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Ghostwriting and Spectrality in Robert Harris's *The Ghost*

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Abstract
A critique of Tony Blair's collaboration with George W. Bush in the War on Terror, Robert Harris's The Ghost *(2007) goes beyond its topical subject by exploring the connections between ghostwriting and spectrality. The unnamed protagonist of Harris's novel is a professional ghostwriter who, after being commissioned to revamp former Prime Minister Adam Lang's memoirs, becomes enmeshed in various forms of spectrality. While isolated with his hosts in a fortress-like compound on Martha's Vineyard during the island's bleak off-season, the ghostwriter experiences the Uncanny firsthand. In the end he compiles a 160,000-word book, not realizing that with the project's completion he is signing his own death warrant by writing a work about the pursuit of truth. The novel's coda differs from that of Roman Polanski's 2010 film adaptation, but Harris's narrative captures the universality of literary Gothicism.*

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In the opening chapter of Robert Harris's *The Ghost* (2007), while the literary agent of its unnamed protagonist is trying to interest him in rewriting a former British Prime Minister's memoirs drafted by an aide, the ghostwriter plumes himself on his skills as a probing and inventive scribe. Although admitting that his career is "undistinguished" (previous clients include a television magician, a rock star, and a professional soccer player), he routinely tries to draw out his subjects by asking, "How did it feel?" (Harris 2007: 5, 6). Because his interlocutors usually cannot answer this question, the Ghost, as hereafter I shall refer to Harris's narrator, explains that "they have to hire me to supply their memories." The vicariousness involved in such sessions then prompts him rather smugly to confide:

> [B]y the end of a successful collaboration I am more them than they are. I rather enjoy this process, to be honest: the brief freedom of being someone else. Does that sound creepy? If so, let me add that real craftsmanship is required. I not only extract from people their life stories, [but] I [also] impart a shape to those lives that was often invisible; sometimes I give them lives they never even realized they had. If that isn't art, what is? (Harris 2007: 6)

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Midway through the novel, launching into the arduous task of revamping Adam Lang's scripted autobiography in only two weeks after the publisher accelerates the timetable to take advantage of publicity concerning the ex-politician's complicity in the American "War on Terror," the Ghost scales back on his earlier claim about "art" by asserting that "In the absence of genius there is always craftsmanship" (Harris 2007: 153). Forty-two pages later, mystified by discrepancies in source accounts of what first drew Lang into politics, he revises again his vocational self-image. "I see myself," he now admits, "as the literary equivalent of a skilled lathe operator, or a basket weaver; a potter, maybe: I make mildly diverting objects that people want to buy" (Harris 2007: 195).

This decline in the narrator's assessment of his occupation derives from his having to grapple, like the outsider in a Gothic psychodrama, with various forms of spectrality on this particular assignment. Aside from the fact that he is Lang's "ghost," as he maladroitly identifies himself upon meeting the former Prime Minister, Harris's protagonist is wrestling with the revenant of Michael James McAra, long-time legislative assistant to Lang, who before his mystery-shrouded death at age fifty by drowning in Nantucket Sound had cobbled together a factual but uninspired account of his supervisor's life for Rhinehart Publishing. The "whole book" as compiled by McAra and based heavily on archival research "somehow felt false, as if there was a hollow at its center" (Harris 2007: 58), decides the Ghost. Unable to identify exactly what this lacuna is, though suspecting that it has something to do with the "phantom presence" of Lang's formidable wife Ruth in the manuscript (Harris 2007: 185), he later is haunted by a nightmare of his drowned precursor's urging him to "*go on without me*" before McAra's bloated corpse washes up, unaccountably given the prevailing currents, at remote Lambert's Cove (Harris 2007: 201, italics in original). In the background hovers a throng of other wraiths, among them four suspected Al Qaeda terrorists, all British citizens, who five years earlier were targeted in Operation Tempest for extrajudicial rendition from Pakistan by then Prime Minister Lang, acting in league with President George W. Bush, and subjected to torture by waterboarding, or simulated drowning, at Guantánamo Bay. One of these men, Nasir Ashraf, died under interrogation. Reporting that Lang is being arraigned by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for these violations, news media also announce yet another suicide bombing in London's underground transportation system that leaves eight people dead. All these casualties as well as McAra's death are looming specters that haunt the margins of the narrative Harris's ghostwriter has been commissioned to redact for $250,000.

