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Ghostly Alterities

Spectrality and Contemporary Literatures in English

2nd, revised edition

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

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> To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. [. . .] If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone.* What happens between the two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain* itself with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost [. . .]. So it would be necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, *is not.* Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, *is never present as* such [. . .]. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.
>
> – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

> Build then the ship of death, for you must take
> The longest journey, to oblivion.
> And die the death, the long and painful death
> That lies between the old self and the new.
>
> – D. H. Lawrence, "The Ship of Death"

1.1. (Re-)Configurations of the Uncanny

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood states that "all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (140).

The connection between writing and mortality lies, according to the Canadian writer, in the desire to make something survive the abyss

of forgetting, in order to give it back to the present. Thus, in "all writing of the narrative kind" we can sense a spectral nature, insofar as it makes the dead live again. Spectrality, besides, in the last few years, has come to be a topical issue in cultural and political debates because of its significance in the field of criticism as well as in literature, so that not only literary narrative writing, but also critical writing has shown a connection with the spectre:

> [C]ontemporaneity is figuring itself according to "modalities of ghostliness," for the spectral not only appears in our narratives in the form of ghosts, the spirits of the dead, but also in our theory, literary criticism, cultural analysis and even sociology [. . .]. (Cimitile, "Of Ghosts" 91-92)

The sociologist Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters*, analyses haunting as a component of our way of life:

> Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production. (7)

In other words, haunting expresses what elsewhere she calls "the complexity of life," meaning that "the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply" (3).

The figure of the ghost, in this perspective, makes power-historical relations, to use Gordon's words, more transparent, playing ambiguously between opposites like life and death, or visibility and invisibility. In short, the ghost dramatises the presence of an absence, making what lies beneath come to the surface.

1. The Meaning of Spectrality

A theoretical starting point to analyse haunting might be Freud's uncanny. Although the concept of the uncanny was first suggested within the psychoanalytic field, its importance has made it a plurivalent concept, very much concerning the present study, inasmuch as it works on the same mechanism as Gordon's notion of haunting.

In the essay entitled "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud theorises the existence of a particular state of mind, close to anguish and horror but difficult to define precisely: "The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). Not being able to prove this generic notion scientifically, Freud refers to the corresponding German word *heimlich*, in order to define *unheimlich* 'uncanny' as its contrary.

Heimlich (from *Heim* 'home') covers two series of semantic categories. On the one hand, it is related to one's home, country, and place and to the sphere of the familiar and intimate. On the other, it stands for something secret, furtive, clandestine, something that must be kept hidden. *Unheimlich*, then, is something that should have been kept hidden but has emerged (as something extraneous) within the familiar, domestic domain of the known. Anneleen Masschelein suggests that "in the use of *heimlich,* a first shift in perspective has already taken place: from the intimacy inside the house to the position of an outsider, who may associate the closeness of the house with secret and conspiracy" (60-61). The slippage from familiar to secret becomes dangerous when the secret comes to be visible, producing the process of transformation of the familiar into something unrecognisable. Recalling Jentsch, Freud points out that what marks the uncanny is, above all, a certain destabilising ambiguity:[1] "[T]he essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncer-

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[1] Masschelein emphasises that ambiguity also derives from the confusion between semantic categories. *Unheimlich* is, in fact, the contrary of the first meaning of *heimlich*, "familiar" and "domestic," but coincides with the second one, "secret" and "furtive" (60).

tainty. One would suppose, then, that the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around" ("Uncanny" 125). Freud "completes" the understanding of this condition of uncertainty by introducing the mechanism of repression:

> among those things that are felt to be frightening there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny [. . .] for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed. (147-148)

Thus, the security of the familiar proves to be guaranteed only by excluding the disturbing elements, whose unexpected return causes intellectual uncertainty, the loss of one's coordinates, and consequently, a sense of the uncanny. In other words, the uncanny is the skeleton in the closet, the ghost haunting the house, the other within the self, whose apparition questions the conditions allowing the very constitution of that self. Indeed, among the "disturbances of the ego" connected with the emerging of the uncanny, Freud mentions "a regression" to a time when there was not a clear differentiation between the self and the world (143); to a time, in short, when the self was not yet *that* self.

Thus, the uncanny reveals the need for a rethinking of the self, which in many contemporary novels appears as an ethical challenge that is often entrusted to ghosts. I will further explain this point shortly.

Freud's essay points to a clear connection between haunting and the uncanny in a definition in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's dictionary, which defines *heimlich* as "a place that is free of ghostly influences [. .

