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## About Telling: Ghosts and Hauntings in Contemporary Drama and Poetry

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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ABOUT TELLING: GHOSTS AND HAUNTINGS IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA  
AND POETRY

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Leif Schenstead-Harris

Graduate Program in English Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

It is difficult to think of something as formally resistant to definition as a ghost. What is more ambiguous than something described as “haunting”? Few currents in literature have been as prominent – and as comparatively unmarked – as our critical and literary dependence on the language of spectrality. While ghost stories in prose have gained substantial attention, in drama and poetry ghosts and hauntings have found less critical purchase.

In response, this dissertation takes up a selection of drama and poetry from Ireland, South Africa, and the Caribbean to illustrate the theoretical and critical potential of ghosts and ghost stories in twentieth-century Anglophone world literatures. Selections are picked for their illustrative potential and thematic richness. The texts constellate a dazzling range of ghosts and ghost stories used by their authors to creatively reflect and investigate the metaphoric play of hauntings and spectrality in epistemological and literary discourses.

The first half of “About Telling” examines ghost stories as performances on the theatrical stage that raise questions of relation and narrative (in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*), nation and song (in Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...*), globalizing technologies and economic change (in Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*), theatre as technology (in Samuel Beckett’s *Shades* trilogy) and, finally, mourning and the lament (in J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* and Derek Walcott’s *The Sea at Dauphin*). Each chapter re-envisions the relationship between drama, narrative, and ghosts.

The second half of “About Telling” turns to poetry and questions of lyric theory: tradition and spectropoetics (in Eavan Boland), gothic prosopopoeia (in Breyten Breytenbach), lyric experimentation (in Samuel Beckett), and ekphrastic addresses (in the discrete responses of David Dabydeen and NourbeSe Philip) to the history of the *Zong*. Once decreed, poetry’s intense pressure on meaning-making in language reveals – not stories – but ghosts.

Refusing transcendental definitions of ghosts and hauntings, this dissertation suggests that the manifold significance of terms such as “ghosts” and “haunting” organizes formal readings of poetry and drama in a recognizable heuristic available for extrapolation and change. It concludes, if such a word is possible, that language affords the resources for ghosts to enter and survive in our world.

## Keywords

Ghosts, hauntings, theatre, poetry, stories, world literature.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks are due to the faculty and staff at the University of Western Ontario, where much of this dissertation was written on scraps of paper and in fragments of conversation... as well as through the more traditional practice of hitting one's head against a keyboard until one or the other breaks and is replaced.

Steven Bruhm and Jonathan Boulter, my supervisors, are due special thanks. They have my deepest gratitude for their inspiring and critical mentorship, and also for their great patience with this document – and with me. Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu's irrepressible wisdom has no equal. Leanne Trask's indefatigable cheer aided greatly while addressing administrative uncertainties, and I am confident in her supreme ability to negotiate any proposed labyrinth. The tenacity and care of my committee of examiners was greatly appreciated: Kim Solga, Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, and Stephen Slemon, you have my respect and greatest thanks. What errors, cautions, and limitations remain are the sole preserve of my own intransigence and, quite possibly, stubbornness. More could be said. It should be said in person.

The support of friends and colleagues both in and outside the academy has aided my work. There are many to thank – too many for the present enumeration. Even so, I would like to publicly note that Zeinab McHeimech's generosity knows no bounds. So too Will Samson's laughter, Kamran Ahmed's joy, Yuri Forbes-Petrovich's enthusiasm, and Mélissa LeBlanc's care. The support of these people and more has been both humbling and powerful during the preparation of this document. Research finds strength and encounters challenge in teaching too, and I am lucky to have taught incredibly enthusiastic, demanding, and intelligent students while at the University of Western Ontario. The spirited intervention of my English 3882G class came at a crucial time – as this document took final shape – and demands my sincere gratitude. Faith, confidence, and joy have value that extends beyond language.

These remarks only go so far. My memory regards many with admiration and acknowledges more. Some influences come from those I have not known and cannot – except through the trace of their words and the memory of their histories.

Financial support of this research through SSHRC and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship has been generous and necessary, and I am grateful for this investment in my work.

My parents have made everything possible. Without them, I would have nothing. No thanks will prove sufficient. I do not regret going into English.

If I have been given much, I owe much more. I often remember the notorious phrase: "If you don't know, now you know." What follows is knotted and gnarled; it is spun from fabrics of many colours and weaves together textures that appear sometimes rough and oddly striated. Happily, a dissertation is an assemblage and not a living being, a vision's constellation and never a master's command, a trace to retrace only willingly. By necessity it will be undone.

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## Preface

I am not erudite enough to be interdisciplinary, but I can break rules.

Can anything be learned from this?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999)

The thinker restrains the flow of narrative.

The philosopher dissects the singer's rose.

Mahmoud Darwish, "Counterpoint (For Edward W. Said)" (2005)

No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.

Maurya, *Riders to the Sea* by John Millington Synge (1904)

Do I believe in ghosts? I believe in you, reader.



# 1 Introduction: Speaking of Ghosts

*Unser Schreibzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken...*  
 [Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts...]

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882

## 1.1

### Purpose, Method, Definitions

What do we see when we speak of ghosts? *Something that was once here, but is no longer.* Perhaps *something that could be here in the future.* Or *something that seems like it is here, although it is not.* If something is missing or gone, it seems only natural for people to talk about it in its absence: to narrate the fact of it being exactly *not here*. “Listening to” or remembering absence (“*I remembered her voice...*”; “*I can see him as if it was yesterday...*”; “*I thought I saw...*”) is only made evident by producing interpretations that stand in lieu of whatever is not present: we speak over or write over the evidence of our eyes in an attempt to trace ghostly absences. These are the ghosts which we (do not) see and hear. We speak of them nonetheless. In 1995, Peter Schwenger wrote that there was “as yet no comprehensive theory of the ghost story” (339). He repeated this claim four years later (1999: 14). Today, sixteen years later, he could and should say the same. To make the matter more complex, ghost stories in prose have often been discussed but similar languages of haunting in poetry and drama have gone relatively unremarked. If there is no *comprehensive* theory of ghost stories, one could attempt a *heuristic* of hauntings to aid readings in contemporary world literature in English and account for representative efforts from poetry and drama. Anglophone writing draws inspiration from traditions across the world by fusing, hybridizing, or reinvigorating older traditions. Thus a seemingly parochial and *exactly* imperial English genre such as the ghost story contributes much to contemporary world literature. This dissertation begins to sketch such a heuristic of spectrality in poetry and drama. Why these two genres? Simply this: each questions common assumptions about stories and settled understandings of the nature of literature and language. Drama foregrounds narrative as a machine for *telling*;

poetry foregrounds language as an illusory *witness*. Each serves a reminder that the work of representation in oral and textual creations conveys our understandings of the world through machinic or illusory ways of communication and relation.

