 September 2001, section Books <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/mick-jackson-fables-with-a-sting-in-the-tale-751843.html>> [accessed 20 January 2009]

anonymity and the genesis of gossip in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a text structured largely by diary form:

The author of gossip tends to be an anonymously democratic 'anyone' who cannot be identified as an origin and hence held responsible. All who participate in gossip are mediators, who invariably heard it from someone else. And it is potent in shaping reputations and responses to people or events in direct proportion to the dilution of its author(itative) base. Because it is essentially a speech-act, gossip can never be 'recovered' in either sense in which we typically use that word – recaptured in its original form or covered over and stopped.<sup>31</sup>

I suggest that the 'Local Woman's Account' illustrates a reactive base which persists in framing the Duke. Her anonymous short account may be intended as beneath serious notice and, therefore, swiftly discounted. The local gossip's account may appear ludicrous on one level, but it nevertheless filters what Spacks calls 'distilled malice' into the narrative and therefore indicates a real threat to the Duke's reputation, as anonymity suggests many voices may be empowered collectively to adjudicate against one.<sup>32</sup> The 'Local Woman's' brief statement plays to base rumour and defamatorily suggests that the Duke was 'deformed very bad as a result of syphilis. His old body was riddled with it, right from top to toe' (p. 115). This is a false rumour that dogged the actual Duke. Her account, based on hearsay and 'reported' third-hand, constructs a stereotype of decadent aristocracy – a fictional monster:

My husband knows a man who saw the old Duke face to face, just as close as I stand here next to you. He says his left eye was a good two inches higher than the right one and that he dribbled from the corner of his mouth the whole time. A terrible sight to behold, he was. The children would run a mile from him or be struck dumb on the spot. And there's plenty others round here that'll back me up on that score. You knock on any door. Shocking, that's the old Duke for you. A shocking sight all round. (p. 115)

Her calculation of this decadent stereotype arises from (as Mr Bird earlier suggested) a search for a reason why the Duke would organise tunnels and her scurrilous conclusion, 'so he could hide his terrible face from view and pop up out of the ground at will' (p.

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon, pp. 722-23.

<sup>32</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 4.

115), is patently preposterous.<sup>33</sup> Placing the novel at odds with an overdeveloped neo-Victorian interest in nineteenth-century sexuality, any suggestion of dark sexual secrets in this text is contained in the local woman's short perfidious 'Account', framed to be read with distrust. Nevertheless, the testimony suggests the insidious influence of inflammatory gossip and imitates its usual anonymous base.

### 3. Diary Defence, Sympathy, and Authorial Polemic

Public gossip is counteracted by Jackson's sympathetic polemic that is embedded in diary heteroglossia. Diary form in the novel indeed suggests, like Dostoevsky's intertextual model, that 'authorial understanding is very subtly and carefully refracted through the words of the hero-narrators'.<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin observes that Dostoevsky's works, in fact, began with the '*refracting word* – with the epistolary form'<sup>35</sup> and Jackson similarly employs the diary to refract both the Victorians and his own voice with 'verbal masquerade'.<sup>36</sup> However, while Dostoevsky's diarist may be permanently preoccupied with how he appears to the outside world, the Duke only intermittently gestures toward this. Disguised polemic must therefore be read differently in *The Underground Man*; the Duke at times reports his interaction with the community in a knowing manner – an acknowledgement that is on other occasions plainly absent. This variation requires readers to test their own perception of conformity, as the novel pursues the theme of madness vs. reason and further flexes a supple line between pastiche and parody.

I suggest that, like Dostoevsky, Jackson shadows his diarist in double-voiced diary discourse. Bakhtin studied Dostoevsky to probe a style of fictional diary writing

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<sup>33</sup> The actual Duke of Portland was subject to rumours of leprosy or some other skin disease to account for his withdrawal from public life.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 205.

<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 204, original emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 259-422 (p. 204).

characterised by the ‘intense anticipation of another’s words’ or ‘an intense sensitivity toward the anticipated words of others’.<sup>37</sup> This resonates with Jackson’s diary narrative, but with twentieth-century gentle irony rather than biting nineteenth-century satire. Dostoyevsky works with a ‘degraded’ variety of such style to demonstrate ‘discourse that cringes with a timid and ashamed sideward glance at the other’s possible response’.<sup>38</sup> This diarist purposely imagines an audience of ‘gentlemen’ in order to help him produce a more ‘dignified’ polemic; but he goes to great lengths to explain is as false – a construct – with no actual readers intended.<sup>39</sup> The Duke does not explicitly debate potential readers, yet his diary presupposes an extradiegetic audience when it poses questions that appear more direct than rhetorical. He intermittently acknowledges and anticipates the words of others in his journal without his whole narrative becoming embroiled in this technique.

Jackson diversely filters affirmative and sympathetic polemic for the Duke’s position. For instance, the Duke expands his diary record to explicitly detail his uncomfortable awareness of awkward encounters. This more clearly spells out potential stories that may arise as a result of these encounters and demonstrates the Duke ‘cringing’ in response to impending criticism. At odds with noble authority, the notion of cringing directs sympathetic interpretation. At these points, the diary not only records event, but also delineates the Duke’s dismayed recognition and understanding of potential reactions and responses of others to his eccentric point of view, thereby disarming any negative reaction. Valerie Raoul suggests:

Like Narcissus, the diarist contemplates himself – though not always favourably. He projects an image of himself in words, but the role of projection and reflection does not end there. He not only sees himself, but is conscious also of others watching him, of watching others, and ultimately of watching himself watching.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 205.

<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 205.

<sup>39</sup> Dostoyevsky, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Valerie Raoul, *The French Fictional Journal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 38.

Awareness of intensified gazes and observation is exemplified in an incident where the Duke mistakes an estate workman's skin complaint for a 'map-tattoo' (p. 107) of Ireland. Once enlightened, and following a misleading conversation concerning treatment, the Duke cringes with acute understanding that the story will be reported to his disadvantage:

It is one of those awful moments that I know will haunt me for many years to come. [...] No doubt while I sit here recording the embarrassing event that same labourer holds court in some nearby alehouse, telling anyone who cares to listen all about the mad old Duke who suggested drinking coal tar to cure his psoriatic scabs. (p. 109)

Here the Duke anticipates the worker assuming the role of 'witness' or empowered story-teller who will 'hold court' to recount his tale of the Duke's eccentricity, with the likelihood that a conformist majority will return a verdict of madness.

In this incident, the Duke is the audience of his own embarrassment. His diary records his awareness of self-observation: 'even as I moulder in a pit of misery some part of me still coolly observes my every move' (p. 149). A sideward glance refracts a further layer to the workman as audience of the Duke's misunderstanding: 'The big chap looked me over very coolly, his eyes narrowing to two tiny slits. When he spoke it was as if he was addressing a backward child. Not *drinks* it, sir. Wipes it on' (p. 109, original emphasis). Here the Duke glances at his public image, and he *does* cringe, likening this feeling to the physical effect of itching powder, deciding that 'the two sensations are somehow similar' (p. 109). The sideward look that *acknowledges* absurdity reveals the Duke casting a glance at an absent interlocutor and illustrates Jackson's move from comedy to an internal polemic aimed at producing sympathy for the Duke. As the Duke's fancies are delivered in good faith and reported with the sincerity of a confiding diary voice, readers may empathise with a logic that, although skewed, seems rational to a self-acknowledged dreamer who harmlessly and innocently indulges his curiosity about the world. Unlike Grace Marks's self-aware and guarded

diary-style voice in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Jackson presents a guileless record of an eccentric point of view.

Thus the diary develops rhetoric of sympathy and understanding for non-conformity. As Bakhtin notes, 'rhetorical discourse tries to outwit possible retorts to itself, it passes on and compiles the words of witnesses'.<sup>41</sup> This particular event is narrated on a range of heteroglossic levels: as a diary record and in two further perspectives. Firstly, the worker's story may well become public; secondly, the Duke narrates his understanding of the consequences for him in that process of fabulation. The account, or tale told, may portray the Duke as the stereotypical 'mad old Duke', but as this prospect is pre-empted and confessed in a private diary, sympathy is generated for the Duke as a victim of prejudicial gossip. Spacks suggests that 'the anxiety about gossip derives partly from its incalculable scope. One can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, how and by whom it is understood'.<sup>42</sup> This is symbolised by an imprecise base of 'some nearby' (p. 109) public house. The 'alehouse' is an unstable site of exchange – with the Duke here an article of unseen trade. The diary works in active opposition to this base to contest gossip circulation and suggest a more authentic exchange between confessor and extradiegetic readers, who become a privileged audience for diary 'authenticity'. Within his diary frame, and by extension, within the larger context of an official investigative report, the Duke regains control of event to pre-empt and disarm a chain of processing and likely narrative distortion and to defend an eccentric world view.