.]" ("The Uncanny" 133), implying by contrast that *unheimlich* is a place haunted by spectres.

If in traditional ghost literature the favourite site of the ghost is the house, contemporary literary production transposes the haunted house into a haunted "structure," where the structure is identifiable with social, historical and cultural contexts. It is not by chance that the flourishing of ghost stories in contemporary literature and the attention given to it by criticism in a way coincides with the spreading of postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism.[2] The kind of influence enacted by these critical movements on history, culture and language resembles that of a ghost on the place s/he haunts. Uncannily, the haunting is perpetrated from within the structure, which makes the ghost an instrument both of investigation and of representation of reality:[3]

> If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there
> is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling
> with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or
> the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is
> taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing per-

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[2] Masschelein points out that "[t]he rise of the uncanny in literary studies coincides with the heydays of structuralism and poststructuralism" (55). Marie-Hélène Laforest instead emphasises how "spectrality in contemporary literature has already been defined as a postmodern motif. It has become common and has been explained in terms of the difficulty of describing the postmodern condition of liminality which followed in the wake of the unsettling of positivist certainties" (138).

[3] Gordon, with respect to this, writes: "Ghosts are a somewhat unusual topic of inquiry for a social analyst (much less a degreed sociologist). It may seem foreign and alien, marginal to the field that conventionally counts as living social reality, the field we observe, measure, and interpret, the field that takes the measure of us as much as we take the measure of it. And foreign and alien it is, for reasons that are both obvious and stubbornly oblique" (7).

son, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon 8)

Both socially and historically, in fact, our time presents itself as a spectral time. The postcolonial awareness of a common (for the West and for the ex-colonies) past of Imperialism and slavery has led to the necessity to re-think the terms of an official history constructed on the marginalisation of the weak and the minorities. Concomitantly, the poststructuralist reflections on the literary and historiographic modes through which such a construction has been enacted, have also shown the inefficacy of language as a means to describe reality.

Recent novels aim at re-defining the notion of history, telling the stories of those who have been forgotten by collective memory, or, like slaves and women, could not make their voices heard. It follows that the great number of alternative voices, which rise to disturb the one and only official version of the past, deconstructs all previous centres of power. At the same time, those novels enact a sort of meta-narrative form of haunting on literature itself, which is both haunting and haunted. An example is J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986), in which the author re-writes an English classic, *Robinson Crusoe,* questioning the modes of production of a text and emphasising the ghostly nature of literature. The presence of a dumb slave, whose story re-

mains obscure until the end, dramatises the fact that literature is always originated by an absence, a gap in one's knowledge or vision of facts. This absence de-centres knowledge and the notion of history and culture, to the point that they need a re-definition, which is possible only if it contemplates the idea of the ghost:

> It is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there,* presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. (Derrida, *Specters* xix)

This spectral time inaugurates a form of "hauntology": "it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology" (Derrida, *Specters* 161).

Introducing haunting into the construction of culture means to safeguard the possibility of deconstructing it; haunting highlights the rifts and ambiguities of literary and historical narrations and in so doing makes them open to a multiplicity of viewpoints and interpretations. In this view, the ghost's deconstruction represents an opening to pluralism and a way to put into question what was previously taken for granted:

> Thus, the uncanny becomes not a source of terror and discomfort – or at least not that alone – but also a bulwark against the dangerous temptations of conjuring away plural spectres in the name of a redeemed whole, a realisation of narcissistic fantasies, a restoration of a true Heimat. (Jay 161)

Hence, the spectre's disturbance provides for a positive starting point to re-think the system, if the intellectual uncertainty generating the uncanny induces the subject who perceives it to question his/her culture and to acknowledge that "the time is out of joint," continuously crossed by a temporal and spatial elsewhere.

The expression "out of joint" is used by Hamlet after his encounter with the ghost of his father; it is therefore particularly relevant here since Hamlet's father is the most excellent example of a ghost in English literature and can help us to define the general characteristics of the spectre. Besides, *Hamlet* (1601) is in many respects an emblem of modernity, giving voice to the unsolvable conflicts of an age when colonialism and the idea of Europe (and then the West) were beginning to be configured as the centre of culture. The development of trade made England discover other worlds, while concurrently the presence of "different" minorities (for example, the Irish and the Jews) became evident within British geographical confines too. As a consequence, the English reinforced the concept of their national identity in opposition to the "outsiders":

> [A]s in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so in the early modern period, Englishness was defined, in part, in opposition to everything *not* English. I want to suggest that the idea of difference is important in complicating our understanding of the emergence of an English nation and in showing to what extent this was the result of an ongoing struggle to colonize, marginalize, or incorporate different groups of people who lived both within and outside the geographic boundaries of England. (Loomba 149)

As Derrida suggests, *Hamlet* already contains the signs of a restless awareness that history is out of joint: "The ghostly would displace itself like the movement of this history. Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe. It would open the space and the relation to self of

what is called by this name, at least since the Middle Ages" (*Specters* 4).