Despite or perhaps more accurately *because* of a ghost's irredeemable ambiguity, studying ghosts today is a growing field of research fertile in theoretical discourses and thematic readings. Lists of conference papers and publications confirm spectrality's quiet susurrations across North American academic circles: the dependence of postcolonial and psychoanalytic critics on the softly theorized term *haunting* confirms its broad appeal; publications such as María del Pilar Blanco and Peeren's excellent *The Spectralities Reader* (2013) concretize it; finally, melancholic reflections such as that published by the *Guardian* in 2011 – "Hauntology: A Not-So-New Critical Manifestation" (Gallix) – preemptively mourn it. In the wake of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), spectrality and hauntology have been enthusiastically taken up in discussions of mourning and morality with ambiguous effect. For Derrida, the terms raise questions of history and justice. But, with too few exceptions, ensuing criticism employs languages of haunting as loose metaphors for an absent presence, and in many cases "haunting" proves more seductive to a critic's linguistic imagination than it does actively explain the ongoing imaginative creation of lives and literature. Roger Luckhurst complains that many critics neglect the historical specificity of gothic motifs and symbols which discussions of ghosts and hauntings invoke even as their languages are employed by what he calls the contemporary "spectral turn" in criticism (2002). The field where readers today find terms such as *ghosts* or *hauntings* is broad indeed. Some hyperbole attends the word "ghost" in its hauntological iterations, perhaps because of its amazing ubiquity as an empty sign. It is, as Mark Turner writes, "a concept for which there is no referent, no evidence, anywhere, any place, any time in the entire sweep of human experience." Nevertheless, Turner concludes that a language of ghosts is "vital in many cultures and perhaps in every culture since the Upper Paleolithic Age [...] [and is] a powerful impulse within human imagination that flows inevitably to this unwarranted fiction" (72).

The ghost's sign of absence can be seen as a fiction of fictions, a kind of master trope for the imaginative impulse. The risk of this position is that "ghost" might signify very little indeed; more than the "non-concept" of Derridean hauntology, a "ghost" only figures absolute alterity for ethical criticism. Each use of the language of haunting, whether as a fiction of fictions or as an absolute other is worlds away from the tradition of spectacular Jacobean theatre from which Derrida pulls his ghostly exemplar of Old Hamlet. To further complicate matters, many different bodies of literature across the world lend themselves to the study of ghosts. The symbolic plane of these traditions can hardly be in uninterrupted continuity so as to grant thematic constructions cross-cultural coherence. Neither is every world literature amenable to Western theory. How can they be brought together in critical conversation? Perhaps only through a qualified critical violence that might make *productive* mistakes with texts. Such is my intent.

This dissertation sets out to investigate the power of the word "haunting" as a metaphor or narrative shorthand used in a globalizing framework of reference. Adopting literary difference as a network of cultural traditions with a shared investment in Anglophone discourses, I explore moments at which ghosts influence the drama and poetry of contemporary world literatures in specific, locally influenced ways that circulate in a global setting. The reason why so many turn to words like "haunting," "ghosts," "appears," or "apparitions" is clear. Very little in life is certain, and these words accept partial or even contradictory apprehensions of truth on the part of those who use them. Yet words bear an etymological history. Terms such as these circulate in a shared linguistic imagination; they riddle the poetics of literary creation and shape a stable branch of the technical language of perception. To describe a figment of the imagination, what is the difference between an apparition that flickers before the eye and a haunting feeling that culminates in the feeling of seeing a ghost? Yet, for people to whom certainty seems out of reach, the use of a familiar vernacular that draws on long histories of epistemological philosophies extends respectability to otherwise tentative observations – as if one could stabilize ephemeral memory by according it the weight of tradition.

In literary criticism, a discourse that repeatedly reimagines the object of its study through chameleonlike terms such as character, form, plot, technique, style, history, etc., the influence of “haunting” proves especially entrenched. After all, in literature and especially poetry, ambiguity regarding the nature of the sign reigns supreme. Little can be delineated in exact terms when speaking of ghosts. It should come as no surprise that spectrality permeates different cultural traditions in locally specific ways, and also that, in turn, this near-ubiquity could be read as an arche-fiction of sorts, albeit in a totalizing gesture. Whatever name they take, ghosts rarely represent concrete materiality. That would be a category error of catastrophic proportions. “What haunts are not the dead,” Nicolas Abraham writes, “but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (1987: 287). Ghosts often signify unforgotten absences, a thought’s inkling not yet encompassed by formal definition. A ghost is a story just waiting to be told. Or, to take up a more radical definition, a ghost is an arabesque at the moment it becomes subject to meaning through interpretation. Life’s thoughtful silences are rife with ghosts. They lurk in the currents under speech and flit across the spaces of modern life. It goes without saying, but the plurality of ghost stories and types of hauntings are far beyond the reach of a single study. Since many studies of ghosts to date take up prose as the central object of investigation, my examinations narrow their remit to drama and poetry. While criticism of ghost stories in prose remains crucial, it is important to complement this established body of work with a heuristic of other genres that take up languages of haunting in new exemplary situations. Keeping the above in mind, this dissertation provides two rough definitions of form’s relationship to spectrality; (1) In the theatre, ghosts are narrative’s agents, and haunting stories are the dramatic hooks that compel audience interest and plot exposition; (2) In poetry, meanwhile, the haunting relationship between sign and signified provides a pretext and a ongoing wound or absence in the material shape of language and formal poetics: no word carries the object of its reference. The felt presence of ghosts riddles rigid boundaries and affords poetry’s readers a speculative ground for otherwise impossible conversations. In either genre (delineations of the two are themselves fluid), ghosts are epistemological fluctuations that haunt breath and text. Any study of ghosts has one major limitation for traditional criticism, for in form, theme, and

theory, ghosts cannot – will not – provide a stable referent to anchor the grand gesture of magisterial criticism. The meanings of a given haunting may seem contradictory when considered alongside another haunting. The solution to this “problem” is this: a ghost does not refer to meaning. It is the *imagined possibility and justification of meaning itself*.

The two major questions that reveal formal differences in poetry and drama are, first, *how is a ghost story told* and, second, *how is a ghost witnessed?* Readings of drama ask how the act of *telling* ghosts brings out the self-consciously performative act of spoken language on stage and the ways in which this act is enrolled into the service of narrative. Audiences must be aware and conscious of a performative *telling* before them, yet a willing suspension of understanding accompanies such consciousness. In contrast, the study of contemporary lyric poetry and its dissidents involves textually nuanced and linguistically enabled acts of *prosopopoeia* and *ekphrasis* as rhetorical tactics derived from a poem’s haunted, which is to say technologically abstracted, discourse. Awareness becomes intensified; readers *witness*. *Telling* and *witnessing* provisionally describe the relationship of aesthetics to hauntings in these genres. In order to approach each issue with specificity this dissertation pursues its dual purposes through two distinct sections. In each I provide first a preliminary discussion of the argument’s context in the genre at hand, second, a summary of the argument, and, third, specific case studies that take up different issues contingent on languages of haunting. The myriad differences demonstrated by these plays and poems that take up themes of haunting only begin to reveal the range and reach of spectrality in contemporary world literature. This introduction will proceed by articulating specific terms – *ghost* and *haunting*, obviously; also *global* as a term for the network of texts in play – to describe why and how poetry and drama are the objects of spectral analysis in a formal and historical critical study.

