

**The Self-Not-Self:
Review of John Harwood, *The Asylum***

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John Harwood, *The Asylum*
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Since receiving the International Horror Guild's First Novel Award for *The Ghost Writer* (2004), John Harwood has persistently pursued a distinctly Gothic vein of neo-Victorian writing, both in *The Séance* (2008) and now *The Asylum* (2013). His latest, darkly claustrophobic offering returns to the theme of familial rivalry, betrayal, and persecution visited on following generations. Layers upon layers of subterfuge and conspiracy are expertly combined with Harwood's by now trademark *deus ex machina* of (at one-time) cutting edge science and technology. This writerly obsession fits in rather neatly with neo-Victorianism's more general inquisition into the nature – and costs – of historical progress and the advancements of knowledge. However, the novel's primary focus, as in Harwood's previous works, remains firmly on a damaged psyche in extremis, faced with both terrifying metaphorical and literal self-loss. The writer's real Gothic terrain is the quest for the ultimately unknowable self, which relativises his characters' identities and, by implication, postmodern identity also in so far as the latter is built on a particular version of the past taken at face value. No one and nothing ever turn out to be quite what they seem in Harwood's novel. Hence no one and nothing can be trusted, with readers implicitly invited to assume a paranoid stance towards all the characters and their assertions and testimonies.

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The ‘seeming vs. being’ theme is signalled from the outset, when the narrator Georgina Ferrars, lately resident of London, wakes in a Cornwall asylum in November 1882, having apparently admitted herself as a voluntary patient under the name of Lucy Ashton but having lost all memory of her arrival at Tregannon House. Investigations into her remembered as well as forgotten past by Doctor Maynard Straker, who runs the “enlightened establishment” on experimental “humane” principles (p. 6), suggest that the identity she claims is actually false, having been appropriated from the real Georgina Ferrars along with several of Ferrars’ personal and family treasures, namely her private journal and her dead mother’s jewelled dragonfly brooch.¹ Georgina/Lucy finds a sympathetic listener in the handsome Frederic Mordaunt, the heir to Tregannon House and to the family curse of intense melancholy and sometime madness, which led his uncle to transform the ancestral home into a commercial enterprise dedicated to the mentally afflicted. In her conversations with Mordaunt, acting as the readers’ stand-in, she recalls her happy childhood on the southern English coast and her isolated youth with her great-aunt Vida Radford after her ailing mother Emily’s death. After Vida’s death, following closely upon the traumatic loss of their home in a dramatic cliff collapse, Georgina/Lucy moves to London to reside with her great-uncle, the antiquarian bookseller Josiah Radford. A good section of the novel becomes a disquisition on the nature of memory and its tendency to weave fictions, with the ‘imposter’ struggling to recover lost time and come to terms with the possibility that, despite her conviction to the contrary, even her most cherished personal and family recollections may not be her own. *The Asylum* capitalises on the myriad distorting effects of an “overwrought imagination”, with the narrator remarking at one point that “[p]erhaps the only person I had succeeded in deceiving was myself” (p. 224). What defines us, Harwood’s novel suggests, may be what we forget or imagine as much as what we accurately recall of the past – and ourselves.

The Asylum’s neo-Victorian self-consciousness remains obliquely chiaroscuro rather than being thrown into the limelight, but Harwood nonetheless engages in complex games with his readers, playing not only on their knowledge of – and implicit recognition of allusions to – Victorian literature, but arguably a few neo-Victorian classics also. The Devon-born Georgina/Lucy’s idyllic youth on the Isle of Wight, for instance, has Hardy-esque overtones in its celebration of nature while also inscribing its

potential to precipitate tragedy. A near-death experience in an earlier landslide on the cliff face during the narrator's childhood, for instance, evokes the literal 'cliffhanger' of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872-73), foreshadowing the later catastrophe of the loss of the cottage as well as the disappointment of the adult protagonist's naïve romantic hopes. However, only one nineteenth-century novel – perhaps not coincidentally by the 'father' of the historical novel, Sir Walter Scott – is mentioned outright: *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), on which Harwood's protagonist is presumed to have drawn for her false identity. Scott's female heroine's tragic affair with a political enemy of her Whig family, who bought the Cavalier's confiscated estate depriving him of his inheritance, her being tricked into marriage with another and her attempted murder of her husband on their wedding day, quickly followed by her death "insane, of a seizure" (p. 15), all offer tempting hints of the revenant familial past that has taken over Georgina/Lucy's existence. Less obviously so, the protagonist's dreary London life with her uncle, as well as her desperate circular flight from Tregannon that only brings her back to her point of departure, displays echoes of J. Sheridan Le Fanu *Uncle Silas* (1864), while Georgina/Lucy's appearance at the asylum as a distressed figure roaming the countryside in "a trance of desolation" (p. 6) inevitably conjures up Walter Hartright's first encounter with Wilkie Collins' titular *The Woman in White* (1859-60). The doubling of Georginas and the protagonist's subsequent confinement in Tregannon's closed ward casts her simultaneously in the roles of both Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie.

