
SPECTRAL CRITICISM

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Abstract

The term 'spectre' slipped into the vocabulary of contemporary literary theory in the late 1990s. This first became apparent when the entries 'ghosts' and 'secret' appeared in the second edition of Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory, edited by Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennet (1999) and following the publication of numerous literary critical texts at that time on Gothic and Victorian literature. Three years later, David Punter considered it apt to introduce 'spectral criticism' as a distinct term describing a certain recognizable way of thinking about literature, interpretation and literary texts in *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century* (2002). The author had no doubt that spectral criticism comprised a coherent area of research that employed consistent theoretical assumptions. It was meant to continue the reflections on literature and textuality initiated by the late works of Jacques Derrida (*Spectres of Marx*, 1993), Nicholas Royle (*Telepathy and Literature*, 1993) and Joseph H. Miller (*On Literature*, 2002). 'Spectral criticism' was also to draw on references to psychoanalytical categories developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in the mid-1970s.

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What is a ghost? Etymologically the word 'ghost' comes from the German term 'Geist', which means 'spirit, any inspiring or dominating principle.' The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'ghost' as the 'soul or spirit, as the principle of life' and 'A person.' So, the ghost is fundamental to our thinking about the human: to be human is to have a spirit, a soul, a Geist, or ghost. The modern sense of 'ghost' involves the idea of a 'spectre', an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the dead returned to a kind of spectral existence – an entity not alive but also not quite dead.

They are always inscribed in a context: they at once belong to and haunt the idea of a place ('spirit of place' or genius loci), and belong to and haunt the idea of a time ('spirit of time, spirit of the age, or 'Zeitgeist'). History itself can be seen as ghostly, because what can in some form or other always come back.

Psychoanalytic accounts of ghosts have revolutionized literary studies. For example, these works suggest that ghosts

have to do with unspeakable secrets. Stella Rodney in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1948) says: “What is unfinished haunts one; what is unhealed haunts one” (322). Literature is a place of ghosts, of what is unfinished, unhealed and even untellable. A ghostly secret is “a situation or drama that is transmitted without being stated and without the sender’s or receiver’s awareness of its transmission” (Rashkin 4). The emergence of psychology and psychoanalysis has its ghostly counterpart in literature in the forms of psychological realism and the psychological novel. In an essay on the ghost stories of Henry James, Virginia Woolf writes:

Henry James’s ghosts

 whenever the ordinary
 appears ringed by the
 strange. (324)

Ghostly secrets contain the ‘gaps left within us by the secrets of others’, together with a sense of the ghostliness of the ego (or ‘I’) itself. Literature, especially fiction, is a place where the apparitional and non-apparitional are made of the same stuff, indistinguishable. E.M. Forster asks in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927): “Once in the realm of the fictitious, what difference is there between an apparition and a mortgage?” (103)

In his book *Spectres of Marx* Derrida says that “A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost” (Derrida 18). Pointing to the Latin sense of the term ‘genius’ as ‘spirit’, Derrida says that a masterpiece is “a work

of genius, a thing of the spirit which precisely seems to engineer itself” (18). For Harold Bloom, ‘literary canon’ is a spectral affair. In the *Western Canon* Bloom says, “one ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading the work does not qualify” (Bloom 30). Before Bloom, T.S Eliot made this point when he wrote the “best”, “most individual” parts of a literary work are “those in which the dead poets...assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 38).

While literature is ‘ghost work’, its haunt is historical. The ghosts of the twentieth century are not the same as those of the nineteenth and so on. Besides, we might reflect on the links between ghosts and technology.

Contrary to what we might believe,
a
 structure of reproduction,
 then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms.
 (Derrida 61)

Whether in literature, psychoanalysis or philosophy, contemporary thought is irrevocably hooked up to developments in technology and telecommunications. Derrida says: “...everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts” (Derrida 139).

Rather, what use of the term might seek to bring together would be a series of images and tendencies which have arisen within critical thinking over the last twenty or so years, from a diversity of sources,

‘Gothic’ could be said to have ‘begun’, shading off as it always does into an imagined ‘prior’ that proves increasingly impossible of recapitulation. Second, there is an increasing recognition that the ‘supernatural’ material with which Gothic claims to deal itself comes to constitute an ‘excess’ around the space of criticism, an ongoing challenge to criticism itself as a branch of enlightenment.

