

Neo-Victorianism in John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer*: Spectral and Textual Communications

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Abstract: The article analyses John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* (2004) as a neo-Victorian novel and places it against the backdrop of the multifarious definitions of the term. Like numerous other neo-Victorian novels, Harwood's narrative revolves around the modern protagonist's quest into the Victorian past. Gerard Freeman's amateur research into his family history leads to the discovery of manuscripts authored by his Victorian great-grandmother. Subsequently, the ghost stories that stimulate the protagonist's interest in an unknown part of his own ancestry are paralleled by his increasing sense of being haunted by Victorian spectres. This article argues that whereas, as a rule, in neo-Victorian fiction communication with the Victorian dead takes place either in the textual or the supernatural realm, Harwood's novel combines the two modes, mixing the textual and the spectral. The intertextual allusions, epistolary components as well as intersections between the fictional narratives and the protagonist's experience further obliterate the distinctions between literature and reality, between the living and the dead, between the Victorians and their twentieth-century descendants. It is argued that Harwood's novel represents an intricate combination of several modes typically employed in neo-Victorian fiction. The essential duality of *The Ghost Writer*, in which nineteenth-century and contemporary plots run in parallel and occasionally intersect, is another recurrent characteristic of neo-Victorian narratives; however, compared with "romances of the archive" such as Byatt's *Possession* (cf. Keen 2003), the protagonist's repeated encounters with the material and immaterial remnants of the past, rather than liberating him, ultimately entangle him even further in the textual fabric.

Keywords: neo-Victorian fiction, Gothic fiction, spectrality, intertextuality, John Harwood

Owing to the fact that neo-Victorianism is both a diverse and emergent trend in literature, there is as yet no consensus on its definition and shared generic characteristics (cf. Maier 2018, [pdf 2]). The term itself appears to have gained sufficient

critical currency to be regarded as being universally adopted; however, the alternative names such as Victoriana, retro-Victorian, post-Victorian (cf. Garrido 2023, 459) or Victorianist (Shastri 2001, 1) that have been previously proposed reflect a variety of possible engagements with the Victorian age in contemporary literature, and the corresponding critical efforts to establish the boundaries of the new genre. Still, the theoretical foundations of this field of study remain fluid (cf. Jones 2018, [pdf 4]). Since its inception, there have been debates concerning the scope and characteristics of the neo-Victorian, resulting in perspectives which tend either to restrict the designation of the term or, conversely, to open it up to comprise virtually all contemporary visitations of the Victorian age. Effectively, the definitions are oriented either towards exclusion or inclusion (cf. Arias 2020, 199). Representing the former approach, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010, 4) and Sally Shuttleworth (2014, 191) are inclined to limit the application of the term to self-conscious and self-questioning (re)interpretations of Victorianism. However, the latter, broader framework appears to prevail today in response to the increasing diversity of twenty-first century revivals of the legacy of nineteenth-century literature and culture. In *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*, Louisa Hadley puts forward an all-embracing, inclusive definition of neo-Victorian fiction as “contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both” (2010, 4). More recently, in view of “the omnipresence of neo-Victorianism on our bookshelves, theatre stages, television, cinema, and computer screens,” Marie-Luise Kohlke champions the deployment the term “in the broadest globalised sense,” extending it beyond the British context (2020, 208; cf. also Garrido 2023). Irrespective of the varied forms of the novelistic dialogue with the past, neo-Victorian fiction encompasses a remarkably wide array of themes. As Sarah E. Maier has observed, it lends itself to exploration in terms of its representation of “spectrality, spiritualism, family, trauma, gothic, cities, humour, biofiction, material culture, Empire, globalism, neo-characterization, freakery, feminism, and masculinities,” and many other areas (Maier 2018, [pdf 4]).

This article discusses John Harwood's *The Ghost Writer* (2004)¹ as illustrative of several aspects typical of neo-Victorian fiction. For one thing, it has features of the academic novel as well as detective fiction insofar as the contemporary strand of the plot is driven by the protagonist's inquiry into Victorian lives.

1 Born in Tasmania in 1946, John Harwood is an Australian poet, literary critic and the author of three neo-Victorian novels: *The Ghost Writer* (2004), *The Seance* (2008) and *The Asylum* (2013).