The diary goes further to develop ways of counteracting gossip by endorsing eccentricity. Ideas of diary sincerity help unmask hypocrisy in those officially sanctioned to pass judgement. Eccentricity is itself deemed to have self-reflexive qualities; Julia F. Saville discusses this in the context of Englishness, national identity,

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<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse', p. 353.

<sup>42</sup> Spacks, p. 6.

and Charles Dickens's work to suggest that eccentricity 'celebrates excess' and is an 'assertion of individual liberty that will not capitulate to its containment'.<sup>43</sup> She argues that, for Dickens, eccentricity became a device for moral revelation:

Through the performance of masking and unmasking, the eccentric earns the moral right to displace the masks of hypocrites, those enemies of earnestness and decency who hide humbug and cant under the veneer of respectability. In fact, one might go so far as to say that Dickensian eccentricity is the moral antidote to self-serving hypocrisy, which is itself perceived to be a specifically English vice.<sup>44</sup>

I question if eccentricity proves a mask in Jackson – the Duke appears unabashed and consistent in his unconventional viewpoint. I suggest, however, that an atmosphere of sincerity and authenticity generated by diary form obviates the need for the Duke to 'unmask' his eccentricity because the form works expressively to suggest that these self-same qualities essentially underpin his character.<sup>45</sup>

I nevertheless concur that, like Dickens, Jackson uses eccentricity to unmask hypocrisy and insincerity in others. The Duke refracts *his* opinion of various community members in his diary to debunk those who may wear their hypocrisy lightly. This is demonstrated in Mr Bowen's account. The Duke says nothing negative about Mr Bowen in his diary, and he, in turn, confirms Mr Bird's earlier testimony that the Duke was a kind and generous employer. Bowen also discloses that the Duke actively encouraged him to have faith in his imagination when he doubted his ability to craft the Duke's designs and he explains that success followed and produced widespread admiration for his work. Yet his account nevertheless affiliates him with the majority when he confesses to gossiping about the Duke in the local public house:

I would come across all the stories about the Duke which were doing the rounds at the time. As a stranger to the area and with my being a good bit

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<sup>43</sup> Julia F. Saville, 'Eccentricity as Englishness in *David Copperfield*', *SEL*, 42 (2002), 781-97 (p. 784). Saville argues that 'even to mention eccentricity in relation to Dickens is surely to invoke his entire oeuvre, for all the characters in his novels – with the exceptions of the hero and heroine – seem to some degree eccentric'. Saville, p. 782.

<sup>44</sup> Saville, p. 786.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson's body of work demonstrates a pervasive interest in eccentricity and includes the novels, *Five Boys* (2001), *Ten Sorry Tales* (2005), *Bears of England* (2009), and *The Widow's Tale* (2010).

younger than the other drinking men, I sometimes found it hard to go against what they said. If I am honest, I will say that after a couple of jars I found I could spin a tale or two myself. I am most ashamed of that now. (p. 45)

Bowen chose to join the 'round' of gossip; his confessional 'Account' serves to underline the Duke's integrity in the face of casual hypocrisy. The diary opposes such hypocrisy, as comic irony defends and explains the Duke's blindness to outside opinion.

On occasions when the Duke's filtered self-awareness is not made explicit, we must read the inherent ridiculousness (or eccentricity) of some of the Duke's ideas through the (at times) aghast responses from his interlocutors. In this respect, the pragmatic evaluative intent of the encoder to '[demand] the decoder's interpretation and evaluation' comes into play.<sup>46</sup> In effect, what we read is authorial positioning of readers, as doubled meanings in diary heteroglossia, parody, pastiche, and irony signal interpretative strategies that exact evaluation and decoding.<sup>47</sup> For example, delaying a gamekeeper for a leisurely discussion on the merits of the keeper's 'most gargantuan dog' (p. 9), the Duke's diary reveals both a child-like fascination and also an unwitting account of the busy keeper's impatience: 'I could have happily spent the entire morning marvelling at the beast, but the keeper seemed eager to be about his business' (pp. 9-10). Unaware that the keeper may not (like him) have all day to converse, the Duke manages to delay him further when a 'first-class idea' (p. 10) occurs to him: might he have a saddle made for the dog? But the response of the keeper, who 'ke[eps] his eyes pinned to the ground and politely decline[s]' (p. 10), emphasises the strangeness of an idea that may be perfectly logical to the Duke, but perceived through the keeper's eyes appears outlandish and eccentric. Thus Jackson anticipates and emphasises a comic reaction to another of the Duke's (many) fancies and communicates this in the double-

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<sup>46</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 54; p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> Hutcheon claims that 'there is little disagreement among critics that the interpretation of irony does involve going beyond the text itself [...] to decoding the ironic intent of the encoding agent'. *Parody*, pp. 52-53.



voiced irony of the keeper's muted reaction; one implicitly understands that the keeper's gaze is resolutely focussed on the ground to disguise incredulity, embarrassment, or perhaps indeed, amusement. Readers may again extend this understanding to perceive or foresee the potential for a process of gossip and fabulation that will perhaps broadcast this episode, like other stories, at the melting pot of local gossip – the 'alehouse' (p. 109).

A further stage in defending nonconformity emerges when characters who support the Duke's peculiarities and fancies are themselves endorsed by the Duke in his diary. For instance, Mr Bird provides a positive account of the Duke and he, in turn, is described by the Duke as acting 'expertly', with 'discretion' and 'precision' (pp. 13-14) – qualities that the Duke admires because he knows that he lacks them himself. They share a love of maps and charts and commune a companionable 'hushed exhilaration' (p. 14) when admiring the tunnel plans: 'we did nothing but gaze down and drink in every last detail, until all my pleasure and gratitude finally welled up inside me and overflowed'. "'Sterling work, Mr Bird," I said' (p. 15). 'Mr Bird's Account' immediately follows this entry in the Duke's journal. The only 'eccentricity' that Mr Bird identifies is the Duke's concern for his tree roots and he importantly rebuts the rumours of abnormality in the Duke's appearance:

There were stories, as you know, regarding the Duke's appearance – how he was said to be deformed and dreadful to look upon. But the people who go about saying such things are nothing but gossip-merchants. Anyone who ever met the man will tell you just the same. I saw him a hundred times if I saw him once and the worst I could say was that on a bad day he could look a little ashen. (p. 19)

Mr Bird suggests that rumours of eccentricity only began when the tunnel construction commenced. Absorbing and counteracting the 'Local Woman's Account', he explains: 'when a man starts acting eccentrically and hiding himself away, people feel at liberty to give their imaginations some slack. By the time they'd finished they'd made him into a right monster, but it was all in their own minds' (p. 19). Mr Bird invokes rights to

liberty and imagination and significantly inverts one chief complaint levied against the aristocracy, further turning suggestions of idleness back on the gossips: ‘people like to let themselves get carried away. It comes, I think, from idleness, or envy, maybe’ (p. 20). He concludes that the Duke suffered from ‘shyness in the extreme’ (p. 20) (a quality shared by Mr Bird) and valorises him as ‘a most gentle man’ (p. 20). This is a quality of character that the diary works hard to emphasise in direct challenge to loaded social implications of the term ‘gentleman’. Recalling Cardinal Newman’s definition of a ‘true gentleman’, the Duke, with ‘no ears for slander or gossip’, is thus positioned morally rather than privileged according to birthright.<sup>48</sup>

The Duke is therefore supported by those who endow him with characteristics that, Saville suggests, eccentricity essentially masks and that the diary expressively reveals. Ultimately, the diary tests the accounts of the majority and defuses community criticism by illustrating them as largely trivial, ill-informed, ignorant, or a product of fantasy and lurid imagination. Put simply, affirmative reports of the Duke reinforce his positive qualities of generosity and decency and the diary synchronously demonstrates that suspicion and negativity arise from ignorance or lack of personal integrity. The novel thus pits conformity against non-conformity, with eccentricity the moral victor.