Yet unlike Collins' hapless female victims, Georgina/Lucy is made of sterner stuff and without a proper male hero available (Mordaunt repeatedly disappointing her expectations in this respect), she is forced to take charge of her own destiny. Nonetheless her quest for selfhood finally relies on a number of perhaps too opportune coincidences, such as the re-discovery of the journal. Therein she finds copied her own (or the other Georgina's) mother's letters which will eventually provide the key to the mysterious events – with Harwood resorting to one of neo-Victorian fiction's favourite motifs: interpolated diaristic and epistolatory texts. The unexpected introduction of lesbian desire through this private writing, combined with tropes of doubling, switched identities, and false imprisonment both in a home presided over by a male tyrant and in a madhouse, also revisits *The Woman in White* by way of Sarah Waters'

Fingersmith (2002), as well as calling to mind Waters' earlier *Affinity* (1999). Readers recalling Maud's tyrannous pornographer uncle Mr. Lilly in *Fingersmith* or the underground book/bookbinding trade in illicit materials depicted in Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) may be immediately suspicious of the bibliophile, bookshop owning uncle in *The Asylum*. Harwood, however, as often employs intertextuality to lay a trail of red herrings for his readers, which is all part of his narrative game. He plays with reader expectations derived from the emergent canonisation of neo-Victorian fiction as much, at times even more so, than from first-hand knowledge of Victorian texts, blurring the possibilities of disentangling *what* is actually being adapted.

If not quite as intricately plotted as *The Ghost Writer* and perhaps a bit too predictable in parts, including the somewhat lackluster denouement, *The Asylum* is nonetheless a gripping addition to the growing range of neo-Victorian novels set in whole or part within the confines of an asylum, predominantly, though not exclusively, focused on female characters.² Besides Waters' already mentioned *Fingersmith*, this subclass includes texts as diverse as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Nora Hague's *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2002), Miranda Miller's *Nina in Utopia* (2010), and Kathy Hepinstall's *Blue Asylum* (2012). Why in the supposedly post-feminist era, this particular trope should continue to hold such fascination for both female and male authors as yet remains to be fully explored by neo-Victorian critics. In part the resonance may be read as a response to the various conservative backlashes that continue to punctuate Western states' politics, especially in the form of legislation to control women's bodies, reproductive and abortion rights. Perhaps significantly, Harwood's novel ends with his protagonist's implicit decision never to marry or procreate. A further reason may lie in the seminal importance of canonical feminist literary and theoretical works, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), for writing that addresses women's oppression, which of course constitutes a major focus of the Gothic genre in which Harwood specialises. Indeed, Georgina/Lucy's childhood game with the "full-length mirror in a tarnished gilt frame" in her bedroom, imagining a twin sister named Rosina, "quite different" from herself, "bold, headstrong, defiant of authority, and utterly fearless" (p. 20), is strangely reminiscent of the mirror scene in the red room in *Jane Eyre*. Not least the transgressive Rosina tempts her to do

“forbidden” things, such as “play[ing] in the moonlight” (p. 20), climbing the garden wall or exploring the crumbling cliff edge, which almost leads to a lethal fall.

In *The Asylum*, however, the narrator actively invites rather than merely confronts her spectral Other in the looking glass, hence Othering herself as much as being Othered by those around her, at times almost to the point of being driven mad. The *Doppelgänger* motif, of course, is another recurrent trope of neo-Victorian writing that metafictionally dramatises and complicates our conflicted love-hate relationship with the Victorians as our historical Others, underlining the essential Gothicity of the neo-Victorian quest to re-imagine, resurrect and solicit continuous haunting by this particular historical period. For aficionados of neo-Victorian Gothic, the return to the nineteenth-century madhouse via *The Asylum* will prove hard to resist.

Notes

1. I found myself wondering whether the choice of the latter was inspired by the cover image of the René Lalique brooch of A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009) in a nod to the multiplying Gothic doublings in Byatt’s own (part) neo-Victorian text.
2. Examples of neo-Victorian novels focused on male characters in asylums include Sebastian Faulks’ *Human Traces* (2005) and Adam Foulds’ biofiction *The Quickening Maze* (2009) about the poet John Clare.