The tragedy of the Danish prince consists in the impossibility of solving the conflicts that the ghost of his father creates in his mind. In the play, in fact, no final solution can be reached and the system is apparently re-established through the cathartic defeat of evil.

Postmodern and postcolonial ghosts, instead of asking for a restoration of the system, aim at its destabilisation, which cannot culminate in a revenge or an expulsion of evil; in contrast, it leads the characters and us readers to interrogate the reasons why the time is out of joint. Hamlet succumbs at the end of the play because his age does not confer a political agency on the ghosts. In opposition, in postmodern and postcolonial times, political agency cannot ignore the voices of the phantoms, acknowledging the interrupted space of history as their own:

> This means that political agency finds itself imbricated with the invisible, with the silent, yet persistent, uncanny memory of a violent hierarchization located in the past; taking action is imbued with that "presence" and plays with it a more or less conscious *fort-da* game. Late modernity proves a *haunted* time, and its hauntedness has a markedly *political* character; it proves to be a time with a *haunted agency*.
>
> (Cimitile, "Of Ghosts" 92-93)

What is significant, in any case, is that a ghost opens *Hamlet* and also opens the modern age, inaugurating a disturbing modality of acknowledgement of truths, further developed by contemporary forms of ghostliness. The spectre's prayer, addressed to his son but evidently also to posterity, "Remember me" (1.5.111), induces us to reflect on the role of memory, significantly put by Hamlet before any pre-given knowledge:

Hamlet: Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of *books*, all forms, *all pressures past*
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter. (1.5.95-104; italics mine)

In other words, to remember the ghost, i.e. to bring the ghost back to memory, implies a redefinition of knowledge and culture.

1.2. Voyages into the Past

Our time is a spectral time, then. But who are the ghosts and why do they return from where they dwell? Above all, where do they dwell?

Freud would say: they dwell in the unconscious of the subject – and we may add: also in that of the community – as the psyche is organised as a layered structure, where what is conscious and appears on the surface is just a "selection" of the contents (the unconscious), responding to a series of principles of classification, aiming at the exclusion of threats.[4]

In this perspective, the ghost appears as the other within, by uncannily emerging in order to destabilise the system s/he inhabits. It is a fact that in literature phantoms are always frightening figures, strangers who must be finally expelled, so that society can maintain its order

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[4] In *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud writes: "The unconscious is the larger circle which includes the smaller circle of the conscious; everything conscious has a preliminary unconscious stage, whereas the unconscious can stop at this stage, and yet claim to be considered a full psychic function" (445).

and set of values. Part of the disturbance produced by ghosts is due to their liminal and ambivalent nature, halfway between life and death, which makes them inhabit an interstitial space which becomes a privileged position from which to question the world. Hence, ghosts are the bearers of some knowledge or truth not known by the living, and they therefore appear as disquieting others whose function is that of raising questions and creating ambiguity.

I have already anticipated that the ghost has come to be a symbol of the postcolonial and postmodern critical attitude towards the past, both for his/her interstitial nature, which enables him/her to challenge the structure, and for the fact that, as Derrida suggests, the spectre is always a *revenant*, someone who returns (17). In returning, s/he establishes a virtual parallelism between past and present, whose relationship cannot but be spectral and controversial, insofar as different pasts cohabit with the present. Besides, the ghost who returns also "returns for the first time," which complicates even further the encounter between different temporalities: past and present are both interrupted and made problematic (while at once projected on the future).

The past and present in question, here, are those of modernity and postmodernity, the modern age being the matrix of a deconstructed culture, whereas deconstruction (the spectral one) is not a sterile exposition of what has always been under the façade, but the research of an alternative to a strict polarised opposition between I-the Other and Subject-Object of the discourse, through a never-ending interrogation on the very essence of our culture and history. We could say, then, answering one of the initial questions, that the ghost dwells in the in-between spaces of modernity, trying to interrupt the apparent constructed monolithic image of History.[5] The point demands further investigation, involving a discussion on history.

