

Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*

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Abstract:

Affinity 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 the plot and the actual love affair that plays in the shadows and sub-text of the novel. This article examines how narrative visibility and class invisibility are effectively coordinated by specious epistolary confidence.

Keywords: *Affinity*, diary, epistolary, fraud, gaze, letters, neo-Victorian, panoptic, spiritualism, Sarah Waters.

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 1998: 240)

There is a ubiquitous presence of fictional letters and diaries in neo-Victorian fiction. Imagined documents appear to be agents of the 'flaunted' narrative discontinuity and multiple points of view upon which critics claim the genre is based.¹ Epistolary voices repeatedly revision neo-Victorian fiction's favoured marginal, unrepresented, rejected, or other figures (Humpherys 2002: 446).² This is evidenced in works like A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1991), where the letters of a fallen woman contrast with the diary of a frigid wife, and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), which debates the 'othering' of a female criminal by piecing fictional letters and a diary voice into a patterned patchwork of voices. Similarly, Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001) revisions a diary voice in order to interrogate the mysteries that surround Lewis Carroll's lost or destroyed diary pages and, in *The Underground Man* (1997), Mick Jackson imagines a

diary for an eccentric aristocrat, ‘othered’ and ‘rejected’ because of insanity. In line with this epistolary trend, Sarah Waters presents her second novel, *Affinity* (1999), in diary form, imagining the ‘unrepresented’ lesbian and how women might have experienced late nineteenth-century prison life. Waters exemplifies Millbank Gaol’s panoptic principle to discipline and punish, but steadily distorts the panoptic principle as interposed diary entries reveal lives entwined and mired in a ‘queer’ atmosphere of Victorian spiritualism. This article examines how Waters’s two diarists reflect the “Millbank passion for queer geometry” (Waters 1999: 235), with visibility in the novel framed by generic expectations of diary form, but subverted by clandestine letters that elude even the gaze of the reader.

Waters manipulates the expectations generated by diary form and simultaneously uses letters to subvert the panoptic power principle of the prison. 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. Notably, nineteenth-century spiritualists believed that those engaged in mesmerism must master the ‘gaze’.³ Waters foregrounds the critical model as readers are bombarded with hypnotic repetitions of the “unsettling gaze” (Waters 1999: 64), recurring with almost parodic persistence throughout the text.⁴

Affinity’s focus on the critical gaze resonates with Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) and his discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptic principle, as highlighted by previous commentators on the novel (see Kohlke 2004 and Llewellyn 2004 and 2007). In addition, Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble have investigated how Waters moves from Foucault’s explanation of the panopticon’s mechanism to reveal it as an “optical illusion” (Armitt and Gamble 2006: 148). Focussing on Gaston Bachelard’s ideas of space, they broaden the epistolary genre to interpret journals as a letter exchange framework. Suggesting that the two diaries are “superimposed one upon the other to create a sort of palimpsest” (Armitt and Gamble 2006: 152), they highlight a mutual dependence between the texts. 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. Letters supplement diaries as a significant, if covert, presence in the novel. This article therefore explores the clandestine coordination of unconcealed diary form with elusive letters that crucially evade the gaze of readers. Margaret Prior's diary is entangled within a web of epistolary relations between herself, the imprisoned medium, Selina Dawes, and her maid, Ruth Vigers. Alone with her diary and possessed by a "single base spirit", Margaret is a victim of spiritualist fraud and effectively a "passive writer" at the hand of Vigers (Waters 1999: 227).⁵

Waters thus distorts epistolary relations to manipulate characters and strategically unfold a story of deceit. Incorporating documentary forms effectively revises or supplements the double-coded structure of neo-Victorian fiction by drawing on the critical entailments of epistolarity. Epistolary forms are metafictional devices that implicitly embody what Janet Gurkin Altman terms a *mise-en-abyme* of the writer/reader relationship itself (Altman 1982: 212). 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. If the mission of contemporary writers is to establish in order to disrupt, the subsequent auto-diegetic manipulation of forms proves illustrative of contemporary revisioning of the Victorians. I suggest that letters and diaries in neo-Victorian fiction imitate ideas of incomplete 'truths' in order to reinforce Linda Hutcheon's familiar idea that we can only know the past through its textual traces, which are always partial (Hutcheon 1995: 75).

