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**Haunting Spectres:  
The Ghost's Critical Gaze - *Editorial***

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 of Marx*)

Spectrality has always been one of the most interesting and controversial subjects in literature and in high- and lowbrow culture of any age. From antiquity to contemporary time, ghosts have haunted Western spaces of representation, giving voice to the anxieties and fears of different historical moments; a study of their nature and their meanings can therefore throw light on our understanding of changing cultural and social attitudes as partly depending on, reacting to, and coming to terms with what was perceived as disquieting and menacing at different times.

The papers presented in this issue of *Anglistica* investigate spectrality in relation to Anglophone literature and cinema from different perspectives, covering various periods in cultural history, following the development of ghost figures in literature and thus outlining a history of spectrality.

The flourishing of spectral characters can be traced back to the dawning of Modernity. The most notable ghostly characters first appear in Elizabethan plays featuring the return from the beyond of a phantom in search of revenge. In this respect, Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1580s) can be considered as a sort of archetypal model not only of the revenge tragedy genre but, in particular, of the presentation of the ghost figure coming on stage to ask for its revenge. Here and in other revenge tragedies, the ghost often assumes the role of the Chorus, explaining the past events which are the cause of the dramatic conflict presented in the play and underlining the uncanny and repressed nature of feelings and actions; moreover, the ghost is a spectator, observing the development of the action in expectation of its final revenge, imposing on the living characters the memory of what would otherwise tend to be repressed and awakening their conscience.

Among the many examples of ghostly figures, King Hamlet's ghost has been particularly influential, becoming the prototype of modern and post-modern spectres and the inspirer of significant critical theories. The majestic figure of Hamlet's father, in fact, comes on stage in order to determine the

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revenge action of the play, while at the same time it also triggers off a chain of doubts about being and seeming, reality and falsity, truth and deception, troubling Hamlet's conscience and, above all, allowing the creation of the first and greatest modern tragic hero. Indeed, after asking his son to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.5.25), King Hamlet's ghost takes his leave with the haunting words "Remember me" (I.5.91), to come back later to remind his son of his bloody task ("Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose." III.4.110-111): the uncanny and the repressed are thus drawn to the surface and Hamlet is forced to question his conscience and "take arms" against the sea which is troubling him.

From *Hamlet* (1601) on, the conflicts created by ghostly characters are often internalised, to be later brought to the surface as a problematic expression of religious and secular uncertainties. As *Hamlet* interprets the crisis of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Baroque period, torn between the irrefutable dogmas of the past and the changeable and questionable "new philosophy" which "calls all in doubt",<sup>1</sup> so later ghosts, such as the protagonists of the Gothic novels of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, come to question social and sexual aspects of English society, contributing at the same time to a re-evaluation of the irrational and imaginative energies that had been suffocated by the predominance of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment. Novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) are widely pervaded by repressed desires, brought to the conscience of the protagonists by the action of supernatural, spectral forces. Ann Radcliff goes a step further as her ghostly supernatural forces are revealed in the end as a creation of irrational terror, a projection of internal fears which, once they have been rationally explained, force readers and characters to face their own reality and to question their own conscience so as to find reasons and meanings which had been unconsciously hidden.

In her study of Shakespearean adaptations and re-writings, Romana Zacchi discusses how late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries witness the spreading of an interest in the editing of Shakespeare's works and in the numerous adaptations and re-writings of his plays. Analysing Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), Gildon's *Measure for Measure* (1700) and Granville's *Jew of Venice* (1701), she explains how a suitable background is created for the return of the ghost of Shakespeare himself, who becomes a haunting presence on the English stage and in English literature, posing questions about the contents and style of writing. Thus the 18<sup>th</sup> century appears as a period haunted not only by the internal conflicts which in the second half will be conveyed by the Gothic genre, but also by the urge to confront, study and actualise the past, choosing as its best representative a playwright that proved (and still proves) as elusive and floating as a ghost. Maurizio Calbi also discusses the Shakespearean inheritance in spectral terms,

<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *The First Anniversary. An Anatomy of the World* (1611).

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analysing a cinematic postmodern adaptation of *Macbeth*, Billy Morrisette's *Scotland, PA* (2001), in which the original text is present and yet absent, evoked and displaced at the same time.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic heroes express their difficulty to adjust their own individual passion and imagination to an increasingly alienated and mechanised society through a different kind of ghostly presence:

Without an adequate social framework to sustain a sense of identity, the wanderer encounters the new form of the Gothic ghost, the double or shadow of himself. An uncanny figure of horror, the double presents a limit that cannot be overcome, the representation of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 93.