However, the numerous texts he studies, which are incorporated into his own narrative, effectively constitute a parallel plot, or plots, so that the entire novel exhibits a complex, multi-level structure. In bringing together a contemporary and a nineteenth-century story linked by the motif of research into the past and a multiplication of its cast of characters, Harwood's novel resembles several well-known neo-Victorian narratives, such as A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) or Peter Ackroyd's *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012). Another frequent feature of much neo-Victorian fiction discernible in *The Ghost Writer* is its intertextual dimension. If neo-Victorian fiction is traced back to the 1960s, to groundbreaking works such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), then a creative, revisionist engagement with Victorian literature emerges as a recurrent aspect of neo-Victorianism. Whereas, unlike *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Harwood's book does not rewrite a particular classic, it still, like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, relies in its embedded narratives on Victorian themes and generic conventions while alluding to a number of canonical texts. Yet, in contrast to the above-mentioned landmarks of neo-Victorian fiction, *The Ghost Writer* is also strongly indebted to the tradition of Gothic literature.² While neo-Gothicism must be regarded as another significant trend within neo-Victorianism (Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* [1990] or Charles Palliser's *The Unburied* [1999] may serve as illustrations), a combination of intertextuality, metafictionality and Gothicism of the kind Harwood has achieved in his novel is far less frequent. That is why, I would argue, *The Ghost Writer* deserves more recognition as yet another manifestation of the potential of literary neo-Victorianism. The following analysis focuses especially on the interplay of textual and supernatural connections between the contemporary and the Victorian stories and characters, and the ostensible permeability of the boundaries between them.

Harwood's novel projects an intricately crafted fictional world, or, in the words of Peter Craven, "a cunning Chinese box" (2004, 53), in which the Victorian age and the twentieth century, three generations of a family, the dead and the living, the real and the imaginary, the natural and the supernatural, textual and spectral interact and influence one another. The book has been aptly described as "an echo chamber of voices" (Rafferty 2006). As in numerous other neo-Victorian novels,

2 Considering all the three novels Harwood has published, Marie-Luise Kohlke associates him with the Gothic strand of neo-Victorian writing (Kohlke 2013, 208).

the contemporary character's preoccupation, or, indeed, obsession with the past is triggered by a discovery of its material traces. Ever since the narrator Gerard Freeman, a contemporary Australian born to parents of English heritage, finds a photograph of an unknown female relative and a bundle of papers among his mother's things, his life, from childhood until he is in his thirties – which is when the novel comes to an end – is dominated by his desire to investigate his English family's history. His first defiant entry into the forbidden territory of his mother's room has long-term consequences – as his retrospective narrative reveals, mentally he remains forever trapped in the obscure realm of disturbing past mysteries. It is not only the predictable problem of the past's obscurity that hinders his investigative project, but, in a more direct way, his mother's determined secrecy. All she is prepared to reveal in response to his inquiries are oblique hints which intrigue him further without elucidating anything. Indeed, years after her son's first glimpse of his ancestral history Phyllis Freeman dies while trying to destroy the remaining shreds of evidence. No longer impeded by his mother but at the same time deprived of the only witness, Gerard embarks on an obsessive quest. The clues that the protagonist gradually uncovers both reveal and conceal or mislead, pointing to more mysteries and complications. Gerard applies his professional skills (he becomes a librarian) to a personally motivated research. Yet, besides visits to actual locations in England, inquiries in libraries and public records offices, his search for the past also involves reading his great-grandmother's ghost stories, himself being haunted by ghosts, and reliving, with a difference, his ancestors' or his great-grandmother's fictional characters' experiences, which places his own experience on the borderline between the real, the supernatural, and the textual. Also, as Susanne Gruss notes in her discussion of the novel, reading and interpreting the fictional texts and the life stories of his ancestors effectively becomes the narrator's quest for identity (2014, 124).