1. Diary Form

I said that *that* book was like my dearest friend. I told it all my closest thoughts, and it kept them secret. (Waters 1999: 111, original emphasis)

The non-fiction diary is an unavoidable intertext for any fictional diary. In her seminal work, *The Diary Novel* (1985), Lorna Martens traces the history of the twentieth-century diary novel to argue for an abstract or logical potential available for writers who adopt diary form in fiction. She explains that the actual diary, as a communicated object, provides a "simple communicative situation", but whether interpolated into narrative, or wholly

structuring it, a diary in fiction is a *framed* communicative situation. Fictional diarists, like actual diary writers, have no control over their material, but *authors* who choose to employ diary form in fiction have absolute control and, as a result, authority to shape events (Martens 1985: 33).⁶ 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 the suspension of disbelief. Faith in diary writing is supported by Trevor Field, who in *Form and Function in the Diary Novel*, argues that

[m]any 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. (Field 1989: 21)

Readers of diary fiction are therefore open to suggestion that encourages conviction in the diarist's representation of events. Diary form aims to generate an aura of authenticity and self-reflexive honesty, with Martens's governing connotation of "sincerity" always evident (Martens 1985: 38). Generic echoes of sincerity work towards a traditional aim of "buttressing the illusion of the real" (Abbott 1984: 19).⁷ Readers, encouraged by the inevitable intertext of the non-fiction diary, may initially believe that they operate an all-seeing scrutiny of the diarist's private thoughts. H. Porter Abbott suggests that both writer and reader of fictional diaries are "cloistered" within a "bell jar of self-communion" and that this allows authors to "intensify our concentration on the central figure's private drama of self awareness" (Abbott 1980: 23). It is perhaps this "cloistered" narrative atmosphere that encourages readers to collude with Margaret's confessional text and imagine her illusory love story. Fostering faith in the private voice, diary mode may blinker readers' full understanding of their collusion with the confiding voice. However, 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" as the realm of the fantastic (Waters 1999: 218), or conversely remain on the more solid ground of scepticism as we read on? This is a decision that renders Selina either a

manipulative fraud or an innocent victim. But without the autodiegetic authority inherent in the diary form, would readers inevitably err on the safer shores of scepticism?

Waters significantly chooses *two* diary voices to narrate her tale, thus distorting any ‘panoptic’ textual effect in *Affinity* with competing epistolary discourses within the novel.⁸ This immediately disrupts the confessional atmosphere of the single narrator diary text. The two diaries lie side by side, ostensibly in unequivocal view for the reader. It is significant that Selina’s journal introduces the novel, but narrates a period one year before Margaret Prior’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. 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” (Abbott 1984: 24). As Margaret’s diary entries are interpolated with Selina’s, Waters undermines generic confidence by inviting readers to alternatively compare and contrast the perspectives of two diarists. Consequently, dual narration encourages us to perceive Margaret’s misreading of herself and Selina, as well as our own misapprehensions. However, a clear understanding of the relationship between the divided narratives only becomes fully available at the close of the novel.

Gerald Prince asks, “why does the narrator begin keeping a diary?” (Prince 1975: 479) The answer for Margaret is a desire to re-order a complex reality that has nearly destroyed her. *Affinity* begins with Margaret observing architectural patterns and she seeks to emulate these in her writing. Her study of the geometric organisation of the prison (both on drawings and the 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 also Llewellyn, Margaret strives to imitate her father’s scholarly textual ordering in her diary, and from the outset of the novel, the masculine design of the prison is juxtaposed with Margaret’s analogous desire for form and containment in her writing.⁹ Her 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” (Waters 1999: 30,

241). Her ultimate failure to do this illustrates Waters's interrogation of the problems of writing female/homosexual experience.¹⁰