Split identities, doubles, ghosts are indeed a major feature in the narrative and poetic production of the time, and writers such as Samuel Coleridge and Emily Brontë are particularly effective in projecting through ghostly presences the internalisation of the desires and devastating sense of loss that haunt the conscience and the mind of their protagonists. Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is an example of a fierce female character, whose proud and passionate personality renders her haunting both for the novel's readers – since she stands for whatever tumultuous and irrational energy may dwell within the human soul – and for its characters, since her presence is felt even after her death.

Coleridge's characters also present a ghostly quality in that they convey ambiguous aspects of the human mind, which allow both a psychoanalytic and a cultural reading. Both in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and in *Christabel* (1797), for instance, Coleridge plays between the said and the unsaid, a feature which increases the sense of mystery but also makes the meaning of these works unstable, simply spectral.

Laura Sarnelli devotes the first part of her essay to the scrutiny of *Christabel* from a queer, feminist perspective. She analyses the relationship between the female protagonist and the obscure Geraldine, casting new light on the psychoanalytic implications of their encounter and later friendship, also thanks to a parallel analysis of other ambiguous female couples of modern literature and postmodern cinema, such as Sheridan LeFanu's Laura and Carmilla, protagonists of *Carmilla* (1872) and David Lynch's Diane and Camilla, protagonists of *Mulholland Drive* (2001). In particular, the analysis of *Carmilla* also proves enlightening for an understanding of the cultural specificities of the Victorian time.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the spreading interest in psychoanalysis becomes evident in the literary production of the time, which is largely concerned with the investigation of the most hidden sides of the human psyche. It is significant that one of the most impressive and

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memorable ghost stories, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), closes the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly anticipating the modernist narrative strategies of the following century with its ambiguous narrative style. Here spectrality is not presented simply through James's characters, but the narration itself is configured as a form of haunting and even the reliability of the narrator is ghostly. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is also the period in which Lafcadio Hearn writes on Japanese ghosts in *Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, published in 1903, which Stefano Manferlotti analyses in detail, offering an overview that bridges Western and Eastern cultures.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, spectrality is often associated with the deconstruction of traditional narrative patterns, a process fully embodied by modernism and by the new structures of feeling that express the fragmentation of reality and human identity along with a deep sense of displacement and hopelessness in the desolated "Waste Land" of post-war time. An example of this displacement is given by Claudia Corti in her analysis of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), where Shakespeare's ghost returns, posing questions to both Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom about filial relationships, but also about the intersections of historical transformations with personal changes.

The kind of destabilisation inaugurated by Modernism is later increasingly favoured by the spreading, from the 1960s on, of deep changes in society and of cultural movements such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism and more in general postmodernism. These movements aim at dismantling the patriarchal and colonial prerogatives, which prove implicit in the textual practices of modern culture. Spectres, in this respect, are often the figures through which fiction enacts this dismantling, as their function is mainly to lead other characters and readers to achieve an awareness of the (racial, sexual, social) marginalisation enacted by the Western system. Like *Hamlet's* ghost, they return to ask for justice, to "set right" what is "out-of-joint", placing haunting on an ethical level, which can be considered as the specificity of the "ghosts of the posts".

One of the most highly appreciated postmodern/postcolonial ghost novels, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), stages the return in flesh and blood of a black female ghost; other significant novels in Anglophone world literature – Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995), Fred d'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998), Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) – present spectrality in relation to history and to the single realities of the characters and are centred on a ghost returning to take revenge or to reveal unsaid truths.

A particularly subtle form of spectrality is present in two other novels analysed in this issue: Grace Nichols' *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). Izabel Brandao studies the first novel from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on the theme of

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spectrality not simply in relation to a single ghostly figure, but considering ghostliness the result of a network of political forces affecting the characters' lives. Koray Melikoğlu analyses *A Pale View of Hills*, singling out the presence of an "implied author", a ghostly presence which shapes a sort of counter-narration from behind the scenes, forcing the reader to revise his/her position towards the characters. The reader, in other words, feels as if s/he were being "gazed" on by the implied author/spectre, and finds her/himself involved in the mechanism of the narration.

The question of the gaze, which Melikoğlu connects with the implied author, can also be seen in a Lacanian and Derridian perspective, but before getting to this point, it is worth considering briefly the theoretical frame in which spectrality has recently been analysed. The theme of haunting has found a theoretical reference in *Specters of Marx* (1994) – the main reference also for most of the present articles – in which Jacques Derrida gives philosophical and political relevance to the question of spectrality, founding a form of counter-ontology, which he defines "hauntology".<sup>3</sup> Analysing some of Marx's texts as well as a number of important literary works such as *Hamlet*, Derrida criticises Western ontology on the grounds that it works on the exclusion of alterity. Accordingly, whereas ontology is based on "presence", "hauntology" accounts for what has been excluded or has resisted the logic/dynamics of representation, and which returns to disturb what is present. In this view, the ghost is shown to be the best metaphor to address what is liminal between presence and absence and to embody the questions coming from an otherness that proves at the same time familiar (the ghost *returns*) and unfamiliar (it returns in a strange, supernatural shape), provoking an uncanny effect that is due to the aporia of its apparition; the consequent displacement is probably what the ontology of presence needs to avoid. To put it differently, those who did not have the chance to be visible and present, or to be represented in one way or another by Western ontology, have returned in the shape of ghosts to disturb it and reconfigure it.