The Duke is, of course, the focal non-conformist, but his position is reinforced by several characters who share his eccentric, questing approach to life. These characters bask in diary-mediated authorial sympathy and approval. The conformists, like Byatt’s lampooned theorists in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), do not fare so well. Exemplifying conformist and professional security, Reverend Mellor and his friend, Professor Bannister, are subtly disempowered as knowledge guardians. Despite a leaning towards eccentricity, Mellor is too enmeshed in the establishment to warrant full authorial approval. He is described as ‘like a truffling pig’ and ‘engrossed in his hyena-

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<sup>48</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, ‘The True Gentleman Defined’, in *Victorian Essays*, ed. by E. C. Pamwell (Warwickshire: Read Books, 2006), pp. 47-50 (pp. 47-48).

thoughts' (p. 154). He is comically objectified as 'a solid, plump sort of fellow who, by some freak of nature, has only a young lad's legs to support his considerable weight, which jut out from under him at acute angles like the legs on a milkmaid's stool' (pp. 150-51). The Reverend's sermonising is compared to Ignatius Peak, the evangelical baker, and found wanting: 'he had about him not a fraction of Ignatius Peak's zeal' (p. 152). Bannister too, 'a singularly important chap' (p. 207), has physical oddities and, 'like his old friend Mellor, [...] was a wordy fount' (p. 208), who too often for the Duke's liking and understanding eulogises at length in 'tedious' and 'thoroughly boring' (p. 209) and 'incomprehensible monologue[s]' (p. 211). The Duke's diary analyses and undercuts these authority figures with casual disparagement. He may be on a mission to seek knowledge and information, but when imparted by such conformists, this becomes dangerous. Ultimately, 'morbid reading' (p. 139) and the marrying of knowledge gleaned from Mellor and Bannister set the Duke on his radically misguided and ultimately tragic search for enlightenment that results in his fatal experiment with the purloined trepan.

Using humour and irony, the diary guides interpretation of conformist intelligence, whilst at the same time, disseminating non-conformist interpretations that model sympathetic close reading of the Duke's body/text. Conformist intelligence may endanger the Duke's fragile mental state, but the diary approves and validates non-conformist discourses, particularly those ex-centric to mainstream medicine who reassure and calm the Duke's 'irrational fear that [he is] on the verge of fatal collapse' (p. 41). Mellor and Bannister only exacerbate the Duke's tendency to see his body through a Gothic lens of morbidity, whereas the alternative therapists calm imaginative excesses and encourage a type of reading that searches for subtle meaning.

For instance, the Oakley sisters, 'two splendid women' (p. 100), are recommended to the Duke as 'the best diagnosers in the county' (p. 98). Elusive and

silent in comparison to the ‘verbal onslaught’ (p. 211) of Mellor and Bannister, the twin sisters (based on actual nineteenth-century healers), are ‘both apparently wrapped up in some profound and unspoken exchange’ (p. 101).<sup>49</sup> The Duke pays a visit to the Oakleys’ ‘strange little world’ (p. 102) and, submitting to the ‘sisters’ powerful gaze’ (p. 102), finds their eccentric search for his aura conducive to his own quest to quieten a ‘spiritual hurly-burly’ (p. 167). Their ‘penetrating eyes’ (p. 103) and ‘reputation for possessing some peculiar spiritual power which enables them to see right inside a man’ (p. 100) fulfil the Duke’s desire to know what is going on behind the bars of his ‘bone-tree’ (p. 138). I suggest that the Oakleys’ style of ‘reading’ and perception models strategies for extra-diegetic diary readers as Bakhtin’s ‘superaddressees’. Readers are encouraged to ‘visionary powers’ (p. 100) and may thus ‘see how [the Duke] is [narratively] put together’ (p. 105). Within his diary, the Duke disseminates alternative insight to oppose interpretations produced by gossip and conventional wisdom. Non-conformist intelligence illuminates what conformist information only confuses. Readers required to evaluate the case history may emulate the Oakleys’ ability ‘to look deep inside a man’ (p. 98) via access to his private diary thoughts.

Modelling reading practice and analysis and corroborating authority for the Duke’s imaginative perception are therefore those who, ex-centric to authority, question and see beyond the surface; in turn, these characters are themselves validated in the diary. The Oakleys claim that they can see into a man; ‘blind Connor’ the ‘bone-setter’ (p. 126), with his ‘trusty fingers’ (p. 128), is deemed ‘peculiar and intriguing’ (p. 133), but he also sees and perceives in a non-conventional sense within a tradition of blind seers. Even the zealous Ignatius Peak, the ‘overly-religious’ (p. 95) baker, has absolute faith and ‘inspiration to spread God’s Word’ (p. 96), which allow him to see clearly his

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<sup>49</sup> Jackson claims that ‘the Oakley sisters [...] are based (very loosely) on a real pair of sisters – the Okey sisters – who claimed to have similar capacities and were employed in Mesmerist demonstrations. ‘*The Underground Man: Little-known facts*’ <<http://www.mickjackson.com/UndergroundMan/ug-facts.html>> [accessed 19 January 2009]

path in life, a certainty that causes the Duke to ‘env[y] him more than any other man I have come across’ (p. 98). But perhaps the character who ‘sees’ most prophetically is the Linklater boy, ‘Doctor’, who is (with irony) deemed to possess ‘special qualities’ and ‘rare faculties’ (p. 177):

Doctor chewed on his cheek a little before finally surrendering a solitary, mangled word.

‘Underwood,’ he muttered in my direction.

I begged the young fellow’s pardon.

‘Underwood,’ he said again.

Well, neither Duncan nor myself had heard of any such fellow and after we had stood around in silence for a minute were obliged to leave it at that. But as they set off down the driveway Doctor turned briefly back to me and with his good arm pointed towards the Wilderness, where I had first mistaken him for The Berry Man. (pp. 178-79)

Physically handicapped and possibly the most ex-centric character in the Duke’s community, the ironically (or appropriately) named ‘Doctor’ is assigned the role of soothsayer to foretell the Duke’s disastrous destiny.<sup>50</sup> He possesses answers to the Duke’s existential questions, as indeed ‘under’ the wood lies the story of the Duke’s uncanny haunting – written on his twin brother’s overgrown gravestone. It can also be argued that ‘Doctor’ portends an ultimate retreat underground/underwood to the wilderness, where finally, most radically misunderstood as ‘some sort of monster-man’ (p. 264), the Duke is shot dead by Mr Walker, the poacher, who testifies to his mistake in the final account. Like all the various benevolent eccentrics, Doctor is not given an autonomous voice to testify for or against the Duke in public accounts. The ‘young prophet’ (p. 178) remains the property of a diary framework that validates non-conformity and reading beyond surface meaning. He joins an alternative community that gathers strength in numbers as non-conformity is naturalised and legitimised by diary authority to resist petitions by outside orthodoxy.

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<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Doctor’s knowledge results from his reading of the gravestone on estate grounds – information that is for the majority of the narrative hidden from the Duke’s view.

The diary therefore confronts and complicates conformist readings of non-conformity by recording events with an accompanying delineation of cause and effect as well as filtering responses for those positioned outside the diary frame. ‘Harmless’ eccentricity is alternatively narrated without attendant mitigating or critical viewpoints and demonstrates the Duke’s ‘sideward glance’ – his ironic acknowledgement – conspicuous by its absence.<sup>51</sup> At these points, the Duke’s encounters with the local community are recorded with a blithe (or blind) disregard of the effect of his sometimes outlandish views. This form of ‘tunnel’ vision has the effect of contributing to comic irony in the novel and is an essential distinction to indicate Jackson’s direction that his ‘gentle man’ (p. 20) should be read differently from the Russian unsympathetic type, whose all-knowingness is alienating. Comedy displaces tragedy as Jackson delivers a ludic quality in the Duke’s reports of his whimsy and ‘fascinating’ (p. 108) social encounters. If we consider Hutcheon’s point that the pragmatic function of irony is to signal evaluation, then Jackson strategically guides readers to assess questions of conformity and non-conformity raised by the Duke’s interaction with the community with the diary always weighting sympathy in the Duke’s favour.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Conformity vs. a Non-Conformist Imagination

A fundamental clash of opinion is presented with a non-conformist diarist’s voice in tension with accounts from the conformist majority, rendering the Duke subject to what John Stuart Mill describes in his work *On Liberty* (1859) as ‘the tyranny of the majority’.<sup>53</sup> Jackson’s polyphonic text attempts to imitate and debunk a form of social tyranny created by a disseminated network of gossip and thus resonates with Mill’s ideas of personal liberty. The novel defends the rights of the individual against the

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<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 205.

<sup>52</sup> Hutcheon, *Parody*, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Mill, p. 6.

claims of state (in this case the microcosm of local community) and inverts traditional understandings of power and aristocracy. Mill suggests:

There needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compels all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.<sup>54</sup>

Mill's ideas are echoed variously in the novel. The Duke is subject to community pressures that 'impose' and 'compel' him to fashion himself upon an expected model; his individuality is at times 'fettered' by community expectations. For instance, when he absent-mindedly becomes so absorbed in his maps and charts that he 'forgets' to attend the staff Christmas party – forgets indeed that it is Christmas Eve – his housekeeper, Mrs Pledger, uses her narrative opportunity to report unhappy umbrage at his failure to conform to his social obligations.