Discussing the Freudian concept of *das Unheimliche* or the Uncanny, Avery F. Gordon observes that among the "characteristic features of haunting"

is that “the ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the […] lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge” (Gordon 1997: 63). Harris’s novel captures this eerie atmosphere well when its setting shifts in the third chapter from London to Martha’s Vineyard, where the Langs and their small retinue are guests at publisher Martin S. Rhinehart’s vacation house during the largely deserted island’s midwinter off-season. After a ferry ride from the Massachusetts mainland, the narrator is taken by a deaf-mute taxi driver to his portside Edgartown hotel, the journey and vista making him feel “as though I’d come to the edge of the earth” (Harris 2007: 44). The next morning proves even more ominous. Driven by the same cabby to the Langs’ temporary residence in nearby West Tisbury, the Ghost arrives at the Rhinehart compound that “somehow resembled a holiday home designed by Albert Speer” (Harris 2007: 53), its brick chimneys being said to resemble those of a crematorium. The environs of this lair are no less oppressive. Surrounded by scrub oak and sand dunes bordering empty stretches of oceanside beaches, the house itself with a “wall facing the coast [. . .] made entirely of glass” offers only a bleakly “primordial” view (Harris 2007: 56). Moreover, a weekly security drill called “Lockdown” causes steel shutters to descend suddenly over all exposed windows, turning the retreat into a fortress-like prison (Harris 2007: 95). Such details combine to suggest the claustrophobic architecture etched by Giovanni Battista Piranesi in *Le Carceri d’Invenzione* (1750, 1761) and projected by Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Because Harris’s thriller primarily concerns its narrator and the act of writing, it is significant that the novel emphasizes a pattern wherein the process of ghosting “become[s] a form of doubling” (Paulson 2011: 128, 131). Upon sitting down with Adam Lang for a full day of interviews, for example, the Ghost discovers that in the course of their sharing preliminary reminiscences about “the minutiae of English life nearly half a century earlier”—things such as Raleigh bikes, radio comedies, the 1966 World Cup Final, and Beatles singles—“this was not just his childhood we were itemizing but mine and that of every boy who was born in England in the nineteen fifties and who grew to maturity in the seventies” (Harris 2007: 90, 91). In “pool[ing]” their experiences, he goes on to say, “a few of my memories inevitably became blended into his” (Harris 2007: 91). This identification expands in the next chapter when Lang’s ghostwriter breaks from his usual practice with clients by indulging in a limited degree of self-revelation. Disclosing that he lost his parents at about the same age as his subject did, Harris’s narrator recounts how he had been a student at Cambridge not long after Lang and, like him, enjoyed its many venerable traditions. Earlier in the novel, “beginning to get into Lang’s skin” by reading about his life (Harris 2007: 34), he enumerates these parallels in background, indicating that in his spectral role the Ghost “loses touch with his

own role as a 'literary [*D*]*oppelgänger*'" (De Michelis 2012: 78). A certain vacancy or insubstantiality, moreover, typifies both main characters. For his part Andrew Lang had hoped at one time for a career in theater, his virtuosity in the title role of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* at age seventeen having "confirmed him in his desire to become an actor" (Harris 2007: 92). Unemployed in a professional stage capacity after his university years, he pursued that ambition via a different route, his "genius" being to "refresh and elevate the clichés of politics by the sheer force of his performance" (Harris 2007: 13). A similar kind of lateral drift occurred in the narrator's life. Although the novel does not specify his postgraduate aspirations, it does mention that Lang's collaborator also once shared "a passion for student drama" (Harris 2007: 35), after which he presumably entered the ranks of nondisclosure-agreement-signing freelance writers. A further parallel is the two men's relationships with women. Besides the fact that Adam Lang is currently having an affair with personal assistant Amelia Bly, *The Ghost*'s ending reveals that for more than three decades he has been essentially the puppet of his CIA-affiliated wife Ruth and "Medusa-like" mother of their children (Harris 2007: 60). The bachelor narrator's sexual life is not altogether dissimilar. Apparently given to temporary liaisons, he is having a relationship in the fictional present with a politically left-leaning woman named Kate whom he alienates without compunction or remorse by agreeing to write Lang's memoirs.