A study of this kind merits a brief word on structure, for as a dissertation it is admittedly fractured and open. In his *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Harrison writes that some books are “more like a net than a cloth” with articulations “full of empty spaces for the reader to enter and wander about in” (xii). Such an admission recognizes the effort by which readers construct and reconstruct arguments, contexts, and inquiries. Equally

importantly, especially for a subject with such vast possible investigative sites as this one, an open construction refuses to perform the totalizing work of a closed study – however seductive its masterful design and carriage prove. Horizons should be invitations and not strictures of limitation. I hope that the openness of connective possibilities in this study of misreadings works as a positive invitation for challenge, provocation, and thought.

§ ETYMOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL SKETCHES §

Historically, supernatural or preternatural associations shape words such as *ghosts* or *haunting*. Etymologists look to pre-Germanic languages to argue that the speculative root of the Germanic *gast* and today's *ghost*, *\*ghois-*, runs cognate to the Old Norse *geisa*, or rage, as well as the Gothic *usgaisjan*, or “to terrify.” Derivatives of *\*ghois-* beyond Germanic linguistic influences also cohere around a fundamentally empty sense of devastation as verbs that mean “to wound, tear, [or] pull to pieces” (*OED*). The concatenation of these affects – a wound, a tear; a mixture of terror and rage – articulates the austere and highly charged network of associations in linguistic memory that imbues meaning to stories about ghosts. Many ghost stories speak to personal loss and wounds, lingering doubt and residing fury toward both those present and those absent from one's world. The changing trajectory of these intense affects charts the procession of the ghost and the operations of its logic of associative meanings through worldly objects and drives. Compounding these vertiginously historical associations, today's ghosts often tell of survival or disappearances within bureaucratic or societal norms. Ghosts can also represent forms of the vanishing human body in media technologies such as writing, photography, and television. While the old words for ghost express emotional violence, these more contemporary expressions concern structure and place. They refer to the place of the wound, perhaps, but in ways more indelibly associated with the word *haunt*. After all is said, a sense of fury or a wound will *survive* to challenge amnesia or forgiveness or, in different ways that take up questions of place instead of affect, structures of normative control. Despite everything, ghosts remain, even if they cannot be seen to do so.

Haunting has been closely connected to ideas of ghosts from an early historical point. The two words' long affiliation reveals the propensity for linguistic change in the social roles and concepts of ghosts. In twelfth-century French, *hante* meant a habitual place or action. In English usage, by contrast, *hante*'s Middle English cognate *haunten* became by Elizabethan times the near-exclusive domain of ghosts and the precisely *uncanny* kind of habitual action. According to the *OED*, the earliest use of *haunt* with an explicitly ghostly association comes in Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "Some haunted by the ghosts they haue deposed" (III. ii. 154). The line reeks with improper inheritance, guilt, and fury, all classic registers of ghosts. While this change was strongly influenced by Shakespeare's plays, competing uses for "haunt" in English at the time are equally important. Of these, the earliest examples are in late-sixteenth century English clergyman Abraham Fleming's adaptations of Socrates' medical writings. In his *A Panoply of Epistles*, Fleming imbued *hante*'s sense of habitual absence with an immaterial agent. Thus a sick person is "haunted with a fever or quivering ague" (Fleming 228). In this combination of medical philosophies and theatrical usage, the metaphysical shudder of ghosts was transposed over other invisible agents in English vocabulary which had only shortly before emerged in uses of the word "haunt." Even today "haunting" signifies bodily symptoms of invisible wounds, illnesses, or distress. Among the panoply of melancholic symptoms that characterize a "haunting," the *OED* lists heaviness, beauty, weakness, guilt, regret, and pain. The clearest figure for such affective states remains a ghost, connected to the other spectres of literature or everyday speech that figure uncanny affects, dark desires or traumatized pasts. As a provisional definition, then, a haunting occurs when immaterial signs of survival are both broadly drawn and, ultimately, reductively assigned one type of logical justification: a thing existing somehow out of time and sight, but not inexplicably so. With a usage too common to be pejorative, *haunt* possesses a discursive linguistic power without fully investing in gothic concerns, though its frequency grounds the gothic in a world of everyday survivals and popular regimes of feeling and sensibility.

A ghost survives in the act of haunting. Read forward in time, which is to say under a progressive model of historicity, such survival can express a form of political,

social, or moral resistance. Ongoing historical interpretations of ghosts ask them to testify to psychological interpretations of guilt and conscience. So too many stories of ghosts tell of furious apparitions rising up from horrific events. But the logic of haunting is more deeply embedded in language and it manifests linguistic principles made grammatically viable from its origins in *hante's* habitual place and action: language is the ongoing habit of attributing meaning where there is none. Survival is the continued desire to imbue language with meaning encountering the sediment of historical discourse. This linguistic type of survival gives rise to warnings such as that of careful hermeneutist as Gershom Scholem. "We live in our language like blind men walking on the edge of an abyss," Scholem wrote. "[L]anguage is laden with future catastrophes. The day will come when it will turn against those who speak it" (qtd. in Agamben 2000: 68). Ghosts are the signs and latent signifiers of incipient catastrophes: moments, traumas, and wounds that suddenly reveal a hitherto unknown haunting in the act of linguistic expression. A catastrophe is not, however, always destructive, but can represent the sudden opening of potential where previously there seemed nothing. Less spectacularly, ghosts are also an ongoing revelation of the everyday manipulation of language by people speaking of things beyond language itself. Language has "hidden depths" but no density; it hides itself even in the simplest words. This is to say that life's material phenomena haunt language in a wound of the sign to which poetry incessantly returns, but which subtends all conversational acts with a fundamental absence: the sign is not what it signifies; content is not its index. All of the above brings us to a preliminary definition of the word "ghost": the active illusion of an empty word or wound that signifies a repetitive element in an ongoing relationship or structure and whose surviving unrepresentability signals a future-oriented possibility yet to be closed by interpretation's drive toward meaning.

There is also a technical branch of definitions for ghosts and hauntings. In critical literature, hauntings are one of many tropes and themes that risk naturalization as only a convention of poetics in its task of image-making. Ghosts commonly express fleeting expressions and half-envisioned imaginations in colloquial speech because they exactly simulate and reify perception's imaginative act. Thus it is that, as Elaine Scarry writes,



By means of the vividness of perceptions, we remain at all moments capable of recovering, of “recognizing” the material world and distinguishing it from our imaginary world, even as we lapse into and out of our grey and ghostly daydreams. Aristotle refers to this greyness as “the feebleness” of images. Sartre calls it their “essential poverty.” (1999: 4)

The imagination creates its own ghosts. These phantasms, narrative memories of perception, make claims on figurative languages. Human minds blur the material exposition of our world and the collection of invariants that psychologist J.J. Gibson describes as crucial visual structures (slant, reflectivity, colour, and illumination). Scarry speculates that the principally visual working of the imagination “underlies the entire genre of the ghost story” which, incidentally, she deems the most believable type of story, especially when told under cover of night. For her, a ghost story

instructs its hearers to create an image whose own properties are second nature to the imagination; it instructs its hearers to depict in the mind something thin, dry, filmy, two-dimensional, and without solidity. Hence the imaginers’ conviction: we at once recognize, perhaps with amazement, if not with vivacity, then with exquisite correctness, precisely the thing described. *It is not hard to imagine a ghost successfully. What is hard is successfully to imagine an object, any object, that does not look like a ghost.* [... A] ghost reproduces the imagination’s expertise in fading objects but has no counterpart in the material world, either in its surface texture or in its deep structure of production. (1995: 23-24, my emphasis)

As contemporary neurobiological discourses explain, the material counterpart of the imagination is the neuronal network of brain structure. Similarly, the grammar of language plays counterpart to imaginative processes abstracted from the biological reality of language-users and developed as a metaphysical structure called language. In this operation, a ghost effectively *intensifies* the properties of the things that surround it, *straining* the capacity of language-meaning but also *strengthening* its faculties. A ghost suggests through opposition the materiality of the imagination’s unreal creations.