As panoptic object, under surveillance by family, staff, and doctors, it is unsurprising that Margaret seeks private communion within the confessional pages of her private journal. Others readily write her into a range of social and ideological discourses, and her own writing potentially counterbalances 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 the burning of the 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 'unbuckle' 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 begins 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, "journals of the heart" (Waters 1999: 70). It is suggested that personal journals indulge unhealthy fancies and undermine the convalescent 'remedies' prescribed by doctors and family. 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" (Waters 1999: 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" (Waters 1999: 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 ghost-writer and her own gullible reader. Her diary records an aspiring romance; yet the document is ultimately 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' gaze upon the pages, sticky and white" (Waters 1999: 348). A complex shadow story lies between the lines of Margaret's diary to reveal that the only viable same-sex love story within the novel is one necessarily realised by dark deceit and mesmeric trickery.

2. The Panoptic Gaze

She still kept her eyes upon me – now, however, I saw her gaze grow strange. (Waters 1999: 211)

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 internal mechanisms produce the relation in which the individuals are caught up. (Foucault 1991: 202)

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” (Foucault 1991: 202). 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’ to be totally seen by Vigers ‘without ever seeing’. Margaret’s diary, far from providing her with a private refuge, in fact, facilitates Vigers’s penetrating scrutiny. In line with Foucault’s idea that power should be visible but unverifiable, “like a faceless gaze that transform[s] the whole social body into a field of perception (Foucault 1991: 214), Vigers is all along under Margaret’s nose, but as a member of the serving class, she is effectively invisible to her mistress. Thus *Affinity*’s narrative architecture of “queerly segmented” (Waters 1999: 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 “enclosed segmented space, observed at every point [...] in which all events are recorded” (Foucault 1991: 197). 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 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. As 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 illustrates 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.

Margaret is exposed to a variety of written messages that repeatedly foreshadow or illuminate the narrative action, but 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 & Assault*” (Waters 1999: 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 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 both are subjected to an authoritative gaze insisting upon punishment and reform, which reinforces their similarities. Selina tells Margaret: “all the world might gaze at her, it was a part of her punishment” (Waters 1999: 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 (both were linked to deviant

sexuality) and these ideas are all contained within the novel to circle back to social panic and fear of what Alex Owen suggests is “femininity gone awry” (Owen 1989: 147).

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” (Waters 1999: 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; ultimately its shape must surrender to the uncertain experiences of the writer.

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*” (Waters 1999: 252-253, original emphasis). Margaret strives to write with authority, but her maid, Vigers, powerfully overwrites the diary with her own preferred story. 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 as Margaret makes a further (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 attempt to challenge her position as a hysteric 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” (Waters 1999: 68). However, following intimation that she knows Margaret’s secrets, 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!” (Waters 1999: 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 her spiritualist powers enable an all-seeing ability that 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 that betrays its role as confidante. Mediated access to Margaret’s private journal enables Selina’s ‘panoptical’ view 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.”

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. (Waters 1999: 111-112, original emphases)

Margaret therefore begins to accept the idea that she is caught in Selina’s all-seeing gaze of paranormal powers 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*” (Waters 1999: 117, 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.

Yet Selina is a shadowy presence in her own text, which can be read as symptomatic of her powerless role as a pawn for others to play at will. Selina is potentially at risk should her diary fall into the wrong hands. Even before incarceration in Millbank, she would have been aware of the panoptic mechanism that understands “visibility as a trap” (Foucault 1991: 200). Selina has much to hide, and diary writing is consequently risk-laden. A life based on masking and masquerade will not reveal the player behind the performance carelessly. She does, however, demonstrate her shady relationship with text and writing to Margaret. She inscribes “TRUTH” (Waters 1999: 167) on her own body, created as a disappearing mirage manifested by way of a box 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’.¹¹ Margaret eventually realises that “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” (Waters 1999: 342). 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.