Community members demonstrate a collective view of the Duke's responsibilities in their accounts. His story is already written in tradition, which scripts a starring role for him and supporting roles for community players. Their sympathy for him may manifest in concerns for his health and bodily well-being, but only if he plays (or performs) his part, a situation illustrated by Mrs Pledger's testimony. The Duke's diary suggests that she is normally stoic, if not a little tight-lipped, and capable of a 'withering glare' (p. 86) in the face of his eccentricities. The Duke admits that she 'has never had much time for progressive thinking' (pp. 23-24), but he nevertheless records his enduring respect for her: 'Mrs Pledger is a very fine woman – I have always said as much' (p. 240). She, in turn, appears concerned for his physical wellbeing, yet her account reveals little sympathy for his deteriorating state of mind and, using this space as a public platform, she gives vent to a grievance that he has betrayed 'a tradition at

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<sup>54</sup> Mill, p. 6.

Welbeck' (p. 197), thus 'pledging' her loyalties more clearly to the position than the man. In this respect, the postman's bewilderment that the Duke might fantasise about delivering a round of letters is poignant; Mr Hendley's account represents an underlying public opinion that will always believe 'a man with his money could be just about whatever he chose to be' (p. 170). The diary contests this, demonstrating that the Duke is governed by societal expectations and strictures that wealth and privilege cannot counterbalance and suggests, therefore, that envy (generator of gossip) is misplaced.

Jackson's awareness of the aristocrat as a well-known fictional stooge is subtly addressed and displaced in the diary. The stereotype persistently dogs the historical and fictional figure, be it depicted as a ruling or fading social and cultural power. Aristocrats do appear in neo-Victorian fiction and they tend to conform to stereotypical ideas of an effete, idle, and feminised class, reflecting an actuality where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, 'the abstract image of the entire class, came to be seen as ethereal, decorative, and otiose in relation to the vigorous and productive values of the middle class'.<sup>55</sup> Neo-Victorian examples of this include Susan Barrett's *Fixing Shadows* (2005), Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005), which features Geoffroy Loveall, a 'paragon of foppery',<sup>56</sup> and the degenerate and inbred Alabasters of Bredeley Hall in A. S. Byatt's novella, *Morphia Eugenia* (1992),<sup>57</sup> who play to all the stereotypes identified by Len Platt as 'the clichés of literature. Oversexed as young men, gout-ridden and often insane in old age'.<sup>58</sup> Byatt parodies aristocracy as a hive of incestuous activity and it becomes, as Gutleben points out, 'the butt of the narrator's ludic satire'.<sup>59</sup> The stereotype is not discounted in Jackson's representation (with madness in old age proving particularly resonant); what is different is the extent to which the Duke absorbs and disarms the type

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<sup>55</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 93.

<sup>56</sup> Wesley Stace, *Misfortune* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Morphia Eugenia*, in *Angels and Insects* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 3-160.

<sup>58</sup> Len Platt, *Aristocracies of Fiction: The Idea of Aristocracy in Late-Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Literary Culture* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Gutleben, p. 101.



in his diary discourse.<sup>60</sup> The novel does not totally discard what Platt terms the ‘narratological hoops’ of clichéd representation of aristocracy but, with comic irony and support from diary conventions of sincerity, Jackson manages to distort the more usual critiques of social and class power structures that illustrate aristocracy negatively as a non-ironic ‘representational routine’.<sup>61</sup> In particular, one main stereotypical feature of the aristocrat – eccentricity – undergoes a radical reversal of fortune in Jackson’s representation. This is not satirised, but emphatically celebrated, as ideas of conformity are installed and tested in the narrative.

The Duke’s diary offers a defence for liberty against Mill’s ‘tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling’ by promoting sympathy for a candid confessional voice. In many ways, the Duke is presented in a child-like and defenceless state. He is taken care of by others and indeed cannot look after himself. This is illustrated with his inability to negotiate either his estate or the house itself; on ‘house safaris’ (p. 184) he is perpetually lost and unsure of his bearings. The Duke’s flights of imagination are, in fact, child-like in quality; his fears are those of an ignorant child and his resolutions to problems are infantile in their logic. The sympathetic characters of the novel all regress the Duke to a state of protected safety – a childlike haven from the stresses and strains of adult responsibility; he relinquishes responsibility to Connor – ‘like an infant’ (p. 128); is reassured by the Oakleys: “‘It is all right, you know,’” and, just like a child, I was assured that it was’ (p. 102); he is ‘cradled’ (p. 126) by Clement, who, ‘silent and cautious’ (p. 123), is undoubtedly the moral compass of loyalty to the Duke. Significantly, Clement does not testify in an account, but appears refracted only through

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<sup>60</sup> Stereotypical traits include the Duke’s admission that he is sickly, weak, and easily moved to tears, either through sentiment or frustration: ‘tears welled up in my blinking eyes – such a baby!’ (p. 47). Diary entries confess a tendency to idleness: ‘lassitude continues. [...] The whole day amounted to little more than a series of yawns and stretching of arms’ (p. 140). His character is also fashioned by a dandyish attention to his clothes, which are carefully chosen and meticulously detailed in his diary entries: ‘dressed myself in a lime double-breasted frock coat with fur collar and a knee-length burgundy cape. At the door I picked out a grey, wide-brimmed top hat, a pair of goatskin gloves, cream lambswool scarf and a cane’ (p. 89). He admits ‘mental shortcomings’ (p. 228), but is certainly ‘not happy in [his] ignorance’ (p. 40).

<sup>61</sup> Platt, p. xiv.

the Duke's diary viewpoint as a kind of capable father/caretaking figure hovering and endeavouring to protect the Duke.<sup>62</sup> In this way, defence, already delineated as varied, is advanced as the diary works to further sympathy for the Duke's unsophisticated viewpoint and imaginative excesses.

The Duke's child-like imagination clearly challenges the cynicism and pragmatics of the community. The Duke spends some considerable time in reverie and records his flights of fancy and 'dreamy thoughts' (p. 140) in his diary. Largely superfluous to the running of his household, he lingers and hinders on the periphery of its day-to-day activities and allows his imagination and diary writing leisurely, full rein. For instance, on one ambling visit below stairs, he witnesses Mrs Pledger, labouring and steaming over the onerous task of household washday. This proves fascinating for the Duke, but also prompts awareness of his superfluity: 'with everyone so thoroughly immersed in their business I was left very much to myself' (p. 22). The diary illustrates a doubled and divided estate life; irony emphasises two readings of the Duke's record. Witnessing, but failing to understand the toil and grind involved, he distracts himself (and others) with childlike imagination of shapes in the soapsuds. In the face of so much industry, he ironically records that his fancies 'quite tired [him] out' (p. 23). Whilst reifying the divide and incomprehension of two sides of estate life, the diary also promotes idiosyncrasy and validates imaginative fancy as visionary perception. In his private journal, the Duke records flights of imagination that evidence a visionary sensitivity to see beyond the mundane and prosaic.

His habit of perceiving maps in the shapes and patterns of everyday materials exemplifies how he reads meaning beyond the commonplace and conventional. Perpetually unsure of his bearings, often 'hopelessly disorientated' (p. 144), he seeks forms of order, pattern, and logic. He finds this in his revered Sanderson map and notes,

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<sup>62</sup> Clement speaks only once in the novel to inform the Duke 'we have found you a neck man, Your Grace' (p. 126).

‘now, *there* is order, *there* is sense, *there* is reason. There is observation put to use’ (p. 67, original emphases). Believing himself an ‘amateur-cartographer’ (p. 107), he sees maps everywhere: in soapsuds, in a constellation of moles espied on his back, and a ‘map-tattoo’ (p. 107) of Ireland in an estate worker’s Psoriatic scab, discussed above. He even tries to map gossip, ‘the journey of some item of interest’ (p. 112), but this proves impossible and results in ‘nothing but a ball of twine’ (p. 113), the unravelling of which is beyond his vision. Yet as the diary disseminates a selection of non-conformist viewpoints to oppose an outside conformist majority, it does go some way to unravel the tangle of voices for readers. Thus the diary authorises the Duke’s viewpoint by preserving a space that fulfils the document’s usual purpose as a private record of dissent.