Gothic persists in eluding this
.....of oral tradition, of more primal hauntings by word of mouth. (Punter 14)

Among the echoes called to mind here are those of the spectre and the uncanny, and these inevitably draw us close to the concerns of deconstruction and psychoanalysis respectively. There is, for example, an overarching question about the ambiguities of deconstruction, and especially about deconstruction’s workings between textuality and politics. The emblematic text here is Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which essays a ‘different’ version of history: not as linear development, but as the site of multiple hauntings. Speaking with the ghost of Hamlet’s father in mind, Derrida suggests that:

[...]everything begins by the apparition.....
.. The revenant is going to come. (Derrida 4)

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Punter drew attention to the fact that although ‘spectral criticism’ was heterogeneous in nature, it lent itself to a more consistent formulation through its use of constantly recurring terms (such as ‘ghosts’, ‘crypt’, ‘phantom’, ‘dead’, ‘hauntology’, ‘secret’, ‘telepathy’...), which served as useful instruments for literary-historical research and theoretical reflection. The author recognised these categories as particularly expressive images and metaphors for use in describing how a literary text exists and

for properly understanding the nature of contacts with literature.

In response to questions about what literature has to do with spectres and the dead, Punter raised the example of Maurice Blanchot's 'metaliterary' reflection. For Blanchot, contact with literature was inseparably associated with a unique kind of impossible encounter with someone who, while being dead, continues to be, in a way, alive. According to the author of *L'Espace litteraire* (1955), entering into a relation with literature presupposes contact with something which lasts in a particular form of suspension, in a shape that does not directly refer to a clearly defined condition, assuming an intermediary form of existence in the space between death, spectral presence and resurrection.

It is for this reason that Blanchot compared the experience of contact with a literary work to continually repeated attempts at dialogue with Lazarus in the grave. The work is neither dead nor alive; it appears as a semblance of presence, but simultaneously, because of its disguise and the place it occupies, it assumes the shape of a clothed void, absent and inaccessible, covered with a rock and wrapped in bandages.

Reading, and thus contact with a literary work, as Punter concludes in his comment on Blanchot, resembles the endeavours we undertake to establish a relation with a phantom or to come into agreement with a spectre of one who is deceased. This way of acting may seem to be doomed to failure, but it seems to work in a way which is difficult to define. By reading we come into contact with something that sends us relentlessly to an

absence and a void, while opening us up to a peculiar kind of experience which for Blanchot is the opening of a particular kind of space, an area marked by a retreat from being and close to death, described as literary space, while at the same time, in the act of reading we become witnesses to the impact of a form of presence of whose survival and resurrection we take note. In the experience of coming into contact with a text, which exists simultaneously as something both dead and immortal, which through its own death opens a space with the capacity for continuing after death, that is, for surviving death, we are close to communing with the dead.

'Spectral criticism' is for Punter a way of considering literature as a particular anthropological place for encounters between the dead and the living. Its reflections represent a continuous awareness of the unconditional impossibility of the task which it has undertaken and in pointing to the paradoxically impossible nature of literature as a peculiar kind of medium for this encounter. Yet, it is exactly this mediation which permits us to experience something that remains (alive) after life, and that by the same token is capable of surviving death in the form of spectral excess – being a trace of life after life, its remnant, literature.

Spectrality embodies literature also for other reasons. Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennet, authors who directly refer to Jacques Derrida and his way of thinking about literature, believe that a literary text is characterised by a peculiar modality of existence – it is a form of being devoid of both an unequivocally defined essence and of clearly determined properties. A literary

text does not exist as a work in a concrete space, if we understand this as having a presence in a present moment, nor can it be conceived of in the form of an actualised sense which would be fully present and would lend itself to being located in a spatial or temporal structure. The text is its own phantom and the site of an amplified split or visitation; therefore, it is not its own self but is continually becoming 'this particular something' which accommodates within itself a certain strangeness and a complete otherness. It does not so much conceal in itself a direct presence of the sense or of the author as it constantly retrieves their spectres which refuse to be tamed and which leave us in a space free of distinctions between truth and falsehood, certainty and doubt, ourselves and the other, being and non-being.

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