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*” (Waters 1999: 27, original emphasis). Selina is able to access the innermost thoughts and emotions of Margaret via confidence trickery and connived access to her private papers. Margaret’s diary scripts a drama for Selina to perform – a masquerade with Ruth Vigers acting as stage director, a role the latter performed so well as the spirit control, Peter Quick.¹² 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 her cell and, unwittingly and with devastating irony, she writes in her diary: “In one of those shadows *Selina* is lying. Her eyes are open, and she is looking at me” (Waters 1999: 117, original emphasis). Selina has been evading or ‘lying’ to Margaret and readers all along, a point noted by Armit and Gamble, who understand that the difficulty of constructing a voice for Selina ultimately leads to the realisation that “the character we have constructed in the act of ‘reading Selina’ turns out to be fake” (Armitt and

Gamble 2006: 155). Selina, in fact, proves to have been all along the “sharp little actress” (Waters 1999: 85) that she denied being.

3. A Ghost in the Panoptic Machine

And all the time Ruth sits & watches. (Waters 1999: 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” (Waters 1999: 174). Yet Vigers’s social invisibility allows her to disappear completely beneath the radar of Margaret’s narrative: she is the “faceless gaze” (Foucault 1991: 214). As Selina observes on first meeting Ruth, she operates as a lady’s maid should, silently and unobtrusively, “like a ghost” (Waters 1999: 119).¹³

Readers are ‘cloistered’ within the claustrophobic atmosphere of Margaret’s diary, and Vigers is able to deceptively operate and move within the narrative unrecognised. Bentham evoked “the sleepless eye of constant surveillance” (Semple 1993: 143), and we repeatedly visualise Vigers restlessly shifting in the room above Margaret in references to “the creak of Vigers’ bed” (Waters 1999: 314), signalling the ghostly authority 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 and their suitability/susceptibility 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 ownership and bondage. Witness the “velvet collar, with a lock of brass” that Margaret believes Selina ‘spirited’ to her as a pledge of their

love (Waters 1999: 294). 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 with complexity 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 her 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. As 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. (Waters 1999: 341-342)

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" (Waters 1999: 138), her voice has in fact been disseminated by means of stealthy invasion of Margaret's narrative?

I would suggest that Waters subjects the diary in various ways to a distortion of 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 who reads, who writes, and who interprets and distributes 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” (Armit and Gamble 2006: 158). 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 thereby becoming the key medium in her elaborately coordinated fraud.

4. Invisible Letters

Not a letter, not a word? (Waters 1999: 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 in the novel, and this is 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” (Waters 1999: 315). This letter will reach its intended destination even if Margaret does not. It is clear, however, that this “very curious letter” (Waters 1999: 315) may leave Helen unenlightened, as it effectively substitutes seamlessly for a suicide note, a point 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 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. (Waters 1999: 315)

Margaret does say that she has been led by “someone marvellous” to a “dazzling place” (Waters 1999: 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" (Waters 1999: 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" (Waters 1999: 288-289); looking down she observes: "my flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!" (Waters 1999: 289). This image is perplexing if one considers Terry Castle's claim that twentieth-century lesbian authors have materialised the lesbian in fiction as a new "affirming presence" (Castle 1993: 64-65). Castle further argues that a new understanding of the homophobic literature of the past is available which makes visible a "surreptitious erotic power" to signal an (extra-textual) "fall into flesh" (Castle 1993: 65). 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?¹⁴ Thomas Mallon claims that "no form of expression more emphatically embodies the expresser: diaries are the flesh made word" (Mallon 1985: xvii). Yet Margaret is emphatically presented as unable to bodily write herself as enduring text.

Margaret's letter is ultimately powerless to communicate her position. However, Vigers's secret exchange of letters with Selina effectively controls the textual universe. These are silent texts within the novel; yet they freely manoeuvre all players in the drama.¹⁵ 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!" (Waters 1999: 81, original emphasis). Margaret believes that this knowledge better equips her to understand Selina's "solitude and silence" (Waters 1999: 82), but

eventually Margaret, on learning the truth, begins to understand the vital role that 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!
(Waters 1999: 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 contained within and driving the plot, but physically absent as an overt textual device. 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. Assisted by the medium of unseen ‘invisible’ letters, the planned deception of Margaret is executed by the medium and “her *control*” to effect Vigers’s “sly and dreadful triumph” (Waters 1999: 166, 341, original emphasis). Margaret is catastrophically undone by wholesale distortion of epistolary relations that manipulate characters and also organise the strategic unfolding of narrative for readers.