Using diary strategies, Jackson encourages readers to see logic in the Duke’s unconventional viewpoint. Beset by disordered thoughts, the Duke seeks pattern and order in the observable world. Like Margaret Prior in *Affinity*, who wished to emulate observed architectural patterning and organisation in her diary, the Duke writing his diary at a beloved bureau records: ‘it is here I fancy some order is restored into my cock-eyed life’ (p. 87). However, echoing nineteenth-century sensation fiction, he is unaware that the answer to his questions are contained in a document concealed within a hidden drawer in this very same desk.<sup>63</sup> Disorder consequently persists, and foregrounding that he is habitually ‘plain baffled’ (p. 3), his unanswered questions foster doubt and consequent refuge in fantasy and fancy, as he finds ‘Imagination always willing to leap into Ignorance’s breach’ (p. 3). Increasingly mired in muddling theories, his diary is steadily colonised by experiment and superstition that starts to dissolve a line between eccentricity and insanity. Jackson’s commitment to valorising

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<sup>63</sup> For example, one of Wilkie Collins’s many ‘morsels of paper’ is discovered by Rosamond Treverton in *The Dead Secret* (1857). An illuminating letter is found hidden in an inauspicious writing-table after a brusque and impatient search of the long neglected Myrtle Room. Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1857]), p. 273.

nonconformity ensures, however, that the Duke's diary remains the privileged viewpoint in the novel. As Martens suggests, 'the first-person voice establishes the writing's claim to authority; for a visionary's insights are authoritative only as long as they do not become commonplace, accepted, and spoken by authority'.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the Duke's diary, maintained and authenticated as a sincere and guileless record, evinces a searching insight that works to undermine outside authority.

### 5. Madness, Hypochondria, and Gothic Imagination

The Duke's diary proves an imaginative refuge from the disappointments and frustrations of life (or just plain boredom). As Chances suggests of nonconformists:

These starry-eyed people are aware of an enormous discrepancy between uninspired reality and the rich, imaginative wonderland of their own creation. They are different from most members of humanity. Sensitive beings whose sensibilities are attuned to a different wave length, they listen to the sounds of a different drummer. They are detached from the prosaic and ultimately find meaning only in the ethereal fairy-tale world of their reveries, floating somewhere in the mysterious expanses of the mind.<sup>65</sup>

However, detachment from the prosaic in preference for the mysterious expanses of the mind can cross the boundary between sanity and insanity. First-person diary narratives always tax questions of reliability and the narrator's sanity. Descent into madness is, unsurprisingly, a common feature of diary fiction.<sup>66</sup>

Jackson states that he was, in fact, influenced by one particular Russian nineteenth-century diary text, Nikolai Gogol's short story, 'The Diary of a Madman' (1835).<sup>67</sup> Another sick and superfluous man, Gogol's diarist, Poprischin, is obsessed with power and glory as he writes his diary with a fastidious focus on paper and quills. Imagining that he is 'of noble origin', he details 'extraordinary incident[s]' that include

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<sup>64</sup> Martens, pp. 156-57.

<sup>65</sup> Chances, p. 54.

<sup>66</sup> See Martens, chapter 13, for a discussion of pathological states and the diary.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson states on his website that *The Underground Man* 'was influenced in no small part by the author hearing a recording of Gogol's 'Diary of a Madman', read by Kenneth Williams on the radio'.  
<<http://www.mickjackson.com/UndergroundMan/ug-writing.html>> [accessed 19 January 2009]

an encounter with talking and letter-writing dogs.<sup>68</sup> Faithfully recording his visions in his diary and, despite confessing that his ‘head [is] always in a muddle’, he remains convinced that he possesses superior vision – he can see things ‘as no one has seen or heard before’.<sup>69</sup> Yet Jackson’s Duke is for the most part confident of no such thing and his diary is alternatively characterised by uncertainty, self-doubt, and a sense of ‘backwardness’ (p. 41). With some similarity to George Gissing’s Henry Ryecroft, who records in his diary ‘my life has been merely tentative, a broken series of false starts and hopeless new beginnings’,<sup>70</sup> Jackson’s Duke feels his superfluity acutely:

I have never composed a work of art. I have invented nothing, discovered nothing. The land and wealth which were left to me, though hardly squandered, were not employed as fruitfully as they might. [...] I did not even manage to marry the woman I loved – a feat most men manage to carry off. No, all I’ve done with my life is to take countless melancholy constitutionals [...]. As things stand I will be remembered as the Duke who built the tunnels and kept himself to himself. Otherwise I am eminently forgettable – but half a man. (pp. 117-18)

As a genuine nobleman, the Duke shifts uncomfortably in his privileged skin, wishing to escape the burden of this and ultimately rejecting the nobility so ardently desired by Poprischin. Parallels can, nevertheless, be drawn between Poprischin and Jackson’s Duke, as both diarists retreat into madness to assume their preferred roles: Poprischin (incarcerated in a lunatic asylum) imagines himself King of Spain and the Duke’s “‘imaginings” – brief slippages of the mind’ (p. 235) slip too far as he loosens the shackles of sanity and nobility to dissolve boundaries between eccentricity and insanity.

The novel interrogates a wavering boundary between eccentricity and madness as the diary’s expressive qualities work to positively defend eccentricity from conformist judgments and also to question those who read madness via a network of gossip and tale-telling. The Duke’s diary voice alternates between a glancing

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<sup>68</sup> Nikolai Gogol, *The Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. by Priscilla Meyer and Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 2005 [1835]), p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> See Martens for a detailed list of Russian nineteenth-century diary fiction, p. 296.

<sup>70</sup> George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1903]), p. 160.

acknowledgement of how madness *looks* to the outside world and at other times leaves readers to perceive or read this between the lines. For example, at the height of his distress or ‘madness’ following the uncovering of the truth behind a persistently haunting and uncanny memory, the Duke writes a diary entry that records an understanding of the picture he presents to his assembled, sensationalised staff. Despite an increasingly fraying hold on his sanity, the Duke recognises and records a moment of lucid perception that observes ‘their staring faces all lit with their candles and lamps. All wanting a little look-see at the mad, bald, beardless Duke’ (p. 260). The Duke understands how insanity *looks* and his diary voice here glances at potential story-tellers who will write his madness. His behaviour may appear irrational to outsiders, but those privy to his diary confession may read his behaviour as a ‘natural’ distressed response to personal calamity.

The Duke’s diary may promote non-conformist discourses and identities by concomitantly discrediting more accepted discourses and practices of allopathic medicine, but it becomes increasingly evident that neither can combat an escalating morbidity of body and text. Again echoing Gissing’s Ryecroft, who records ‘memory, reason, every faculty of my intellectual part, is being whelmed in muddy oblivion’,<sup>71</sup> and affirming Martens’s observation that the diary can show the development of a pathological state, the Duke concentrates his diary entries on introspection and self-obsessive examination of thoughts and emotions, with a continual focus on his failing body.<sup>72</sup> On this topic, his imagination manifests ‘a fearful inner darkness’ (p. 34) to blister into full-blown hypochondria.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gissing, p. 117. Ryecroft ruminates: ‘if I am right in concluding that mind and soul are merely subtle functions of body. If I chance to become deranged in certain parts of my physical mechanism, I shall straightway be deranged in my wits’. Gissing, pp. 117-18.

<sup>72</sup> Martens, p. 127.

<sup>73</sup> Reinforcing neo-Victorian verisimilitude, imaginative fancies were popularly believed to be at odds with prescriptive ideals of masculinity in the nineteenth century; as Jane Wood explains, ‘imagination was not a faculty to be encouraged in men since it implied a creativity which transgressed the boundaries

As a discourse, hypochondria is primarily a disease of discontent and imagination. The Duke is discontented and anxious as he contemplates his reflection and (in usual diaristic fashion) espies only ‘a withered stump of a man’ (p. 242). As Dostoyevsky’s diarist ‘refuse[s] to consult a doctor from spite’,<sup>74</sup> the Duke summarily dispenses with the family doctor, ‘want[ing] nothing more to do with the fellow’ (pp. 86-87) and thereafter investigates alternative remedies. It is not spite but exasperation and a fraught attempt to find relief from ‘that craven pain’ (p. 121) which impels his turn from allopathic to homeopathic discourses.

The medical establishment is represented in Jackson’s novel by Dr. Cox, a ‘cocky beggar’ (p. 64) in the Duke’s opinion. Suspecting that Cox is conspiring with his servants to actively keep information from him, the Duke perceives ‘sideways words’ (p. 260), covert exchanges or conversation conducted with slyly inferred doubled meanings. Trying to decode such collusion, he debates this as a problem of trust in his diary:

I don’t mind admitting that after this morning’s fiasco with that blasted Cox I feel some essential trust between doctor and patient has been broken beyond repair. Traditionally, when one feels ill one consults a doctor who identifies what is wrong. Isn’t that the way it goes? When the doctor gives a name to one’s previously nameless malaise is that not the first step towards recovery? The doctor informs the patient that he is right to say he is sick. [...] The doctor gives permission to act out a specific sick-man’s role. It is a small but integral part of the drama of being ill. (pp. 66-67)

Unfortunately for the Duke, this permission is not granted by Dr Cox and the drama of being ill is consequently distorted. But the Duke’s direct questions in this passage ask readers (as diagnosticians) to consider his case.