With multiple dualities at its core, connected by the motifs of research, or quest, *The Ghost Writer* affirms its affinity with numerous neo-Victorian fictions which, according to Kate Mitchell, "explore both our continuity with, and difference from, our Victorian forebears, and formulate our relationship to the period as a series of repetitions which produce both the shock of recognition and the fright of estrangement" (2010, 177). Concurring with Mitchell's claim, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss observe that "[n]eo-Victorianism is concerned with repetitions and reiterations of that which is considered Victorian," and aver that, accordingly, some of the theoretical approaches adopted

in the study of the literary and cultural revisitations of the Victorian age are underpinned by the concept of return as employed in psychology, hauntology or trauma studies (2014, 4). Indeed, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham elevate the spectral to a defining feature of neo-Victorianism, contending that “[t]he spectral presence of the Victorian past is all around us” (2010, xi). Thus, they claim that the neo-Victorian novel is inherently uncanny:

it often represents a ‘double’ of the Victorian text mimicking its language, style and plot; it plays with the conscious repetition of tropes, characters, and historical events; it reanimates Victorian genres, for example, the realist text, sensation fiction, the Victorian ghost story and in doing so, seemingly calls the contemporary novel’s ‘life’ into question; it defamiliarizes our preconceptions of Victorian society; and it functions as a form of revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present. (2010, xv)

Hence, in their reading, the intertextuality of neo-Victorian fiction may be understood as a form of spectrality. As Arias and Pulham further argue, the textual traces of Victorian literature detectable in contemporary texts open up “multiple possibilities for re-enactment, reimagining, and reinterpretation” (2010, xix). Their focus on the connection between spectrality and textuality is informed by Julian Wolfreys’s *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002). Within the very broad framework that he has adopted, which largely overlaps with the notion of intertextuality, Wolfreys advances the view of a text’s inherently haunted nature, due to its capacity to contain traces of other texts as well as to sustain a life, or afterlife, of its own, and giving a peculiar form of existence to textual realities and characters (Wolfreys 2013, 73).

Sally Shuttleworth, while acknowledging that neo-Victorianism encompasses a wide spectrum of works, emphasises the prominence of ghosts, mediums and spiritualism in the contemporary fictional evocations of the nineteenth century (2013, 183). Her observations are in line with Hilary M. Schor’s discussion of A.S. Byatt’s two novellas that constitute *Angels and Insects* (1992). Byatt both writes like the Victorian dead and engages in a dialogue with them – a method that Schor describes as “ghostwriting” (2000, 237). John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* may be regarded as an overt exemplification of those approaches to neo-Victorian fiction that define it as a mediator between “the truly dead” Victorians and

their imaginatively resurrected “phantoms” (cf. Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, 504). In *The Ghost Writer*, communication with the Victorian past takes place in two directions at once, backward and forward – much as the modern-day protagonist yearns to uncover the secrets lurking behind the half-glimpsed artefacts, the Victorian ghosts, in different guises, invade the present, which results in parallels, repetitions, re-enactments, and a permanently uncanny aspect to Gerard's experiences. The familial past, shrouded in mystery, intrigues and lures the protagonist so irresistibly that he breaks into his mother's dressing-table in search of the evidence that he suspects might be concealed there. This constitutes the beginning of the novel. Gerard's first encounter with his spectral ancestors, which he describes as an act of trespass, enables him to catch a glimpse of what is beyond the limits of the empirical present. The woman in the photograph he finds is unknown to him, yet strangely familiar: “I had never seen the woman in the photograph before, and yet I felt I knew her” (Harwood 2005, 4). This is also the first time in the story when the distinction between the living and the dead is obliterated. If the woman in the photograph seems to him to be alive, his mother, when she suddenly appears in the doorway and frantically beats him for his transgression, has a distinctly spectral appearance: “Tufts of hair stuck out from her head; the whites of her eyes seemed to be spilling out of their sockets” (Harwood 2005, 5). This episode is also the first in a series of encounters between the living and the dead, ghosts or revenants, the real and the imaginary, amounting to a baffling textual and supernatural game.

The title of the late nineteenth-century journal that Gerard finds together with the photograph, though is unable to read at the time, is *The Chameleon* – its name may be taken to refer to the constant exchanges and bewildering blurring of identities between the real-life and fictional characters in the novel. Soon the protagonist receives a letter from an English girl calling herself Alice Jessell and they develop an epistolary relationship lasting many years. As she refuses to meet him in person or even to send her photograph, he is left to conjuring up his own image of her. In his imagination, Alice becomes an incarnation of Pre-Raphaelite heroines, or the Lady of Shalott, or both – the Lady of Shalott as portrayed by the Pre-Raphaelites. But the network of references expands. After his mother's death, the adult protagonist at last has a chance to read his great-grandmother's tale published in the issue of *The Chameleon*. Certain parallels with his own situation are unmistakable, and Alice, too, appears to resemble the heroine of the Victorian ghost story.