Considering language's abstract mediation of humanity through signs and symbols, it is no surprise that a ghost's most common figure is a person. Nor can it be a surprise that the "likeness of the ghost to the living person – from its movement to its moan – can produce a marvelous and uncanny sense of vividness, gripping our memory" (Turner 32). Ghosts haunt the mind to flood the imagination, but they offer less a *grip* than a *making* – a poetics. From mental image-making, ghosts sally forth into the stories and reports of language, where they intensify the abstraction of words. Thus it is that ghosts find sustained existence in drama and poetry, as this dissertation argues. The precisely *literary* nature of such ghosts is not a sign of sheer fantasy. For too long "common sense" has suspiciously relegated ghosts to a realm of imaginative unreality. This study seeks to trace ghosts through their contexts, histories, and uses – through the structures and cultures that shape meaning and possibility, in other words.

#### § GLOBAL LITERARY STUDIES AND THE GLOBALGOTHIC §

*Global literature, everyday contexts*: once the study of literature finally breaks free from national or thematic frameworks, contemporary literary critics face a disciplinary chasm of rearranging structures. The term "globalization" may help, but *caveat emptor*. It is as Suman Gupta observes "one of the most markedly protean and thickly cognitive words in our vocabulary" (9). Still, Anthony Giddons helpfully defines globalization as "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away" (64). The way in which this intensification is tracked and seen has a very specific history. In 2001, Ian Baucom observed that "a spectre is haunting the MLA, the spectre of global literary study" (168). For this dissertation, the objects of analysis – ghosts themselves – make critical questions of traditions, boundaries, and literary constellations especially acute. Literary ghosts can be found across a broad collection of contemporary minoritarian, eccentric, postcolonial, globalgothic, or, simply, global Anglophone literatures. Objects for the present study are selected for their different forms of ghosts and hauntings as well as for their potential to generate complex discussions of global relationships. The texts are taken from a field of contemporary Atlantic literatures incorporating Ireland, South

Africa, and the diasporic Caribbean. On the one hand, my triangular selection from the corners of North and South Atlantic literatures retraces the naval trading routes in which ghost stories circulated during the age of imperial British influence. On the other hand, the differences between these bodies of national or transnational literatures generate robust themes derived from cultural specificities as much as from more homogenizing national or gender-based selections of texts. The present study is located within a subfield of global literary studies called the *globalgothic*, which should simply at this point signify a remediation of globalizing themes under the gothic sign of dis-ease and violent interpretation – to read from below, strangely; to make useful mistakes.

Any study of these assembled works operates under the framework of global literary studies and thus implicitly carries with it the imperial, Western, and centripetal force of that disciplinary framework, even in its refusal of those terms. “Globalization takes place only in capital and data,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s recent *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* begins: “Everything else is damage control” (1). Remediating literary studies through a global lens is not an innocent affair, but it is necessary precisely for that reason. To adapt Arif Dirlik’s polemical language, global literary studies (like more traditional fields such as globalization and postcolonial studies) seems either “an accommodation with a current structure of power” or, perhaps, “an apology for it” (23).<sup>1</sup> Global literary studies and postcolonialism exist within the neoimperial logic of global capital as they prosecute Western forms of epistemic social, political, and economic organization. The path is tempting and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for one, argues that “[o]ur minds must be ready to move as capital is to trace its paths and to imagine alternative destinations” (251). It remains an open question whether critical interventions can disrupt globalization’s centripetal force which, while enlarging

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said uncompromisingly assessed postcolonial theory as one of the “confused and fragmented paradigms of research” which form an aggregate that “reflects the eclipse of the old authoritative, Eurocentric models and the new ascendancy of a globalized, postmodern consciousness from which [...] the gravity of history has been excised. Anticolonial liberation theory and the real history of empire, with its massacres and exploitation, have turned into a focus on the anxieties and ambivalences of the colonizer, the silent thereby colonized and displaced somehow” (2001: 66). This critique of globalism in postcolonialism remains remarkably acute.

the spread of Western cultural norms (evident in this study in the Anglicization of literature), also contracts and concentrates normative possibilities around the rationalist EuroAmericanism of new imperial power (Baucom 2001: 160). The crucial beginning is to recognize global frameworks of aesthetic development, cultural change, and social forces in the comparative and transnational work of contemporary literary criticism.

Into this space of compromised transnational critique enters the *globalgothic*, an emergent body of criticism and theory that sees discursive technologies and themes in conversation across the globe arranged around unsettled epistemic frameworks. Studies such as mine both serve and define the substantive aspirations in the term *globalgothic*, a refined framework carved from the broader concerns of global literary studies that selects cultural production and not economic structures as its object of study. The *globalgothic* articulates relationships of cultural technologies within their contextual socio-economic histories. Scholars of the *globalgothic* join a growing number of critics for whom new media dependences on virtuality, images, and unpredictable transitions suggest the relevance of ghosts and phantasms for critical analysis (Gunning 2007: 97). Glennis Byron observes that proliferating signs of the gothic have been recognized around the world since the 1990s. For Byron, “these developments in the increasingly diverse and problematic genre labelled gothic were intricately connected to [...] the development of an increasingly integrated global economy” (1-2). It is thus necessary to incorporate the thoroughgoing study of neo-imperialisms, transnational revitalization, technological production, and gothic thematizations of globalization itself as the *globalgothic*’s primary concerns. And yet Byron, Botting and Edwards claim globalization has entered a “new phase” that replaces Euro-American value-creation with “a new emphasis on multidirectional exchanges” (Byron 3; cf. Botting and Edwards 13, Jay 42). Their spliced term *global/gothic* is created with the hope that global contexts for contemporary analysis can be disentangled from Eurocentric traditions of gothic tropes and signs; after this disentanglement, the next step would be to recognize contemporary gothic forms operating across the globe at the present moment. “At the very least,” Byron writes, “we want to register a sense of the gothic inextricable from the broader global context in

which it circulates rather than a gothic tied to past notions of Enlightenment modernity” (4). The very idea of Enlightenment modernity is what today *still* circulates as the philosophical underpinnings of globalization, a kind of psychogeographical current that has influenced the possibilities and decision-making of institutions and persons since Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) at least. Traditional understandings of the gothic are *precisely* what a globalgothic study could examine in their theoretical role as they undergo revision in local manifestations of cultural contest and adaptation across regions of a world inequitably subject to globality. To address the gothic as evidence of a new multidirectionality would be to assert a power of the superstructure to reveal fundamental shifts in what is still an utterly unequal economic base of globalization.