In light of what I have called the vacancy of these mirrored characters, it is fitting that Harris's sixth novel, which won the 2008 International Thrillers Writers Award, departs radically from his earlier fiction set in antiquity and privileges *écriture* over narratological immediacy. At the virtual center of the text is Mike McAra's 621-page original manuscript which, after extensive emendations, the Ghost eventually rewrites as the 160,000-word *Memoirs by Adam Lang*. Before his completion of the project pursuant to Lang's assassination, however, a digital file of McAra's typescript that the narrator surreptiously emails to himself as an attachment in order to work on it at his Edgartown hotel vanishes in cyberspace, alerting the ghostwriter to the fact that his Internet communications are being monitored by parties unknown. This vanishing of his source material indicates to Harris's scribe that he is enmeshed in a potentially dangerous situation. The development also suggests that he is caught up in the trammels of metatextual aporias like those associated with Jorge Luis Borges's labyrinthine *ficciones*.

The regnant model here is that of the palimpsest, which as a paradigm for *écriture* derives from Part I of *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), Thomas De Quincey's autobiographical sequel to *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821-22) written after his Gothic novel *Klosterheim; or, The Masque* (1832). In *Suspiria*, asking "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain?" De Quincey answers with this peroration:

> Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished. And if, in the vellum palimpsest, lying amongst the other *diplomata* of human archives or libraries, there is any thing fantastic or which moves to laughter, as oftentimes there is in the grotesque collisions of those successive themes, having no natural connexion, which by pure accident have consecutively occupied the roll, yet, in our own heaven-created palimpsest, the deep memorial palimpsest of the brain, there are not and cannot be such incoherences. The fleeting accidents of a man's life, and its external shows, may indeed be irrelate and incongruous; but the organizing principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres, whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without, will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated, or its ultimate repose to be troubled in the retrospect from dying moments, or from other great convulsions. (De Quincey 2003: 175)

In this passage, which inaugurated "the substantive concept of the palimpsest" that has endured "from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day" (Dillon 2007: 1; see also Maniquis 1985), De Quincey is positing a metaphor of cryptic, antecedent inscription in the human brain that counters the self's spectralization over time and underwrites ontological unity. The panegyric attests to the urgency De Quincey feels for some assurance of life's ultimate cohesion, but as extrapolated in Harris's novel the palimpsest of Mike McAra's foundational text points only to a deepening abyss of mystery that culminated in his death. The task of the Ghost, puzzled by the official account of Lang's induction into politics, soon becomes that of decoding or peeling back the layers of McAra's narrative, which he undertakes by first tracking down the fate of its author.

At its exact midpoint, once Harris's protagonist finds himself beguiled by the idea of a "secret document" that McAra may have left behind (Harris 2007: 156), the novel morphs into a classic story of investigative sleuthing or detection. Discovering a photograph, retrieved through his precursor's archival research, of the Footlights Revue cast taken during Lang's undergraduate years at Cambridge, the Ghost notes that on its reverse side is scrawled a telephone number, which he learns upon dialing it belongs to Richard Rycart, the former Prime Minister's ousted Foreign Secretary and now a United Nations envoy for humanitarian affairs, who is leveling charges against his former employer for ordering the illegal handover of suspects for torture by the CIA. That puzzling coincidence prompts the Ghost to steal away from the Rhinehart compound, where he has been confined to McAra's quarters, by way of bicycle during a torrential rain storm. An old Lambert's Cove resident's skeptical report of how Mike McAra's corpse washed up there three weeks earlier compels the narrator to visit the scene, where to his surprise