In this perspective, the ghost has become a cultural key figure that needs to be scrutinized and deciphered, a scrutiny that could prove highly revealing for the times we live in. In line with this thought, Avery Gordon underlines the sociological importance of studying spectrality as something belonging to our everyday 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".<sup>4</sup>

Anna Maria Cimitile also stresses how late modernity and contemporaneity in all their forms are imbued with ghostliness. In particular, she analyses the ghost's agency also in its relation to criticism, "for the spectral not only appears in our narratives in the form of ghosts, the

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998), 7.

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spirits of the dead, but also in our theory, literary criticism, cultural analysis and even sociology”.<sup>5</sup>

The agency of the spectre does not in fact limit itself to revealing the unspeakable; it also concerns the ultimate mechanisms of representation. Indeed, in highlighting how ontology, history, culture have functioned and still continue to function on a mechanism of exclusion, the ghost enacts a revision of textual practices and of representation in general, leading to the awareness that, however unintentionally, representation keeps some obscure zones and unconscious spaces that resist an ultimate meaning.

The phantom, in other words, symbolises these zones and functions as a critic and psychoanalyst of the text in that its haunting reveals unsaid secrets but also makes the readers aware that texts are unstable. Textually speaking, the ghost may be seen as a character that is different from the other characters because of its superior critical knowledge of the facts in question. Like the anamorphic skull menacing Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), analysed by Lacan in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the ghost shows reality from a different perspective, thus reducing the field of our vision to something relative.<sup>6</sup> Similar, in fact, to the Lacanian Other whose “gaze” forces the subject to recognise that its look is just a viewpoint, the phantom represents an alterity that can be never fully grasped and whose effect is the relativisation of ‘our’ position. The recourse to the Lacanian distinction between “gaze” and “look” may acquire a particular meaning inspired by the Derridian notion of “hauntology”: the “look” is indeed the symbol of the Western patriarchal/colonial power of surveillance and classification used in addressing the Other, while the “gaze” is a counter-look which obliterates this power by rendering the Western subject an object. It is interesting to note, at this point, that Derrida in *Specters of Marx* also uses a metaphor involving the eyes, which he defines the “visor effect” and which he singles out through the analyses of King Hamlet’s figure covered in armour. The “visor effect” refers to King Hamlet looking at his son from within the armour so that his eyes are hidden by the visor; in other words, the phantom can stare at a spectator who cannot reciprocate the look, and if the spectator is the Western colonial and patriarchal subject, the ghost’s agency is that of producing an inversion of perspective where it is the subject of the discourse that turns out to be at issue, exposed and analysed from an angle that destabilises his/her balance.

Both in Lacanian and Derridian terms, then, the ghost’s gaze breaks the harmony of a linear narrative by revealing something forgotten or secret and by questioning the system and the way that narration is produced. Hence, it not only causes a reinterpretation of the past/present relationship, but also demonstrates the limits of representation, working as a critic who ‘returns’ to a text to cast new light on its obscure zones, providing new interpretations with the awareness that they are relative and provisional.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Maria Cimitile, “Of Ghosts, Women and Slaves. Spectral Thinking in Late Modernity”, *Anglistica* 3.2 (1999), 91-92; see also *Emergenze. Il fantasma della schiavitù da Coleridge a d’Aguiar* (Naples: Liguori, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).



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In this optic, it is possible to give spectrality the significance of a critical practice that takes into account the relativity of any reading as well as the historical and cultural references affecting reading. Returning is thus not simply a movement from the past to the present, but it is also evocative of something to come: “a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back”.<sup>7</sup> Haunting, in other words, is a ‘textual’ door left open to ever new interpretations, which ghostly characters render explicit, but which is present in any text. Margaret Atwood has written that any kind of writing is motivated by the desire to save something from forgetfulness, and so from death, which gives it somehow a spectral nature.<sup>8</sup> After Derrida’s “hauntology”, it seems to be important to underline that reading too can be associated with an ethical form of haunting, whose aim is raising questions and rethinking what was previously given for granted.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 99.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* (London: Virago, 2002), 140.