In his ancestress Viola Hatherley's Gothic tale "Seraphina," an upper-class debonair socialite abandons his lover, who subsequently commits suicide by drowning. After some time, Lord Edmund begins to glimpse a beautiful veiled female figure in the streets of London. He never meets the elusive woman, but his futile pursuit of her takes him to an obscure gallery where he sees and immediately buys a portrait of what seems to be his mysterious quarry. Edmund's fixation with the painted figure, who appears strangely animate, leads him to attempt to enter the world of the painting, which, in an alternative version of the ending, the newspapers report as his stepping into a river and drowning. The contemporary narrator recognises an uncanny resemblance to his own obsession with the invisible and unreachable Alice. Having read the story, Gerard has a dream in which Alice merges with Seraphina, and he partly identifies with Lord Edmund. However, whether he projects his own reading back onto his own experience, or whether his great-grandmother's story prophetically foreshadowed it is left unresolved. He may have been inspired by Pre-Raphaelite art, but so, as he speculates, may have been his Victorian ancestress. Effectively, the origin of the Alice/Seraphina image cannot be determined. Additionally, this episode highlights the ambiguity of the titular "ghost writer" - whereas Viola Hatherley was an author of ghost stories, there is a possibility that she also authored and shaped the life stories of her descendants, including Gerard. Under the latter interpretation, the contemporary protagonist's ontological status becomes questionable - as he is gradually entangled in the stories he reads, his own identity begins to shift between that of a real-life human being and that of an incarnation of his Victorian ancestors or a modern-day version of the fictional characters he encounters in the texts.

Invoking Derrida, Wolfreys states that the spectral, which is ontologically different both from alive and dead, is a third term, "emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither, nor.*" It "speaks of the limits of determination, while arriving beyond the terminal both in and of identification in either case (alive/dead) and not as an oppositional or dialectical term itself defined as part of some logical economy" (Wolfreys 2013, 70). Just as many characters in Harwood's novel, including the narrator himself, exist somewhere in between the categories of alive and dead, they also hover between text and reality. The Alice/Seraphina blend discussed above is illustrative of the entanglement of the spectral and the textual in Harwood's novel. Yet, as in the story of Lord Edmund in "Seraphina," the object of the narrator's desire, that is the truth about his

familial heritage, continues to elude him. The texts he finds, whether factual or fictional, offer only partial illuminations, open up some avenues of inquiry while closing others, contain gaps or contradictory and confusing information. Moreover, the constant exchange of letters (many of them quoted in the novel) with his invisible lover Alice both provides a continuing commentary on his quest and offers him new ideas. In the conclusion of the novel, Gerard finds himself trapped and narrowly avoids Lord Edmund's fatal end.

The protagonist's search for his family history requires him to study historical records, but in the course of his research he also comes across more Gothic tales by his Victorian great-grandmother. Again, as was the case with his original discovery, the way he gradually obtains further evidence remains ambiguous – this happens partly thanks to his own efforts, but partly seems to be as if supernaturally engineered, as if someone wanted the documents to come his way and offer him more tantalising clues. For instance, whereas Gerard's study of administrative records in the Reading Room of the British Museum (Harwood 2005, 77) proves fruitless, he finds there a copy of another story by Viola Hatherley, called "The Gift of Flight," the opening scene of which takes place in the very same location: the Reading Room of the British Museum. Its protagonist, like Gerard, lives in vague anticipation of finding a book that will illuminate her own experience. The tale, with distinctly Gothic features of mystery, haunting, secrecy and forbidden love, also contains the motifs of a fatal attraction to a portrait of a dead woman, flight, fall, and near murder or suicide. Hence, the story resonates not only with Gerard's experience (both prior and subsequent to his reading of the story), but also with the other stories by Viola Hatherley (there are four of them in total) included in the novel. Not only does the frame collapse into the fable, as Peter Craven described the structure of *The Ghost Writer* (Craven 2004, 54), but the book turns out to be a veritable intratextual mirror hall of stories that reflect, repeat, resemble, or, indeed, distort one another.