he sees Ruth Lang and her security guard struggling down the beach toward him. Later that evening, after interrogating him at the Langs' temporary retreat, "Lady Macbeth" seduces the inquisitive ghostwriter while her husband is absent in Washington, D.C. (Harris 2007: 200). The next morning he expects her, succubus-like, to have left his bed, "as keen as a vampire to avoid the unforgiving rays of dawn" (Harris 2007: 205), but not so the redoubtable Mrs. Lang. The disoriented narrator now feels an urgent need to "get out of that house," the equivalent of a Gothic castle, and "put some distance between myself and their destructive ménage à trois before I ended up as crazed as they were" (Harris 2007: 207). In his desperation to escape the Langs' baleful influence, the Ghost commandeers the Rhinehart compound's Ford Escape SUV and is directed by its satellite navigation system to follow the route to Mike McAra's last destination. Here again surfaces the novel's Gothicism, now in the form of the dead's directing the actions of the living. It is reinforced when in a Boston suburb the protagonist arrives at a sequestered house, the access to which is barred by an electric gate under surveillance by tree-mounted cameras bearing the name of Cyclops Security.

The owner of this residence is like many prototypes in the *Schauerroman* tradition arrogant, supercilious, and vaguely sinister. Paul Emmett, formerly on the faculty of Harvard University and President Emeritus of the right-wing Arcadia Institution headquartered in the nation's capital, displays such qualities not only by his condescension but also by his evasiveness when the Ghost presents him with McAra's photograph showing Emmett as well as Lang in the Footlights Revue ensemble at Cambridge, where the former was at the time a doctoral researcher at St. John's College. Eager to appropriate this evidence of his youthful association with England's future Prime Minister, Emmett ushers his visitor into a study filled with memorabilia including citations, prizes, honorary degrees, and images of him alongside such luminaries as Bill Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, and Nelson Mandela. After minimizing his earlier association with Andrew Lang, the Arcadia Institution's *éminence grise* summarily ends the colloquy, after which the Ghost leaves but avails himself of the Internet for background on Emmett. Among other things he discovers is that, besides being the author of several books on the U.K.'s "special relationship" with the U.S. leading up to and extending beyond the 2003 declaration of war against Iraq, Emmett was involved with the Hallington Group (read Halliburton), which owns the Gulfstream jet that transported four suspected terrorists to Guantánamo. This happens also to be one of the same company's fleet of private aircraft on which the narrator earlier saw Lang arrive back in Martha's Vineyard from a trip to New York (see Harris 2007: 67-68). In addition, the Ghost learns that Yale graduate Paul Emmett joined the CIA in either 1969 or 1970 and was assigned to its Foreign Resources Division, at which point he follows the clues a step further by calling Richard Rycart's

number again, knowing all the while that he is committing “professional suicide” by breaching his confidentiality agreement with Rhinehart Publishing (Harris 2007: 252).

The last eighty pages or so of Harris’s novel, not including its epilogue, draw the narrator ever more inextricably into knowledge of Anglo-American collusion during the War on Terror. When he meets with the wary Rycart in a hotel room on the perimeter of LaGuardia Airport, Lang’s ghostwriter protests that he knows nothing about politics but now feels as though he has “stepped through the looking glass” (Harris 2007: 262). The allusion to Lewis Carroll is meant, of course, to convey his growing sense of the Uncanny, which is heightened when he learns that it was the disillusioned McAra who had provided Rycart with the hard evidence he needed in the form of a top-secret memorandum about Operation Tempest to indict Lang on war-crime charges in The Hague. A further discovery made by McAra in his year-long course of archival research and communicated to Rycart is that he had come across something even more portentous. “The only thing he would say,” summarizes Rycart about his telephone call from McAra a week before the latter’s suspicious death, ”was that the key to it could be found in Lang’s autobiography, if anyone bothered to check, that it was all there in the beginning” (Harris 2007: 267). This embedded revelation, readers of Harris’s novel find out at the end of his penultimate chapter, is “like a message from the grave” encoded in the first words of McAra’s sixteen chapters: “Lang[‘]s Wife Ruth Studying In Seventy-six Was Recruited As A CIA Agent In America By Professor Paul Emmett of Harvard University” (Harris 2007: 330). Textuality thus becomes its own palimpsestic gloss despite the ghostwriter’s attempts to manipulate it. If this previously self-aggrandizing craftsman finds himself subordinated to the authority of McAra’s otherwise pedestrian manuscript, he also is told that, because Rycart has tape-recorded their conversation, he henceforth will be working for Lang’s political archrival, further deepening his authorial displacement.