Thus it is Byron’s “very least” sense of a globalgothic critique that I take up in this dissertation. The chapters of *Globalgothic* (2013) privilege film, vision, and image technologies. These “lend themselves to the marketing of popular cultures” and, as genres of aesthetic production, “have therefore become more multidirectional than others” (Byron 4). Technological pliability at the behest of cultural forces should raise some concern about how multidirectional a globalized world can be, however, especially if it bends to the capitalist logic of marketing consumable products along an increasingly militarized politics of division and along an increasingly controlled media ecology which, as Said writes, “has also developed an institutionalized tendency to produce out-of-scale transnational images that are now in the process of re-orienting international social discourses and processes” (1992: 10). It is one thing to see globalization as a thing uncanny. The British empire has long been figured as a vampire preying on the people of the world for hundreds of years and, today, Arundhati Roy continues to make great use of the haunting power of imperial economics gone global in her recent *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014). Many such examples exist. It is quite something else to assert a true multidirectionality with the potential to challenge or resist the powerful forces of global capital with non-consumable cultural discourses. This study adopts globalgothic criticism in sites that could conceivably form resistances to global legibility through aesthetic form. Drama and poetry (unlike novels and certainly unlike commercial film cultures) offer less

purchase to the commercial translatability that subtends global hegemonies of production and consumption.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that such forms *resist* capital. They are visibly homogenized, especially in internationalist conventions that prescribe the flat or affectless use of English for fluidity in communication. Underneath the production of globalizing forms of aesthetic production, however, exists an shifting play of universal “boundaries between life and death, real and unreal, self and other, normality and deviance” in which the gothic intervenes to make its uncanny challenge against the fixed, the established, and the clear (Botting and Edwards 13). In their own ways, but often with reference to global constructions of normative or Western epistemologies, these are the lines examined and discussed by globalgothic interventions and spectral analyses. Such references make recognizing global frameworks important even as they disappear into the specificities of the work in its local context. To see the evidence of globalization is impossible, Spivak judges, “except insofar as it always was implicit in its vanishing outlines” (2012: 2).

What defines the term *global* that it might constitute a field of *globalgothic* criticism – one in which these critical remarks could find an emergent tradition in the field of modern literatures? Words such as “global” or “local” must be understood as analytic constructs and not themselves explanatory terms or references to the empirical reality of modern life. As Arif Dirlik observes, while the influence of capitalist and Eurocentric modernity “may not be universally or equally visible on all the surface implied by global, it is nevertheless everywhere forcing different people into parallel historical trajectories” (19). Historical trajectories can be traced through instances of cultural production by inquiring into the media technologies at play in those instances, which are themselves passages of narrative or anti-narrative knowledge. Drama and poetry employ technical languages of justification to prosecute haunting logics which, examined through a historical lens, reveal allegiances and mediations of relationships, imagined communities, economic or technological change, the politics of mourning,

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<sup>2</sup> In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger observed a similar difference between abstract linguistic arts and oil paintings. “A patron cannot be surrounded by music or poems in the same way as he is surrounded by his pictures,” Berger writes; “They show him sights: sights of what he may possess” (85). A poem enumerates the material absence of possession.

literary traditions, and – in the extremity of language offered by poetry – the very potential of language to grant face, voice, or image to history in lyric or epic forms. These discourses of imaginative forms speak within the context of each other. Genre goes global. The modernity of these texts implies their global interconnectedness, even within their local or regional traditions. Thus the value of Martin Albrow’s observation that “globalization effectively means that societies now cannot be seen as systems in an environment of other systems, but as sub-systems of the larger inclusive world society” (11). Literary studies can productively dislodge the nation-state as its framework of comparison by citing globalization as a useful reminder of the overarching field where texts and their writers operate. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “we should learn to think that the human subject in globalization is an island of languaging [*sic*] – unevenly understanding some languages and idioms with the ‘first’ language as monitor – within an entire field of traces, where ‘understanding’ follows no guarantee” (2012: 493). The principle of communicability across the media technologies that facilitate phatic acts promises neither comprehension nor equitability. Nor can it answer the expectations of subject-formation, conceptual cohesion, or language use.

Implicit to any recognition of globalizing cultures is a question of “technologies of recognition [that] selectively and often arbitrarily confer world membership on literatures, whether national, local, diasporic, or minority,” as Shu-Mei Shih argues (16-17). Such technologies include “constellation[s] of discourses, institutional practices, academic productions, popular media, and other forms of representation that create and sanction concepts” (Shih 17). Theatre and poetry are both technologies that depend on abstractions of voice and human presence; within their discursive practices, however, there are also multiple reflections on the roles of photography, film, lyric tradition, and lyric poetics. Under the rubric of contemporary technologies of human mediation, globalization “is both the condition of possibility and impossibility of modernity [...] in the margins of the universal” (Siskind 334). *Unheimlich* modernities of contested “heterogeneities, otherness, discontinuities, and differences” exist along these margins. Such jagged terrain reveals situations where, to adopt a postcolonial reading of global

affairs, “haunting can signal the return in spectral forms of cultures and pasts that have been pushed aside, [and, consequently] those revenant pasts return often as sites of loss, nostalgia, guilt, or betrayal” (Botting and Edwards 16-17). The globalgothic critic registers these revenants – and more. Today’s (im)possible modern situations of global contingency offers openings that globalgothic critics make meaningful: “the dark and shadowy contours of a new world order that is mediated, networked, militarized and corporatized but [that] offers no clear-cut image of itself, flickering between a series of dissolutions and displacements” (Bottings and Edwards 18). Fundamentally, then, in the global analysis of potential, the question of poetics – wherein the world transforms –takes central place for a recognition of the historical technologies that make visible and enact the possibilities strung along the jagged bounds of modern life. Interpretation makes meaning of abstractions. “[T]he challenge of the global,” Baucom writes, “is also that of rethinking time, not simply to testify to the presence of the past in the present [this, ostensibly, is the role of traditional ghosts!] but, in a certain sense, to refuse the very category of the present” (2001: 170). What are the possibilities and poetics evident in contemporary world literature that might be read as (global)gothic, anxiously unrecognized abstractions out of time but nothing less than timely? Precisely this: the ghosts which figure possibility provoke a kind of thinking that makes equal use of things known and unknown.

