

Luke Thurston, 2012. *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism: The Haunting Interval* (Abingdon: Routledge)

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Luke Thurston's *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism: The Haunting Interval* (2012) is a timely addition to the established literature on literary haunting. Throughout, the monograph posits that a host/guest dynamic is central to the function of the ghostly in a selection of short stories and novels from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The antagonistic dynamic that Thurston persuasively argues for is between narratives as hosts – often at first seemingly bound to abide by the differential logic of the signifier – and the ghosts that invade these hospitable texts: in other words, the ghostly is read in its guise as a traumatic guest that ruptures signifying logic through excess, or by unveiling to the subject the gap at the heart of the signifying chain.

Befitting his existing critical oeuvre, one that is concerned consistently with Jacques Lacan's seminars and writings, Thurston is ambitious in his theoretical scope; but he is dedicated, too, to closely reading the much-maligned aesthetic of the ghost story. Indeed, his meticulous close reading, and the malleability of his theoretical frame, could become paradigmatic scholarly approaches to reading the spectral relationship to the (seemingly) coherent ontologies of modernity. In terms purely of its literary scope the book, too, suggests exemplars (from Edgar Allan Poe to Elizabeth Bowen) of an evolving neo-Gothic handling of the ghostly in modernity. In turn, Thurston's argument does not dislocate modernism from a number of its influences. Modernist stagings of anxieties arising out of the subject's relationship to burgeoning technologies – that so concerned

writers of the macabre in the Victorian and Edwardian periods – become central. In this sense, readings of Dickens return to guide our understanding of the ghostly in Woolf, while Henry James’ “The Jolly Corner” (1908), and its staging of masculinity, is said to resonate, to an extent, with May Sinclair’s work. These are just two instances of the reciprocal and evolving trajectory to Thurston’s argument. Essentially, Thurston charts the rise of a “neo-Gothic” ghost story mode: a body of texts that beckon consistently to “the edges of signification through figures of music or epiphany, voice or gaze” (163).

It is not just the trope of the apparition that Thurston reads, but a range of manifestations of the ghostly that challenge the pervasive – and phallogocentric – notion of the coherence of the logic of the signifier. Drawing these readings together is a theoretical framing of the texts that follows, if I may borrow a term from Thurston’s reading of Dickens’s “The Signalman” (1866), a “zig-zag” topography that moves between, and reflects upon, several and interrelated post-structuralist theories of the subject and anamorphosis. This trajectory considers, most frequently, the Lacanian understanding of the logic of the signifier and its relation to the barred subject; Gilles Deleuze’s reading of the “immanence of life” in Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1865); Alain Badiou’s theory of the “event” – from his *Being and Event* (trans. 2005; Continuum); and Jean-François Lyotard’s formulation of the “figure,” which Thurston reads as belonging to the order of the visual, “something incompatible with narrative discourse, an anamorphic phantom skewed away from the representational scope of a realist diegesis” (166).

Naturally, in a short review, it is hard to do justice to the nuances of this argument, but perhaps the most provocative theory of the ghost comes at the monograph’s conclusion. The ghostly – for its invocation to terrify or be transcendental rather than clichéd or overwrought – should momentarily reveal or point towards the traumatic kernel of a pure ontological essence that lays beyond or in excess of the signifier. This is a moment that in its very recognition by the subject – anamorphic as it is in structure – claims a certain sovereignty of radical being, the “new” that once was veiled and outside of dominant phallogocentric codes: “what is most terrifying about the ghost is therefore its sheer originality, its radical status as a cleft in the network of signifiers” (167). Consequently, to avoid cliché or the bathetic in the ghostly narrative involves carefully juxtaposing the normal in the quotidian with what, in the words of Elizabeth Bowen’s preface to *The Second Ghost Book* (1952), normally remains “just out of the true”: in other words, merely anamorphic and spectral in relation to the logic of the signifier.

As Thurston persuasively suggests, “the ontological temporality of the subject is wholly determined by repetition, by the always-already, the non-original,” and so, “any

truly original manifestation can only emerge as an anamorphic breach of signifying geometry, something forbidden, a transgression of the veridical law of reality” (167). It is Bowen’s stagings in her early to middle period – such as in “The Shadowy Third” (1923) or “The Disinherited” (1934) – of an unravelling of the differential codes of domesticity, which is symptomatic of one manifestation of this spectral thirdness: an elusive surplus that becomes emblematic of such breaches and hauntings. In particular, Thurston bemoans that established readings of “The Disinherited” have overlooked its pivotal position in anticipating late-modernism (particularly Samuel Beckett) as it stages “a “nameless” utterance, the fundamental traumatic self-disclosure of a human subject split off from the legible structures of tradition and community” (163).

A certain transition is thus charted from the Victorian to the early-modernist period; one that will mutate into the nihilism of late-modernism. In Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* the reader is given merely a glimpse of the ‘pure event’ of Riderhood’s being before the host narrative reasserts itself; this is a fragment of a whole, an episode that Gilles Deleuze – in his “Immanence: Une vie...” (1995) – is forced to read in isolation in order to bring to the fore its radical ontological significance. The Edwardians and the modernists – in some senses recalling Poe’s notion of the aesthetic of the short tale – turn to the ghost story, with its positive attributes of ‘shortness’, to stage a series of ghostly invocations that shatter the narcissistic tendencies of realist narratives that abide by the differential logic of the signifier. In particular, in his reading of the infamous and inscribed whistle of M.R. James’ “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” (1904), Thurston suggests that at the centre of the short ghostly narrative may be an enigma that disrupts signifying logic: “a disturbing vitality figured in textual elements that keep on disrupting the supposedly reticent, decorous host-narrative” (72). It is telling, too, that Thurston chooses to read Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) – a hospitable narrative that always already has the potential to be disrupted by the radical otherness of the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith – rather than turn to Woolf’s short stories. One wonders whether, for example, in Woolf’s fragment “A Haunted House” (1921) there is already at work a late-modernist movement beyond the hospitable narrative, and beyond also the host/guest dynamic of the Victorian and early-modernist narratives.

It seems apt, before closing this review, to return to this issue of hospitality – especially given Joanne Watkiss’ essay “Hospitality and the Gothic” that closes the recent *A New Companion to the Gothic* (ed. David Punter, 2012: Blackwell). Surely, if one thinker has linked the guest and the ghost it is Jacques Derrida. In a monograph that considers consistently hospitality and the ghost, Derrida’s work is called upon only on occasion,

and certainly never in its guise as addressing the Other/other as ghost or guest (put forward, for example, in the opening of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) and in his *Of Hospitality* (trans. 2000: Stanford UP)). Perhaps Derrida's relative absence is symptomatic of the essential disagreement between deconstruction's figuring of the apparition and psychoanalysis'. For Derrida, the spectral voice comes from an Absolute Other and its address is armed with the power to transcend and radically rework the present for the subject; in Lacanian psychoanalysis the ghostly is a spectral remainder, a symptom of the fictions that structure reality, which the ghostly cannot transcend with any permanency (see Slavoj Žižek's introduction to *Mapping Ideology* (1994: Verso)). Either way, this movement beyond Derrida – and with him Abraham and Torok – towards Badiou, Lyotard and Deleuze characterizes Thurston's book as a radical guest within the field of established Gothic readings of haunting. As hosts, it is the duty of Gothic scholars to welcome a study that advances knowledge of the field significantly.