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defining masculine rational control’. *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 77.

<sup>74</sup> Dostoyevsky, p. 1.

Irony in Cox's conversation with the Duke reveals to the reader that the doctor's unnamed diagnosis is, in fact, hypochondria; Cox lists the Duke's previous (self-diagnosed) complaints under the guise of facetiously enquiring if they have cleared up:

'Did the scrofula clear up all right?' he asked, a coy little smile playing on his lips.

'Thankfully, it passed of its own accord,' I replied. 'Must have been a mild attack.'

He made a wide-eyed face at me and nodded. 'Very good,' he said, unbuttoning my nightshirt and slipping a freezing hand inside. 'And the lockjaw?'

'I found it eventually eased with time,' I was obliged to concede.

'And the meningitis?'

'That too.'

'I see,' he announced. (p. 64)

Cox is confident that he does indeed 'see' the truth of the Duke's complaints and readers also see that his diagnosis is patently, if namelessly, hypochondria. However, hypochondriacs always believe they *see* what their doctors have overlooked; they understand theirs to be a superior diagnostic. This is confirmed by the Duke who, after consulting one of his 'books on bodies' (p. 123), 'saw at once what Dr Cox had chosen to ignore. My symptoms correspond exactly with those in the medical book' (p. 71).

Hypochondriacs prefer to find their 'body information' (p. 122) first-hand via medical texts – they cut out the middle man, that is, the (doubting) general practitioner, and rewrite their own affirmative case history. In this respect, hypochondria has an affinity with diary form; keeping a personal journal allows the Duke to name and self-reflect on his symptoms and potential remedies and also provides an avenue for him to vent frustrations with 'ignorant Dr Cox' (p. 128). If as a type – hypochondriac now added to aristocrat – he is pre-written into official discourses that do not accurately record him, the Duke can go underground with his own personally tailored 'body' book. Nineteenth-century thought held that hypochondria was, in fact, a threat to the medical establishment, as Maria Frawley attests: 'the self-confessed hypochondriac was threatening in part because he seemed to usurp from the medical establishment the



power to diagnose and, in some instances, the means to treat'.<sup>75</sup> But Jackson's hypochondriac appears disempowered; he does attempt to dismiss the medical establishment, declaring himself 'done with the medical world!' (p. 67), and endeavours to find his own course of treatment. Nevertheless, he remains at the mercy of others, as his diary record illustrates. Cox may be dismissed, but his control lingers between the diary lines. It is on doctor's orders, for instance, that the Duke is not informed of the deaths of his gardener, John Snow, and of Snow's wife, a deliberate exclusion of knowledge that the Duke records as totally disempowering:

My whole body brimmed with emotional pain. I thought, 'My staff and Dr Cox have decided between them that I am weak. They have kept the Snows' death to themselves.' [...] I wept from the shame of my own staff thinking me weak and mad and not to be trusted with the truth. (p. 148)

Once again, the Duke's diary record glances at the public narrative that colludes in revoking his authority: 'I had lost a friend and missed his funeral, and suffered the indignity of not being the master in my own house' (p. 149). In 'secret conference' (p. 65) with the household, authoritative medicine prescribes treatment that effectively writes him out of the event.

The diary narrative disputes both diagnosis and authority, however. The Duke regains some authority by legitimising his symptoms in his diary, a text that contests public ownership of him and his body. Echoing Alice James, sister of Henry – perhaps the most famous example of a nineteenth-century invalided diarist – the Duke uses a private text to challenge disempowering medical readings and recordings of his body.<sup>76</sup> Athena Vrettos suggests that Alice James struggled to write her 'nervous body' into the 'unauthorised language' of a 'secret diary' and thus 'assumed a double existence'.<sup>77</sup> According to Vrettos, James's diary legitimised her and her body:

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<sup>75</sup> Maria Frawley, *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>76</sup> Alice James, sister of Henry, was a lifelong diarist and hypochondriac who eventually succumbed to the real, not imagined, disease of breast cancer.

<sup>77</sup> Vrettos, p. 49.

By taking control of her own story, Alice transformed an unsatisfactory medical narrative – her case history – into a personal narrative that affirmed her body's reality by projecting it onto the written page. In other words, through the act of inscribing her experience of illness (albeit in an often flippant and self-deprecatory manner), Alice was able to sustain a belief in the validity of her physical experience in the face of medical denials and doubts.<sup>78</sup>

Vrettos suggests that this process of recording in a secret diary symbolically reaffirms individual identity by means of imaginative structures when threatened by the disorder of disease.<sup>79</sup> The Duke similarly imaginatively illustrates the severity of his symptoms in the face of what he sees as Dr Cox's trivialising of his 'malaise' (p. 67) and his dramatic belief that 'information is being kept from me. I am being left to die like a dog' (p. 65). In the wake of morbid medical curiosity, the Duke's over-stimulated imagination takes a consequent Gothic turn, culminating in the grotesque self-repanning experiment, where 'infernal winding' exposes his 'little box of tricks ... the terrible fruit' (pp. 245-46).

Jackson was surprised to find himself writing in the style of a Victorian Gothic novel; he explains:

When I completed the first draft of *The Underground Man* it came as a bit of a shock to find that I'd written a 'Victorian Gothic' novel with an 'eccentric' protagonist. Neither of those two things had particularly appealed to me before. At the time I justified it to myself by saying that I'd just happened to find an interesting character who was an English eccentric and as the tale was set in the 1800s, the Victorian Gothic just seemed like the appropriate style.<sup>80</sup>

Yet as his subject of hypochondria is symptomatic of imaginative excess, Gothic is unsurprisingly an appropriate vehicle for the Duke's narration of bodily torment and challenge to 'rational' medical discourse. If diaries are, as repeatedly suggested in this

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<sup>78</sup> Vrettos, p. 49.

<sup>79</sup> Vrettos, p. 49. Frawley argues that 'the hypochondriac posed unique diagnostic challenges because of the role accorded in medical understanding to that inevitably amorphous entity, the imagination'.

Frawley, p. 70.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Wild, 'Interview with Mick Jackson', *BookMunch*

<<http://www.bookmunch.co.uk/view.php?id=1591>> [accessed 21 March 2009]

study, the ‘flesh made word’, then Gothic is the appropriate thematic vehicle to record bodily decay; decay is, of course, the preferred realm of Gothic texts.<sup>81</sup>

Age is Gothicised and diary form mirrors decay as monstrous torment. The Duke sees his body, in collusion with his ‘morbid reading’ (p. 139), in terms of a grotesque process of alien invasion reflecting the interruption of his diary by invasive accounts. A mobile ‘little fist of malevolence’ invades body and diary and the ‘blasted thing’ must, he believes, be kept ‘at bay’ (p. 110). Within his diary, disease or ailments are recorded as mini melodramas, structured with liberal use of metaphor and imagery. One particular episode of bodily discomfort is narrated as a full-blown Gothic drama, an internal ‘storm of colossal proportions’ (p. 73) with ‘a parodic stylization’ of Gothic narration.<sup>82</sup>

Some little monster had picked me as its place of refuge. Some evil had made me its home.

The storm kept on advancing. ‘God help me,’ I heard me say.

The thick curtains at the windows danced a little, twitching in the gusts from the cracks. Outside, a gate rattled madly on its latch, as if the wind shook it with its very own hands. (p. 73)

With some bathos, this drama (narrated over five full pages) concludes with the prosaic revelation that the Duke is, in fact, suffering from ‘gas’ (p. 76). Monstrous malady and accompanying aggrandised Gothic description ultimately vaporise to leave but a cloud of imaginative fancy.

*The Underground Man* might, therefore, be said to participate in what Catherine Spooner calls ‘Gothic-Carnavalesque’, where ‘the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa’.<sup>83</sup> Spooner’s suggestion that ‘one of the most prominent features of the new “Gothic-Carnavalesque” is sympathy for the monster’ is crucial to understanding Jackson’s text.<sup>84</sup> The diary, with its associations of confession and

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<sup>81</sup> Jackson does not focus on larger political debates of nineteenth-century aristocratic decay, but concentrates on the vexed decline of one ‘superfluous’ man’s aging body.

<sup>82</sup> Bakhtin, ‘Discourse’, p. 304.

<sup>83</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp. 68-69.