Increasingly haunted by a whorled story beyond his ken, Harris’s narrator struggles to maintain some degree of personal autonomy even while sensing that he is lapsing into “the ghost of a ghost” (Harris 2007: 310). Referenced obliquely here is Lang’s assassination upon flying back to Martha’s Vineyard from New York, toward the end of which flight the former Prime Minister realizes that his ghostwriter has been compromised by whistleblower Richard Rycart. The novel’s climactic scene fulfills all the expectations of a modern thriller. Knowing that “it was the end of everything” after his conversation with the Ghost (Harris 2007: 302), Adam Lang before exiting from the Gulfstream jet bows to those on board and theatrically declaims, “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and good night.” Stepping out onto the plane’s gangway and waving to his wife Ruth in the terminal’s reception area, Lang

then hears a "fellow countryman" on the tarmac shouting his first name. Ever the responsive politician, he strides toward the presumed supporter. Then comes the narrator's report on what he witnessed: "And that is my final image of Lang: a man always with his hand held out. It is burned into my retinas—his yearning shadow against the expanding ball of bright white fire that suddenly engulfed him" (Harris 2007: 304). The perpetrator, identified a few pages later, is one George Arthur Boxer, "a former major in the British army, whose son had been killed in Iraq and whose wife had died six months later in a London suicide bombing" (Harris 2007: 307). The fact that Boxer learned his tactics from jihadist websites only compounds the *peripeteia* of what Lang's decision while Prime Minister, in deferential collaboration with President George W. Bush, ultimately precipitated. A few days later the Ghost, while watching Lang's funeral on CNN from his hospital bed, is seized by a sense of guilt. "I was the one at fault," he reflects. "It wasn't just that I'd betrayed my client, personally and professionally; it was the sequence of events my actions had set in motion" (Harris 2007: 310).

However laudable this self-indictment may seem, Adam Lang's ghostwriter is still deluded about his importance in this unfolding drama of geopolitics and its unanticipated consequences. That initial reaction soon wanes, however, when the convalescent returns to London and for the next six weeks withdraws from the world. During that interim, turning down media requests for interviews, he ironically discovers that with Lang's death he can intuitively ventriloquize his voice while at the computer keyboard. "I was like a screenwriter producing lines with a particularly demanding star in mind," the Ghost reports. "I knew he might say this, but not that; might do this scene, never that" (Harris 2007: 312). The artifice of theater carries over like an infection from his subject to the telling of his story in *Memoirs by Adam Lang*, replicating McAra's sixteen chapters, which the dutiful hack completes in six weeks by hammering out an average of 3,400 words per day before "collaps[ing] like an empty suit of clothers" (Harris 2007: 315). In this encapsulated history of authorial transmission and redaction a later text reprises an antecedent text, both being based on a cunning imposture by a stage-minded politician. Little wonder, then, that Mrs. Ruth Lang, now elevated to "Baroness Lang of Calderthorpe, the government having just given her a seat in the House of Lords as a mark of the nation's respect" (Harris 2007: 314), should as the CIA-sponsored architect of her husband's career compliment the ghostwriter on his having published "*a proper book*" (Harris 2007: 315; italics and underlining in original). Fictionality thus becomes elevated as existential truth.