The boundaries between the stories are further blurred by the inclusion of yet another level: just like Gerard, the characters in Viola Hatherley's tales experience dreams, hallucinations, or episodes taking place in the murky zone between reality and delusion. These incidents develop into stories in their own right which are embedded within the main narratives. Sometimes the fictitious characters also come across texts which appear to be related to their situation. For instance, in "The Gift of Flight" Julia reads an account of a scene which she subsequently sees enacted in the street as soon as she leaves the

library. In another reversal of time, and another transgression of the text-reality boundary, Julia finds a newspaper report of her lover's suicide, and arrives at his flat in time to prevent it from happening. The recurring echoing between life and fiction disrupts the customary relationship between art and reality, with art as its mirror, implying that in Harwood's novel it may well be two-directional. The meaning of Gerard's mother's enigmatic remark, "One came true," turns out to refer to one of the tales in which Viola Hatherley appears to have unwittingly pre-scripted the lives of her granddaughters, and possibly also that of her great-grandson.

Notwithstanding the wide spectrum of definitions of the neo-Victorian, it is widely recognised to be "a double movement," hovering between the past and the present, traversing the boundaries of time, enabling interactions and encounters between texts, cultures, individuals and communities (cf. Arias 2020, 199). Hence, Rosario Arias describes neo-Victorian fiction as "Janus-faced" (2020, 199). Its theoreticians, whether implicitly or overtly, often invoke Simon Joyce's metaphor of the rearview mirror in discussions of the ways in which the Victorian age is portrayed in contemporary fiction. In "The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror" Joyce argues that in the process of looking backward towards the nineteenth century through contemporary lenses we inevitably see our own reflection. By employing this metaphor, Joyce stresses the processes of mediation and distortion which influence contemporary re-imaginings of the Victorian age (2007, 3). Discussing literal references to mirrors, glass and windows in selected neo-Victorian fiction, Heilmann and Llewellyn comment that those invisible barriers "could usefully be viewed as the textual layering of the contemporary novel and its Victorian narrative, the text becoming almost a glass permitting a double-viewed reflection" (2010, 144). Yet the complex structure and multiple textual layering of Harwood's novel entail not just a double view, but multiple reflections. The experience known to drivers glancing into the rearview mirror, described by Joyce as "the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what's behind us" (2007, 3), is intensified in the case of Gerard Freeman, who appears to be caught in a network of multi-directional glances.

The narrator's story is a record of his confused (and confusing) meandering between manifold replications and refractions. The idyllic country house Staplefield, which he remembers from his mother's recollections, seems not to have existed as he fails to find any records of such a place when he arrives in England. However, he comes upon Staplefield as a fictional location in one of his

great-grandmother's stories. In yet another twist, Gerard discovers that it did have a real-life counterpart, or perhaps even two, in his family history. This discovery makes the protagonist realise that his great-grandmother's tale "The Revenant" is to be studied not only for its connections with her other fiction, but also for its mirroring of reality – yet not only the reality that had happened, but also that which was about to happen. Typical of the convoluted structure of the entire novel, the tale itself contains two narrative strands, with one repeating, with a difference, the other. Its main character, a young girl called Cordelia, becomes strangely fascinated by her grandmother's disturbingly life-like portrait, before she discovers the tragic story of Imogen's unhappy marriage, her romantic affair with the portrait painter, and her husband's revenge on both his wife and the artist. The theme of a deadly fascination with a painting, known from "Seraphina," is employed here again – the husband who bankrupted and possibly killed the painter and appropriated his collection is believed to have subsequently suffered from a curse contained in the paintings. The collection remains in the ancestral mansion and has retained its lethal properties. The young lawyer who comes to examine the family's legacy and eventually becomes engaged to Cordelia might be the titular revenant – a reincarnation of the painter, or perhaps also of Imogen's husband, the painter's arch-enemy. Indeed, Cordelia's eerie experience is that whenever Harry inspects the art collection he seems to adopt a different personality. But Cordelia herself likes to put on her grandmother's veil and pose as her ghost. Competing for Harry's love leads to enmity between Cordelia and her sister. The final scene, in which Cordelia discovers her sister's romance with her fiancé, ends in the lovers' fatal fall down the staircase (an echo of what happens in the tale "The Flight").