<sup>84</sup> Spooner, p. 69.

sincerity, is, as discussed, an apt device to generate sympathy in fiction. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle observe, ‘it is important to distinguish [sympathy] from “feeling sorry for”; in tragedy, sympathy with a character is indistinguishable from a logic of identification, of identifying with that character and experiencing and suffering with her or him’.<sup>85</sup> In Jackson’s tragi-comedy, the diary imitates this by providing, as Abbott observes, ‘opportunities for the expression of interior, private life’.<sup>86</sup> The Duke’s private diary invites readers to be complicit with and sympathetic to his eccentric viewpoint and to recognise broader neo-Victorian identification of continuity between the Victorians and ourselves.

The bodily focussed concerns debated by nineteenth-century Gothic continue to preoccupy contemporary literature. Pathologies of sexuality, hysteria, and madness are indeed the central foci of *Affinity*, *Alias Grace*, and *Still She Haunts Me*. *The Underground Man* may be ostensibly about the Victorian body, but there is, nevertheless, a contemporaneous aspect to the Duke’s frustrations with mainstream medicine and his hunt for alternative remedies. The Duke’s exploration of alternative medicine seems surprisingly familiar as he details unconventional therapies that are regularly sought today. Some of the remedies he experiments with are totally anachronistic, such as phrenology and, of course, trepanning, but others including, osteopathy, homeopathy, aura consultancy, or experimental diets continue to be considered viable alternative healing routes by some and quack remedies by others. Such similarities illustrate that, despite modern medical advances, we remain in many ways unenlightened regarding somatic aggravations and enduringly fearful of bodily aging deterioration. In this respect, Spooner’s suggestion that ‘Gothic has become an idealised space for textual disruption; yet again, it is the means through which we reify

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<sup>85</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Second Edition (London: Prentice Hall, 1995), pp. 99-109 (p. 103).

<sup>86</sup> Abbott, p. 36.

our own enlightenment' is problematised by this novel.<sup>87</sup> Jackson diminishes 'enlightenment' to close the gap between ourselves and the Victorians and illustrate an unresolved concern that 'old age is but the reduced capacity of a failing machine' (pp. 4-5).

As a relentless record of lost days, the diary colludes with the aging process. Irina Paperno observes 'the diary stems from the fear of watching life grow shorter with each passing day' and the Duke notes that age betrays the body and 'sooner or later our body's frailties begin to drag us down and we have no choice but to go' (p. 240).<sup>88</sup> Continuity in diary form's engagement with body, age, and disease can be constructively illustrated by comparing Jackson's novel to a nineteenth-century pseudo-diary text, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).<sup>89</sup> Dorian and the Duke both record a 'general prospect of collapse and decay' (p. 56) in a form of daily diary. Dorian's hidden portrait records his 'leprosies of sin' as daily physical deterioration that mirrors an irredeemably grotesque and intolerable image back to him: a 'withered, wrinkled, and loathsome visage'.<sup>90</sup> Looking into his mirror, the Duke, like Dorian, faces the 'hideousness of age': 'there was the old man looking back at me, his pink little mouth all twisted and limp. His brows were knitted together above a pair of marbly eyes and his whole visage looked thoroughly beaten and bruised' (p. 149). As Dorian contemplates his portrait, he is not primarily horrified at the evidence of his moral or sexual sins, but repulsed by this diurnal record of the greater sin of betrayed youth and beauty:

Hour by hour, and week by week, the thing upon the canvas was growing old. It might escape the hideousness of sin, but hideousness of age was in store for it. The cheeks would become hollow or flaccid. Yellow crow's feet would creep round the fading eyes and make them horrible. The hair would lose its brightness, the mouth would gape or droop, would be

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<sup>87</sup> Spooner, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Irina Paperno, 'Diaries and Intimate Archives: What Can Be Done with Diaries?', *The Russian Review*, 63 (2004), 561-73 (p. 563).

<sup>89</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1994 [1891]).

<sup>90</sup> Wilde, p. 255.

foolish or gross as the mouths of old men are. There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body.<sup>91</sup>

The Duke (tied to a more ‘natural’ temporality) is also compelled to daily record *his* bodily deterioration in Gothic terms on the canvas of his diary. We may understand that Dorian’s portrait daily deteriorates and rots in his attic as a result of bodily excesses, just as Stevenson’s Hyde erupts as the repressed other from within the good doctor, but the Duke’s Gothicised bodily horrors are all the more horrific because they are not the result of dark desires or sexual transgression, but rather part of a supposedly ‘natural’ process. The Duke’s conclusion that ‘the body, I suppose, is simply a vessel. The next man might regard it as a temple but, then, what a foul and decrepit ruin in which to worship’ (p. 241) echoes and distorts Wilde’s Gothic message by unhappily foreshadowing a collective destiny: ‘our bodies, with their incredible capacities, are also the gaols in which we are sentenced to languish. [...] We are entombed in flesh and blood’ (p. 240). Dorian’s ‘punishment’, or horror, proves the hastened spectre of an aging body, but what is perhaps more grotesque is that Jackson’s Duke, a ‘gentle man’ (p. 20) whose only sin appears to be blinkered self-obsession, is compelled to echo Dorian’s fate by daily recording mortality as monstrous torment. In both narratives, mortality is indelibly inscribed within the diary pages as the form inexorably progresses with its death of days.

### **Conclusion**

The Duke’s diary undeniably records a changing state as eccentricity subtly shades into insanity. Madness and non-madness are, as Michel Foucault explains, ‘inextricably involved: inseparable at the moment when they do not yet exist, and existing for each

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<sup>91</sup> Wilde, p. 142.

other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them'.<sup>92</sup> Jackson's novel demonstrates the 'dialogue of th[is] breach'.<sup>93</sup> Martens suggests that fiction involving diarists as madmen shows 'the development of a pathological state "from the inside"' in one of two ways: either as a case study or through an unreliable narrator.<sup>94</sup> The Duke is not an unreliable narrator as, in order to champion eccentricity, he must consistently and reliably represent ideas of non-conformity. Accordingly, his descent into insanity is represented as a case study. This does not prevent signs of what Dorrit Cohn calls 'impaired vision in confessional texts',<sup>95</sup> but the diary is, nonetheless, an 'expressive text [that] is assumed to be transparent'.<sup>96</sup> It affirms the Duke as reliable in his communication of sincere self-confession amid much unreliable gossip.

Despite acknowledging gossip's chain of communication, the Duke and his diary are set apart from it. He notes that there are those who 'like nothing more than to squander their days whipping that wheel on its way' (p. 112), but the wheel stops at his door. He is a missing link in the chain. Just as his staff and community collude to keep him in the dark about the Snows' deaths, it is similarly reasonable to suppose that the death of his infant twin brother – for so long just an uncanny, receding memory for the Duke that 'nags away, like a stone in the shoe' (p. 228) – is well circulated in the public domain as community knowledge or local history. Reflecting his social position in the community (and the dominant narrative form in the novel), he is the central subject of social discourse, but nevertheless eternally isolated from an 'intricate web' (p. 112) of communication. Gossip, as Spacks suggests, 'always tells stories', but isolated from this exchange, the Duke and his diary must tell alternate stories and rely on imagination.<sup>97</sup> 'Swamped and baffled' (p. 146), he seeks liberty and order for his life and indeed a slide

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<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1967]), p. xii.

<sup>93</sup> Foucault, p. xii.

<sup>94</sup> Martens, p. 128.

<sup>95</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>96</sup> Abbott, p. 55.

<sup>97</sup> Spacks, p. 262.

into madness that so drastically culminates in his trepan operation is explained in his diary within a larger debate of cause and effect as only in this state, 'uncorked', can he 'finally [manage] to break down that wall between [him]self and the outside world' (p. 245). Walls are textually broken down posthumously as the diary and accounts collude to narrate two sides of one class-divided world.

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## Conclusion

As a relatively new genre, neo-Victorianism is a developing field of critical inquiry, a situation that prompts Marie-Luise Kohlke's suggestion that we must move in the direction of interrogating 'our motives as retrospective readers and analysts of Victoriana'.<sup>1</sup> Underpinning this thesis is the premise that much literary neo-Victorian fiction is bound in an incestuous relationship with Victorian studies that can be identified and analysed in works that metafictionally, metacritically, and self-consciously engage the nineteenth century. This is in accordance with a critical framework recently outlined by Heilmann and Llewellyn, who delineate neo-Victorianism as texts that 'must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*', as opposed to historical fiction merely *set* in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Rewriting the Victorians is therefore not only a project of recovery but also one of creative transformation. This study has shown that writers use documents creatively to interrogate history and our understanding of it in different strategic ways, but that all have a common purpose to deliver disguised rhetoric that advances the cultural politics peculiar to each text. Addressing inevitable issues of gender and class, Byatt, Waters, and Roiphe use letter and diaries to coordinate sexual and social transgressions and also collectively eulogise variations of 'desire for desire'.<sup>3</sup> Atwood and Jackson focus on class issues with narrative trials that test documentary evidence, unreliable perception and prejudice. Atwood ensures doubt is stitched firmly into the fabric of the novel's patchwork assembly of texts by means of a diary-style soliloquy and Jackson puts

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1 (2008), 1-18 (p. 12).