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Notes

1. Christian Gutleben claims that all neo-Victorian novels “flaunt a discontinuous narrative structure” (Gutleben 2001: 139) and Linda Hutcheon

suggests that historiographic metafiction privileges multiple points of view as one of two primary modes of narration (Hutcheon 1988: 117).

2. The term 'epistolary' refers, of course, principally to letters. The 'epistolary novel' is, however, defined as either comprised solely of letters or expanded to include works comprised of documents like diaries, journals, newspaper clippings in addition to letters. The differences and similarities between letters and diaries are much debated, with a fundamental differentiation made that letters involve exchange and diaries do not. However, this distinction becomes fluid when novel writers adopt the forms as fictional devices. *Affinity* particularly manipulates and problematises ideas of privacy, secrecy and exchange. Therefore, in order to address the shape-shifting intertextual exchange that blurs conventional distinctions between the two forms of writing, I use the term 'epistolary' loosely to refer to both embedded letters and diaries.
3. Alex Owen, quoting Chandos Leigh Hunt, a nineteenth-century London based mesmerist and healer, suggests: "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" (Owen 1989: 128).
4. Configurations of the 'gaze' are repeated more than one hundred times throughout Waters's novel.
5. This is a phenomenon that was explained to Margaret by Mr Hither at the Association of Spiritualists: "He was a passive writer – do you know the term? He had been encouraged by a thoughtless friend to sit with pen and paper, and after a time there had come spirit-messages to him, through the independent motion of his arm ... That, said Mr Hither, is a fine spiritualist trick; he said I would find many mediums doing that, to a sensible degree. The young man he spoke of now, however, was not sensible. He began to sit at night, alone – after that, he found that the messages came faster than ever" (Waters 1999: 227, original ellipses).
6. Martens explains that the actual diary, as a communicated object, provides a "simple communicative situation" by offering tripartite poles allocated to reader/diarist/narrated world (Martens 1985: 33). She qualifies 'reader' with a question mark, which I believe belies 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.

Acknowledgement of potential addressees adds complexity to a perhaps not so simple communicative situation. For a discussion of the contentious topic of diaries and addressees, see Prince 1975: 477-481.

7. 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 2006: 152).
8. There are examples of nineteenth-century multi-narrator diary novels, which 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). Epistolary forms had, however, largely fallen out of favour with novelists at this time, with the exception of Gothic and Sensation fiction writers who continued to employ letter and diary forms for plots that developed secrets and suspense in support of subversive agendas. Neo-Victorian writers who re-appropriate epistolary forms continue to focus on topics that preoccupied Gothic and Sensation fiction, such as adultery, madness, crimes of passion, and variations of dark desires and social transgression.
9. Kohlke argues that Margaret’s “would-be historical subjectivity stages itself in the shadow of her dead historian-father” (Kohlke 2004: 157). Llewellyn also observes that Margaret’s “diary begins with a longing for her father”, which he suggests “reflects her desire for ‘masculine’ mental empowerment” (Llewellyn 2004: 207). Elsewhere, Llewellyn further explores the 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 2007: 199).
10. It is evident that Waters does not simply incorporate critical ideas in support of her fiction, but she also potentially challenges contemporary scholarly debates on female homosexuality. It has been suggested that Waters’s work does not comfortably subscribe to a mode of 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 (Kohlke 2004: 156). By looping critical debates back on themselves within fiction, via diary form, Waters manages to metacritically question the limitations of homosexual theorising in literary studies today.

11. Armitt 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 (Armitt and Gamble 2006: 153).
12. 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), a point previously noted by Catherine Spooner and Mark Wormald (see Spooner 2007: 364 and Wormald 2006: 195).
13. One might argue that this again challenges Castle's apparition theory, because here is a lesbian figure that is empowered by invisibility.
14. Kohlke points out that Margaret "replicates the very writing-out of women – and of lesbians – from patriarchal history that she initially seemed to contest" (Kohlke 2004: 161).
15. The key characters involved in Margaret's deception are all carriers of letters (or mediums of epistolary transaction), i.e. Mrs Jelf, Selina Dawes, and Ruth Vigers.

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