The “knowledge” of literature, or what interpretation seeks to wrest from a text is, arguably, narrative, relation, telling. Alternately, and even more importantly, literature exposes the failure of narrative, and the authorial constructedness of meaning created through interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The difference between the two lies in their receptivity to

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<sup>3</sup> Paul de Man phrases this failure of narrative as a resistance of linguistic constructions when its contextual justification of human speech are interrogated. “Questions of origin, of direction, and of identity punctuate the text without ever receiving a clear answer. They always lead back to a new scene of questioning,” de Man writes, regarding Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unfinished “The Triumph of Life” (1822). “Whenever this self-receding scene occurs, the syntax and the imagery of the poem tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding. The *resistance* of these passages is such that the reader soon forgets the dramatic situation and is left with only these unresolved riddles to *haunt* him: the text becomes the successive and cumulative experience of these tangles of meaning and of figuration” (1984: 97-99, my emphasis). De Man’s verbs shape a hauntological figure that others might call a ghost, a figure *before* narrative and whose resistance to interpretations of humanity generates a narrative which explicates to overwrite text.



narrative and runs like a sword between the modes of theatre and poetry. Robert Bringhurst argues that narrative is the perceptible form that any knowledge of life must either mirror or reject “because story is the form a life embodies: [it is] not at root a literary genre but a nonmaterial biological form perceptible in time the way a grassblade or an oak tree or a goldfish is perceptible in space” (178). Narrative does the impossible: it makes sense / *sens* out of the inhuman. It is unclear whether literature *really* speaks of human truths or, of course, whether it “speaks” at all. It is more likely that literature enacts a hermetic and textual play of signs and symbols that “speaks” only *to itself* across the uneven cultural topography of the world; to say this is to read literature – in a very uncanny sense – “as the place where [a] negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available” (de Man 11). Poetry describes only itself; the collaborative illusion of drama works only so long as it can be iterated. Stephen Greenblatt argues that “[w]ritten letters are virtually inevitably the agents of globalization” (2001b: 59).<sup>4</sup> Writing abstracts speech through a culturally determined form of technological mediation in which meaning is presumed, attributed, and circulated through interpretative communities. Examining literary aesthetics as a potential agent in global frameworks means to see “both place and placelessness together” and allows a “way of reading the world to understand the cultural logics which create and maintain the *unheimlich*” (Fallon 15-16). As readers we *lift meaning from a text* by telling stories about it and by recreating narrative from textual signs. The lift here is double: an implied movement of meaning *from* a text, but also a stealing of meaning *into* discourse on the part of the reader, misattributed and somehow, perversely, burglarized. Economic metaphors only get us so far before they encounter the uncanny of possession. I am not alone in seeing the act of historical re-contextualization as a kind of resurrected haunting where the critic “fashions a bond between the living and the dead, the present and the

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<sup>4</sup> Writing’s historical development as a tool of increasingly complex social systems for accounting their riches demonstrates the ancient but relevant connections between written letters and global – at least imperial – circulation, as evident by writing’s transformation at the hands of travelers and merchants around the Egyptian and Sumerian empires and, behind them, the priests and scribes who instituted forms of stylization (Hagège 1988: 73-75). As Hagège writes, “writing is an instrument of power: it enables the sending of orders to far-off fiefdoms and can determine which laws will prevail. And if it is filled with mysteries, it is all the more effective” (75). A machine of ghosts, even long ago.

past, in the nonsynchronous time of the contemporary” (Baucom 2001: 165). Media are technologies of knowledge. From their abstractions we *cut* forms of narrative as attempts at mastery.<sup>5</sup> “In music or painting or poetry, lyric or epic,” Bringhurst writes, “even in mathematics or analysis, when thinking succeeds, *we tend to say that it is telling*” (169, my emphasis). This dissertation is about telling ghosts in the nonsynchronous time of the contemporary global text. It is about moments of reading in which ghosts make themselves known as the holes in interpretative narration that remind us of absence, fury, loss, and even of the inhuman and deeply strange relationship between literature and life.

#### § ON GENRE – DRAMA AND POETRY §

Dramatic works *tell* stories, which is to say that at the theatre a person performs in front of you. This is in stark contrast to reading a material text. More than just piecing together a story from the pages of a textual object, actors stand before audiences and embody stories with voice and gesture. Very formally, then, a story is *told* by producing a narrative illusion of characters and plot in front of an audience who together shape a symbolic plane of shared imagination out of this foundational illusory telling. In illusion are spectres, reminders that events *imagined* are not events *seen* and that there is more to reading than a series of untruths and mere fancies. Ghost stories mirror and haunt the storytelling performance, and in its phantasmagoria actors’ bodies become characters hitherto unthinkable to audiences. The stage’s limited arena fashions fantasy’s infinite space, and thus too do ghosts haunt theatrical stages as the imagination produces images of narrative suggestion. Yet this is not the end of the matter, for in the imaginative act of creation ghosts and illusions also remind audiences of the instability of linguistic veracity: the shape of a ghost reifies the theatrical illusion made originally of linguistic structures.

If theatrical stories are a transformative alchemy and a snare for audiences who will to truth through *telling*, then at a fundamental level drama’s ghosts iterate an

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<sup>5</sup> With Ann Laura Stoler, I take up Foucault’s charge that “knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting” (1984: 88; cf. Stoler 7-8). It disrupts the sometimes false consolation of continuities and wholenesses.

aesthetic provocation that “continues to hang, spectrally in thin air: how can language utter truth within the mendacious illusion of representation itself?” (Warner 2006: 136). Conor McPherson, whose *The Weir* is discussed below, thinks of drama itself as an illusory and haunted séance performance. McPherson conversationally allows that

It [the séance] is the ritual of theatre, where you commune with the beyond, which I think is what theatre can lead to. Theatre is a kind of séance. [AR: Yes, everyone we see on stage is ghostly; they don't exist.] And we all create the illusion, if it is an illusion, together. We all create the sense of belief or the suspension of disbelief. (Roche 2015: 189)

In theatre ghost stories “tell” in two different ways. They first allegorize the illusory nature of the dramatic spectacle and, in this guise, they expose the nature of artifice as such. A ghost, in this technical sense, is an invisible resistance that licenses the continuing creation of illusions through fiction; from it, all follows. Secondly, when reified, ghosts occupy a more traditional role as agents of narrative serendipity and convenience. This latter type of theatrical ghosts tell of things that either cannot otherwise be told or of things without material shape: relationships, relations, and desires – powerful agents of human interaction and change that partake in the ghost’s classic role as a figure of figures.

Stripped of theatre’s illusions, props, and bodies, the ghosts of poetry “tell” in a different manner than those in the theatre. To continue the séance metaphor: poetry is the genre wherein readers witness a ghost who, when asked if it “is real,” answers “no.” Questions of interpretation shift accordingly. Drama lends itself to questions of narrative and artifice. In contrast, poetry exposes collisions of history and textuality where poems and their readers witness ghosts conventionally read as the subjectivities proffered by poetry’s lyric or epic forms. The ghosts of poetry witness traditions and affiliations, formal experimentations, historical events, and the evocative power of *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical strategy I read as a ghost’s haunting potential to shape what it is not, namely, a text made of images that are themselves forms of representation that shift to hide their symbolic emptiness and distance from the things of the world. Ekphrastic power can be

felt in *prosopopoeia* as well, where language is afforded an imagined face and voice and where that which is not human is effectively humanized through interpretation. The perceptual activity of seeing ink can become the charged act of witnessing events if the mind justifies such figments through an historical interpretation of linguistic materiality while reading. This readerly movement from sight to witnessing is crucial, for it heightens the perceptible affordance of linguistic power just as it highlights the ghost's role as a creations of interpretation. If we *read* something, it offers us meaning, but if we *witness* something we give up on the evidence of our eyes to allow the proposed insolvency of a text to overwhelm us. Quite simply, we react to what is not there. Yet, “[t]o *witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in a process of judgement” (Taussig 71). Adjudication seeks to correct counterfactual logics and, thus, allow readers to evaluate the pressures and intensities of linguistic delineations that blur the perceptual heuristics which distinguish subjects from objects along ideological lines.