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[5] Looking at the classic tradition, indeed, ghosts, though already present, were seen just as mediators between the world of the living and the world of the dead, their task being that of "informing": "Before the nineteenth century,

In the *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault proposes a powerful revision of the mechanisms underneath the notion of culture, history and society, considering modernity an age utterly dominated by the principles of causality. At the same time, it is the age when Western humanism develops and when "language," "work" and "science," considered as human products, posits men's life in a central position (272-329). The human practices, in fact, define man and his limits within rationality, becoming the recipient-structure in which Western man has learnt to feel at ease, delighting in the enlightened universal progress of his world.[6]

Iain Chambers stresses how despite the assumption that "[s]lavery, ethnic absolutism and racism, are considered [. . .] external factors that do not touch the heart of modernity and the triumphs of progress, political democracy and cultural enlightenment" (61), there is a heart of darkness, in virtue of which modernity has been able to sustain its discourse of reason and progress:

> The horror of the other, most precisely located in a racialised difference and imputed biological distinction signified in the colour of skin, is not only, and more obviously, the fear of an external threat. Its potency lies in the potential of the transgression, destruction and doing away with that order, with its social, political and aesthetic understandings, with its power. Such power is not only, and most obviously, political and economical, but also sexual and ethnical, cultural and psychic. There is the peril of that disciplinary order being displaced, absorbed, annihilated; all terms that tend to be associ-

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ghosts are, in themselves, generally less important than the prophetic or revelatory information they convey; and though they naturally excite fear and wonder, their introduction is not deliberately designed to unsettle" (Grabble 404).

[6] I use "man" to emphasise how Western cultural discourse was shaped in a phallologocentrism, where only the white man was the subject.

ated with eighteenth-century definitions of the sublime, which, like darkness and dread, now acquires a deeper resonance in a racial and racist configuration of such terms. ("At the Edge" 62)

Here Chambers points out how the fear of the Other lies in an intellectual menace to the rationality of the system. The distinction between inside and outside, as in the case of the uncanny, can be blurred by the presence of a disturbing element, always perceived as an outsider, something in contrast with the coherence of the system. In modern culture, this Other is identifiable with the ethnic and sexual minorities, considered as a source of anxiety, despite their active role in maintaining the economic system. This is the case, in particular, of the slaves brought from the colonies to work in Western plantations. As Chambers remarks, the intellectual disturbance represented by them lies in their potential menace to an order based on sexual, racial and class difference. The fear of the other, i.e. the fear of the destruction of that order, is canalised in the debate on the sublime, associated to "displacement" and "darkness," in the years when modernity was still being constructed and when a first critique of that set of values came from the Romantic Movement.

In fact, focusing on the recesses of the human soul, rather than on the economic growth of society, the Romantic movement questioned reason and its limits, basing many of its statements on the theory of the sublime. Eminent voices, such as those of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, describe the sublime as incalculable and indefinable, a sort of "presence" in the human mind, which cannot be explained rationally.[7] The acknowledgement that there can be something outside human rational control is counterbalanced by the fact that the accep-

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[7] Here I refer to *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) by Edmund Burke and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) by Immanuel Kant.

tance of the impossibility of controlling all the emotions is itself an act of rationalisation. The sublime and romanticism, then, become privileged sites from which to start to deconstruct modernity but paradoxically also to confirm its bases and reinforce its faith in reason. In fact, the Romantic sublime, though standing for "darkness and dread," was not supported by an ethical reflection of its implications; it was an exclusively aesthetic category, so that its disruptive potential was confined to a realm that could not touch the basis on which modernity was constructed (Chambers, "At the Edge of the World" 63).

This point is further developed by Chambers in the analysis of a famous painting by Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On*, where a slave ship is portrayed during a tempest, one of the most common sources of the romantic sublime. In a corner, very marginal to the centre of the picture, a black leg in chains emerges from the waves, thus suggesting that a slave has been thrown overboard, and therefore enacting the sublime at another level. Chambers, then, suggests that the aesthetic judgment of the painting, inspired by the stormy sea, could cross with an ethical one, inspired by the black leg in chains:

> It might be [. . .] very revealing to interrupt an aesthetic judgment with an ethical one, or even to mix and conjoin the two. This would be to arrive at the Wittgensteinian maxim that ethics and aesthetics are the same thing. [. . .] To put slavery back into the frame, to take those discarded black bodies and return them to the story, is not only to confront the limits of a reason and an aesthetics unwilling to contemplate the other side of the story [. . .] [but] to suggest that there are further stories, further modernities, to be narrated. ("At the Edge" 63)

What I would like to suggest here is that the interstitial dimension inhabited by the ghost can be identified with that of an "ethical" sub-