At this juncture Harris's novel moves compellingly to a close, one which underscores in the words of Lidia De Michelis "a condition that—at both a literal and figurative level—can only be escaped at the cost of the *death of the*

author(s) and the coterminous *birth of their texts*" (De Michelis 2012: 78; italics in original). This critic is referring to the development that, while attending (without benefit of an invitation) a reception with Amelia Bly upon the release of Lang's autobiography, the ghostwriter again encounters Paul Emmett and learns he was Ruth Lang's CIA recruiter roughly three decades ago when she was a Fulbright scholar at Harvard. The revelation prompts Harris's narrator to flee from the hall "into the hollow, imperial grandeur of Whitehall" (Harris 2007: 328), outside which another bomb has gone off near the National Gallery. The "vampirization" to which De Michelis refers, however, materializes only in the novel's epilogue or five-page seventeenth chapter, significantly one chapter longer than McAra's original manuscript as though it is a codicil. Having abandoned his former flat and doubting his sanity while moving from one seedy hotel room to another, the Ghost hears on the midnight news that former Foreign Secretary Richard Rycart has been killed in a New York City car accident. "I knew after that," he remarks, "that there was no going back" (Harris 2007: 331). After replaying over and over again the tape of his final conversation with Lang, Harris's protagonist wraps up his first-person *récit*, the one we are reading, by saying that he has entrusted former consort Kate with his confessional text. "Only if she doesn't hear from me within a month," he adds, "or if she discovers that something has happened to me, is she to read it and decide how best to get it published" (Harris 2007: 335). Lang's ghostwriter is now a full-fledged spectre, his manuscript as fashioned by Harris confirming the death of its author.

The compositional history of *The Ghost* itself parallels almost uncannily this parable about the hazards and contingencies of authorship. In a piece on Roman Polanski's 2010 film based on the novel, Philip Horne discloses that Harris wrote it while working with Polanski on the screenplay for a never completed adaptation of an earlier book. Moreover, so influenced was Harris by his director friend that his novel can be read as "'ghosting' Polanski [. . .], creating an auteur work by digesting and recombining elements from many of his films" including the extraordinary noir classic *Chinatown* (Horne 2010: 40). "Given this osmotic relationship," continues Horne, "one could say that the novel is as much an adaptation of Polanski as the film is an adaptation of Harris" (Horne 2010: 41). While that claim about the reciprocity of creative influence may well be true, Ronald Paulson's meticulously detailed comparison of the two works establishes that their endings diverge significantly. After the launching party for *Memoirs by Adam Lang*, observes this scholar, Polanski shows the Ghost walking out into the street in order to hail a taxi and being run down by a black car that had been trailing him earlier. The scattered pages of McAra's coded manuscript then float back to screen left, "the only remaining traces of the Ghost" who "merges with McAra in the white spectral sheets" (Paulson 2011: 132). In stark counterpoint Harris's ending

suggests that his protagonist has finally written "a real book" about "the pursuit and attainment of truth" (Paulson 2011: 133), thereby achieving "a kind of redemption" associated with art and not mere craftsmanship (Paulson 2011: 128).

Academic discussions of spectrality's role in literature are not always very illuminating, dominated as frequently seems to be the case by rarefied extrapolations of theoretical texts. At the other end of the spectrum are book reviewers who, aware of Harris's former employment as a political journalist admitted to Tony Blair's inner circle during New Labor's 1997 election campaign, and having little interest in academia's exaltation of theory, center their responses to his novel on its being primarily a disgruntled attack on Blair by a one-time admirer (see Freedland 2007, Griffiths 2007, and Steyn 2008). It would be a welcome change to entertain the possibility that a popular, well-conceived, and rewardingly intertextual novel such as *The Ghost* might be more than just grist for those with narrowly exclusionist viewpoints. Harris's ability to master the defining elements of literary Gothicism and recognize their pertinence in twenty-first-century contexts reminds us once more of its universality and timelessness. Moving beyond that, this popular writer's 2007 novel projects a model much like the palimpsest in its story of a professional ghostwriter's discovering the primacy of *écriture* over narratological immediacy. Textuality for this significantly unnamed scribe, who initially prides himself on an ability to get inside his subjects' psyches, proves ultimately to be the source, if not quite the cause, of his undoing. Reading Harris's narrative in terms of literary theory, it is tempting to draw a connection with Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," but in the end *The Ghost*'s strength is that it requires no such scaffolding.

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