As pressure is applied to linguistic claims of representation, most often in particularly intense discussions of history or identity, divisions between subjects and object collapse. Such change bears serious implications for the assumed subjectivity of thought to operate in poetry. A ghost's role in *surviving* often leads those who “see” ghosts to interpret them as witnesses to the past. Similarly, assuming poetry to speak of experience, readers expect it to *testify*. Testimony speaks of “something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority” (Agamben 2002: 34). The idea that a ghost “lives” on past death to tell of unfinished business makes ghosts the only *true* witnesses. A ghost can “touch bottom,” to use Primo Levi's phrase (83). It might – supposedly – testify to the depth of experience in situations where human beings cannot. Yet this idealized testimony invests ghosts with a power they reveal themselves unable to justify, were one to listen. Ghosts testify only to their impossible presence. Under scrutiny, poetry reveals traces. Poetry's form of “telling” requires the active witnessing of the reader. The ghost is a fiction of survival and a dream of testimony without the possibility of speech. Ultimately, what poetry thus proposes – when read as a study in

“telling” ghosts – is an intensification of the hallucinatory or ecstatic act of reading itself, enabled by technological features of recognition functioning as rhetorical operations.

The weight of witnessing leads readers to give extensive power to its linguistic claims and to expect a certain return from words. Poetry, the space where this assumedly happens, is where ghosts most clearly operate as autonomous agents of language free from the interpretative strictures of dramatic narrative. Poetry is writing’s fetish, imbued with a representational power its illusory words may not rightly have but afforded intensity because of the weight and depth of the things it claims to address. From a word’s slight purchase on its subject of representation, poetry gains its oft-discussed power of “speaking”: speaking to experience, to history, to atrocity, to its readers and so on. All are, in the end, apostrophes, rhetorical addresses to absence. At its most “expressive,” we say, poetry “sings.” This is not a form of telling. In its extension, poetry shapes a simulacrum of human potential. Discussing the title of his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *The Witness of Poetry*, Czesław Miłosz says he chose his title “not because we witness it [poetry], but because it witnesses us” (4). The agency is curious but inverted, as if one should wait for a doll to jump up, train its eyes on us, and begin to dance and sing: as if tradition could carry a force and weight beyond the instances in which the living affirm it. But that is precisely what readers do: wait for the miracle of self-sufficient language to appear. It is nothing less than the impossible. Readers actively create the magic of language when they bear witness to poetry and enliven the ghosts inert in material textuality. Poems gain strength as they make of readers their accomplices in a cooperative creation of rhythm, rhyme, and forms of sonic remembrance. Those works that reify this structure deserve special attention, since they present a reflexive space. Their themes enumerate a family of representational familiars that include dreams, ghosts, mirrors, visions, and the neuter. Puncta of representational textuality rest at this disappearing point of media. The imaginative creation of linguistic images through this act of witnessing haunts poetry as it does notebooks, testimonies, anthropological writings, and other forms of textual representation. In their own way, all are “like spirits of the dead” (Tausig 118-121). To summarize, then, readers imbue poetry with a power in which ideas of voice and

expression become possible: nothing less than *poiesis* itself – the ligature of making – permits the possibility of ghosts through the intensity of linguistic interpretation called witnessing. Readers are always confronted by the disappearing act of personification as *poiesis* exhibits its inhumanity: it *undoes* itself before the reader’s eyes until both dissolve.

§ A GHOST BY ANY OTHER NAME §

In 1897 Andrew Lang spoke for a milieu of emergent psychological societies and rational science when he observed that a ghost, “if seen, is undeniably so far a ‘hallucination’ that it gives the appearance of a real person, in flesh, blood, and usually clothes. No such person in flesh, blood, and clothes, is actually there. [...] that, in brief, is the modern doctrine of ghosts” (vi).<sup>6</sup> Lang’s working definition of traditional views of ghosts in literature and society helpfully encapsulates the common understanding of ghosts from the late seventeenth-century and onward. At this point ghosts joined the visible world through disjointed temporality and with, it was believed, narrative insight. This understanding licensed moral interpretations to a ghost’s message and asked them to model readerly functions. Ghosts were “otherworldly sleuths” ready to swoop from the wings of a text where they somehow resided, and thus were also reflective symbols of the text’s own functioning as a transgenerational relationship between readers or listeners

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<sup>6</sup> Lang returns to the question of the ghost’s garments. “[A]ny ghost that wears clothes is a puzzle,” he says: “Nobody but savages thinks that ghosts have clothes” (69). However Davies reveals that naked ghosts make up only a very small section of reported sightings from the medieval period to the contemporary (23). Lang does not pursue the dilemma of a ghost’s clothes but appears confused with his dismissal that only “savages” think ghosts have clothes. This farcically inverts Montaigne’s old play on “the savage” and clothes. “All this is not too bad,” Montaigne writes at the end of his remarkable “On Cannibalism” (1580) – “but what’s the use? They don’t wear breeches” (159). To wonder at a ghost’s clothes is not risible but marks an earnest interrogation into belief and culture. Eleanor Sidgwick for example, one of the Society for Psychical Research’s first administrators and a professed sceptic about the supernatural, found the question troubling. If clothes had no souls, she reasoned, then how could a ghost return wearing clothes as people so often claimed? Roger Clarke summarizes: “this, she believed, was proof that ghosts could not be the dead returned” (31). In her skepticism, Sidgwick joined Dickens illustrator George Cruikshank, American writer Ambrose Bierce, and philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Indeed, Hobbes raised the question in *The Leviathan* (1651). Much later, the anonymous writer of *Anti-Canidia* (1762) responded to Hobbes with the following argument: “souls were surely naked; ghosts didn’t need clothes to keep warm” (Clarke 149). Ghostly clothes often mark a spectre’s origin, and European and American ghosts tend to dress differently. “[T]he former favoured long flowing garments seemingly modelled on grave shrouds, whereas the latter tended toward everyday clothing of the sort they had worn pre-mortem” (Ruffles 27). For my purposes, it is enough to allow that a stage ghost’s clothes are theatrical convention, and that in poetry and prose a ghost’s clothes are simply *words* like any others – graveshrouds by another name. Human tropes make dead metaphors.

past, present, and future (Handley 53). The application of interpretative traditions to ghosts is clearly discernable in its cultural constitution.

An historical view of ghosts should be paired with ‘pataphysicist René Daumal’s theoretical definition. For Daumal a ghost is precisely “an absent being amidst present beings” (91), and he argues that the living who conjure up the ghost are crucial to its flickering existence. The verb *haunting* traces the lines of a ghost’s existence. To read a haunting is to “track[] through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time” (Gordon 6).<sup>7</sup> Absent signs of hauntings are irremediably ambiguous. Ghosts lack fundamental and consistent meaning. There is no presence to their absence, no secret to their form; instead, what exists are patterns and histories of associations. If the ghost is a figure of nothing whose absence engenders meaning, then it makes sense to return to Jean-Paul Sartre for an illustration of technical language when he argues that “it is from being that nothingness derives concretely its efficacy [...] nothingness haunts being” (1966: 49). “[W]hen we endow ghosts with intentions, a sensibility, and morals,” Daumal observes, “these attributes reside not in the absent beings, but in the present ones that surround the ghost” (91). Ghosts strongly resemble the metaphysical construct of language where meanings depend on a user’s familiarity with social conventions. Now you see it, now you don’t. What don’t you see?