While reading the story, Gerard begins to suspect that it anticipated a real-life conflict between his own mother and her sister, and becomes convinced that his mother's murder of her sibling must be at the heart of the family's secret. Mark Llewellyn suggests that in Harwood's novel the Gothic tales become histories, "in the sense that they provide [the protagonist] with the investigative and interpretative clues" (2010, 37). Gerard gradually realises that of the four tales by Viola Hatherley he has found "The Revenant" is the most relevant to his research. The interpenetration of the contemporary narrator's experience and the trials of the fictitious characters created by his great-grandmother is highlighted by the fragmentation of the Victorian tale. Gerard finds its subsequent sections over a period of time so that the tale and his own search for the past

proceed as if in parallel. The Victorian Gothic continues to invade the present. If, as Arias and Pulham contend, in neo-Victorian fiction the Victorian text functions as “a form of revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present” (2010, xv), then in Harwood’s novel the revenant in the embedded story called “Revenant” is also the story itself, and it may be said to self-consciously name its own haunting status.

A structural principle of *The Ghost Writer* is that the boundaries between different realms of being, between the Victorian and the contemporary, are not so much transcended as erased. The protagonist discovers that he himself is yet another in the series of revenants. Having chanced upon a photograph of his mother with her infant son, he then finds a record of his own death. Only some time later does he realise that the baby in the picture was not himself but an elder brother whose existence had been kept secret from him, and that he, i.e. the narrator of the novel, was named after his dead sibling. In the ending of *The Ghost Writer* Gerard Freeman is caught in a veritable vortex of accumulated echoes and cross-references – a neo-Victorian character exemplarily entangled in spectral and textual repetitions. He finds himself searching for evidence in his ancestors’ abandoned family mansion, which appears to be haunted. A ghostly but living woman, dressed in white, appears, intent on killing him. She turns out to be his mother’s aged sister Anne. Rather than being murdered by his mother, as he had assumed, Anne had spent her life consumed by the desire for revenge. Unable to reach her sister, she now wants to vent her anger on the next generation.

Even though the fire that Gerard accidentally starts engulfs the woman and the house with all its dark secrets, his final escape cannot be interpreted as a liberation. What happens to him, including the circumstances of his escape, is clearly a replication of some of the motifs found in his great-grandmother’s Gothic tales. His spectral aunt is not only connected with the veiled, elusive women in those tales; she turns out to be also his mysterious correspondent Alice Jessel, whose name connotes both Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* and Miss Jessel, the governess in Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*.³ Nor can one miss her affinity with Wilkie Collins’s “woman in white,” or Charles Dickens’s Miss Havisham. Yet when Anne, her bridal dress and her obsession with revenge are finally destroyed, the protagonist realises that his life has been empty,

3 The Gothic tales recounted in the novel have been likened to those by M.R. James (Craven 2004, 51).

wasted and predetermined by other people's scripts. Ultimately, Gerard feels devastated and hollow: "with nothing to hold me to the earth, and no life to relive" (Harwood 2005, 374). However, the one thing that he retrieves from the burning house is another typescript by his Victorian great-grandmother: "I felt the weight of the manuscript tugging at my shirt, and began precariously to descend" (Harwood 2005, 374). If the novel is read in terms of the protagonist's quest for identity, then this quest fails. The ending of the story intimates that he is going to spend his subsequent years studying yet another text, haunted by the spectral and textual echoes of the past, with no life of his own, animated only by communication with the revenants.

John Harwood has produced a novel of impressive and bewildering formal complexity, in which the boundaries between the originals and replicas, the real, the textual and the supernatural have been deliberately obliterated. The motifs of research and detection, Gothicism as well as plot and character multiplication exemplify some of the potential inherent in neo-Victorianism. As an intensely metafictional narrative, *The Ghost Writer* is underlain by overt references to the literary heritage. However, while the persistent echoing and mirroring makes for a formally successful literary project, on the level of the story it entraps the protagonist so that, contrary to what might be expected, the discovery of the truth does not bring him a sense of accomplishment or the satisfaction of closure. In this respect, *The Ghost Writer* offers an alternative to numerous neo-Victorian novels in which delving into the past eventually brings some form of uplifting illumination or reparation. In the much better known *Possession*, the contemporary literary critics find themselves repeating, with a difference, the story of the Victorian poets they study: "Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (Byatt 2002, 421). The experience, however, proves to be rejuvenating and energising. In the conclusion of her novel, Byatt shows that "the quest for truth, though necessarily unfinished, does lead to an improved understanding of the past, one that is positively beneficial, not baneful" (Keen 2003, 54). The fact that Harwood's protagonist feels downcast rather than elated probably ought to be attributed to his inability to leave the "echo chamber of voices" and endorse the perspective of a dispassionate researcher, or that of a reader who can derive postmodernist pleasure from appreciating the writer's adroit play with neo-Victorian modes.

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