<sup>2</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4, original emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 23.

personal liberty on trial by contrasting a disarming diary account with the judgemental and prejudiced accounts of the conformist majority. Perception is again on trial in *Affinity* as readers struggle to fix one diarist's point of view in light of another, with secret unseen letters further disordering readers' perception of events and exposing class blind spots. Roiphe also manipulates suspicion and prejudice to test readers' susceptibility to suggestion. Close scrutiny of intertextual coordination of documentary forms illustrates how writers manipulate the inherently metafictional aspects of epistolary devices and helps understand the ways in which Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest 'the higher end of neo-Victorianism seeks to illuminate its own trickeries'.<sup>4</sup>

Exposing such 'trickeries' reveals authorial polemic intersecting with unreliable narration in diary and letter forms, as writers imaginatively re-tell the past in a role of reclamation and vision that Atwood explains:

All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard their treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter into time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change.<sup>5</sup>

Stories are often 'kept' or lie in hidden, mislaid, or previously overlooked documents. My research reveals that writers resurrect the past to remake or invent archival resources for intertextual networks that seduce readers with a promise of epistolary secrets as discovered 'treasure'. This study demonstrates that critically aware novelists embrace the metafictional aspects of letter and diary entailments to manipulate writer, reader, and addressee situations and illustrate ways in which a desired nineteenth century is creatively open to expansion by writers' and readers' imaginations: readdressed and redelivered for a neo-Victorian audience.

<sup>4</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 178-79, original emphases.

Neo-Victorian writers frequently present an aesthetic dimension for such situations of delivery that fetishise or even orientalise documents as material relics: sensuous, exotic, ‘other’, and eminently desirable.<sup>6</sup> Fictional diaries are unearthed and, according to A. N. Wilson’s novel, *Who Was Oswald Fish?* (1981), discovered as ‘manna from heaven’,<sup>7</sup> much as letters are discovered and read as ‘living words’ in *Possession*.<sup>8</sup> Such aesthetic materiality is emphasised in Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night*, which describes a legacy of diaries as ‘small, perfectly square note-books with hard, shiny black covers, each closed up by delicate silk ribbons of the same hue, [... resembling] slabs of the darkest chocolate’.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Susan Daitch’s novel *L. C.* (1986), a faux editorial preface details discovery of a diary ‘hidden from the family for decades, left to solipsistic fermentation’: ‘worn brown leather covers, streaks of gold still clinging around the edges, initials engraved in the centre. [...] Treated carefully, wrapped in paper, secured with twine’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Wrapped’, ‘secured’, ‘closed’, neo-Victorian fiction’s letters and diaries depict material traces of the past that await and invite undoing, revisiting, and reimagining – re-opening the past to new readers.

We may interrogate the motives behind such affective representation; there is a suggestion of appetite and consumption in such descriptions, with ‘manna’ – food in the desert that legend suggests can also provide spiritual nourishment, or ‘darkest chocolate’ – suggesting some sense of a rich treat to be savoured. Is it possible that textual evidence or writing for posterity is now something that seems threatened in an age of electronic information overload? Do we now, in a climate of instant messaging and truncated text communication, hunger for the romance of parchment and ink and a

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<sup>6</sup> Jerrold Levinson outlines the characterising of aesthetic pleasure: ‘pleasure in an object is aesthetic when it derives from apprehension and reflection on the object’s individual character and content, both for itself and in relation to the structural base on which it rests’. *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> A. N. Wilson, *Who Was Oswald Fish?* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Cox, *The Meaning of Night: A Confession* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Daitch, *L. C.* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1987), p. 9.

reading experience of ‘papers, polished and frail with age’ that can be recreated in fiction?<sup>11</sup> Does the grand opera of modernity, with its insistent beat of urgent, darting electronic language, threaten to de-aestheticise the written word? Are we perhaps, consequently fetishising a fast fading tradition of the private written word and, as a result, seeking refuge in retro-fictional worlds where the rustle and rituals of pen and paper suggests a more sensory and emotive connection to language? Is this in some way the ‘textual salvation’ that Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest might provide ‘a salve to our (post)modern condition’?<sup>12</sup>

In my introduction, I suggested that epistolary aesthetics were not a concern for nineteenth-century Gothic and sensation writers who concentrated documents for more pragmatic resolutions of property, inheritance, and legal puzzles. Neo-Victorianism therefore shifts an understanding of discovered documents for aesthetic fantasies of recovering the past from enticing relics and remains. Richard Dyer suggests that ‘that sense of the presence of the past in pastiche is not just something cerebrally observed but felt. It is part of the knowledge we can have of our place in history’.<sup>13</sup> Further investigation of epistolary aesthetics would help better understand the neo-Victorian phenomenon and what Sally Shuttleworth suggests is the genre’s ‘deep commitment to recreating the detailed texture of an age’.<sup>14</sup>

My study has laid down a framework to further explore epistolary strategies in neo-Victorianism. An examination of epistolary forms and postcolonial writing would, for instance, be productive in considering how neo-Victorian novelists who concentrate on issues of empire and race diversely employ documents to those focussed on gender, sexuality, and class. A further route of inquiry could focus fruitfully on the role of epistolary forms in relation to the vexed question of pleasures involved for writers and

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<sup>11</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, ‘Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel’, in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. by Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 253-68 (p. 255).

readers of revisionist fiction. This topic emerges repeatedly in critical discussions of neo-Victorianism; it is part of Kohlke's mandate to pay attention to 'our own complex investments in resurrecting the past', including 'pleasurable consumption'.<sup>15</sup> Cora Kaplan argues that 'the rehabilitation of the historical novel and of the Victorian period as a setting capable of producing a reading experience that is potentially both cerebral and sensuous, have gone hand in hand'.<sup>16</sup> Sensuous narrative pleasures prove noteworthy for my first chapter's investigation of the presentation or 'dressing' of letters, as *Possession* indicates Byatt's Jameson-style attempt to simulate *her* early pleasures in uncovering and reading Victorian writers.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that, amid metacritical ironies, Waters's and Roiphe's epistolary forms also work to promote impassioned emotions that many perceive to be lacking today; they appear equally in thrall to an intensity found in tortured and forbidden desire channelled by diaries and letters. Byatt is similarly keen to contrast urgent, all-consuming Victorian passions as something *lost* to reserved poststructuralist scholars emotionally reduced by the rigours of their theoretical ideologies. This is suggestive of Sally Shuttleworth's argument that

Many of the retro-Victorian texts are informed by a sense of loss, but it is a *second order* loss. It is not loss of a specific belief system, but rather the loss of that sense of immediacy and urgency which comes with true existential crisis. We look back nostalgically not to an age of safe belief, for that holds few attractions for us now, but rather to a point of crisis. It is the intensity of emotion and *authenticity* of experience at the moment which we long to recapture.<sup>18</sup>

Writers elide desire with crises of loss that find expression in imperilled or deceiving documents. Heilmann suggests that 'because the "authentic" Victorian experience will always elude any attempts at repossession, our imaginary encounters

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<sup>15</sup> Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Byatt explains: 'my sense of my own identity is bound up with the past, with what I read and with the way my ancestors, genetic and literary, read'. A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Shuttleworth, p. 260, original emphases.

with the Victorian bespeak our desires about the here and now'.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, epistolary forms again come to the fore as neo-Victorianism appears fuelled by a desire to illuminate the 'dusty shadows' of a past that endures in documents archived or hidden in dark recesses of contemporary lives.<sup>20</sup> David Lowenthal suggests that 'a past beyond recovery seems to many unbearable. We know the future is inaccessible; but is the past irrevocably lost? Is there no way to recapture, re-experience, relive it? We crave evidence that the past endures in recoverable form'.<sup>21</sup> Imagining the Victorians as materially recoverable satisfies a desire for a past that 'speaks' to the present and evidences the aesthetic appeal of revisiting the past in material as well as strategic and political ways. Resurrecting the desired Victorian body through a metonymical relationship of hand/handwriting proves a totem for some sense of an authentic past recovered and experienced via the tactile material evidence of surviving letters or diaries.

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<sup>19</sup> Ann Heilmann, 'Elective (Historical) Affinities: Contemporary Women Writing the Victorian', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3 (2009), 103-11 (p.104).

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 14.

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