In this study I use *ghost* relatively interchangeably with the word *phantasm*, although the latter (among the various associated terms: *spirits*, *apparitions*, *phantoms*, *wraiths*, etc.) has at times been used “in the sense of ‘ghost’,” but is more generally “employed to denote visions or hallucinations of the dead rather than the appearance of their souls” (Davies 2).<sup>8</sup> I wish to keep the prolific associations of the uncanny term *ghost*

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<sup>7</sup> Haunting lends sociology a vessel for analysis, as Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* demonstrates. For her, haunting constitutes “modern social life” as “a generalizable social phenomenon of great import” (7). As a result, the social role of hauntings take precedence and a ghost is made to read as “just the sign [...] that tells you a haunting is taking place” (8). In a slightly different manner, I am interested in how ghosts are not signs but that which comes before the sign and is carried in its wake: those moments of failure, desire, or absence which hauntingly inaugurate chains of signification.

<sup>8</sup> Ackroyd lists a number of other local terms and over two hundred words used in England alone for spectral figures. These include shelleycoats, scraggs, fetches, mum-pokers, spoorns, melch-dicks, larr, ouphs, old-shocks, swathes, scar-

while retaining *phantasm*'s strong phenomenological suggestions, for it is drawn as much from classical understandings of sense experience, memory, and (from the medieval period forward) the imagination, just evokes associations with death. Neither ghost nor phantom is equivalent to the term *haunting* which is an effect of *relation* understood in its narrative guise, and which forms a major object of study for this dissertation. I also employ *spectre*, remembering especially its associations with visual culture. Like the spectre's specific sensory nature, as a visible figure ghosts take shape in discourses of light. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists "spectre" as almost synonymous with "ghost" and "apparition" since the early seventeenth century. It also intriguingly lists the April 1862 *Macmillan's Magazine*'s statement that the "simple [...] explanation of spectres is that they are our own thoughts." In another usage, the *OED* cites spectre as a figure of speech for an "unreal object of thought; a phantasm of the brain." Just so. What's more haunting than thought itself? A second question: what is more human than to see ghosts?

Two possibilities organize our always-changing definitions of ghosts. On the one hand, as a transforming feature of linguistic creations ghosts compose a judicial and perceptual resource in which cultural usages such as drama and poetry partake. Their meaning changes recursively, which is to say that "the same issue is taken up again and again at different intervals but with different connotations and results" (Armitage, 33). For example, a siren, once a mermaid, now names a shrill alarm "precisely because it functions both in and out of water" (Armitage 33). Similar remediations of the term "ghost" seem highly plausible. On the other hand, the very question of the ghost remains ambiguous across its various poses and shapes. Like a dancer's body, but in the ambit of language and thus exactly *not* a body, ghosts signal "contrapuntal bursts" in rhythmic interactions of changing systems through which linguistic intentions and usages pass

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bugs, bolls, gringes, nickies, freits, chittifaces, clabbernappers, dobbies, knockers, buccas, and so forth (9). Most interesting are the terms that do not provide a folkloric name for the ghost and those that describe its indeterminate nature. Thus at times a ghost is called a "token." At other times it is referred to as a "know," like the ghostly dog called "the *know* of a dog" (Ackroyd 7). Smuggling in a suggestion that refuses the possibility of knowledge as *the* constituent element of ghostliness – the *know* being also *no* dog, only an image – this Shropshire usage is *telling*.



almost without trace (Manning 155). Thought, history, bodies, and textuality condense to shape a central object, itself otherwise nonexistent, once existent, or (perhaps) never to exist at all: the ghost. As modalities of communication, ghosts exchange signals, not signs; they are impulse, not information; sense itself and not what the senses entail. Ghosts without media to define them are nothing. A ghost is precisely what its surroundings cannot contain: an indivisible remainder, an undilutable residue, or things yet to be said. Their absent presence can be parsed in forms of literary production that intractably complicate the commodification of globalizing cultural forms: poetry and drama, as opposed to the vast market for novelistic prose. In flows of ghostly imagining, the dynamism of a linguistic gesture loses its anchored rhythm in a writer's body. A depth and richness of sedimented language is left in place of gestures for reading to resurrect.

To summarize: ghosts are movements in which language and its users exchange cues and positions to influence the other under the name and license of interpretation. Many familiar conventions of the gothic ghost are derived from an Anglophone aesthetic shaped by Shakespeare and, later, Daniel Defoe, and have since been pressed into the services of an incipient global modernity through late eighteenth-century gothic traditions and after (cf. Castle 1995). As colonization spread, so too ghosts extended their influence as transitive agents of transforming media and technological epistemes. What was first an Anglophone tradition meshed with indigenous figurations of uncanny ambivalence to produce what I tentatively (there is no other word) call the globalgothic "ghost": a regionally-specific historical amalgam located firmly in Anglocentric gothic discourses that opens onto the uncanny and the ambiguous through a diverse assortment of ways, themes, and figures of technological abstraction. The works examined in this dissertation either *tell* ghost stories or *bear witness* to ghosts. At every story's heart is an old shudder: the fury of the ghost and the terror of the living before the mystery of death. In every witness born of words are the intangible possibilities of survival and resistance.

## 1.2

## Talking Ghosts: On Ghost Stories and Criticism

Humanity is but a collection or series of ghosts.

Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (1993)

Grand gestures are the easiest. In his *Victorian Hauntings*, Julian Wolfreys writes that “to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts” (3). But how – and when – is this observation important or possible? To answer this question about the telling of ghost stories, it is necessary to investigate the histories and technologies that contribute to contemporary understandings of what exactly it looks like to “tell a ghost story.”

When speaking about hauntings, it is tempting to claim that the time of ghosts is also the time of imperial omnipresence. While ghosts prominently featured in the English imagination long before the sustained duration of British empire and colonialism carried soldiers, settlers, and sailors across the globe, Anglophone imperialism’s *longue durée* greatly intensified the imagined realm of hauntings. Michael Cox, for one, argues that England’s golden age in the nineteenth century “was also the golden age of the English ghost story” (xiii). To a point, this is true for the gothic ghost and classic ghost stories. Yet Cox’s argument fails to recognize the complex plurality of ghosts on the contact zones along imperial boundaries. Popular interest in ghosts weaves between culture and history; literary figures should not be read through the lens of imperial Englishness or local folklores only. It is most helpful to see ghosts as products of technological inventions and new media *epistemes* in contact with a social imaginary changing spaces and going global. Just as theological influences wax and wane regarding popular interest in ghosts, so too do changing technologies of abstraction and recognition have a place. The progressive narrative of scientific skepticism and technological sophistication replacing religious credulity distorts the process by which technology finely sharpens the keen edge of uncertain thresholds along “what is known” and what is not. Technology “does nothing to dispel the shadows at the edge of things,” Neil Gaiman points out, and the shadowy world of ghosts and their stories “still hovers at the limits of vision” today. Tom Gunning and Terry Castle suggest that since the late eighteenth century technologies of new optical media, the rise of the novel, and increasingly imperial visions of the world

have moulded modernity. These changes influence the ways by which ghosts are “seen.” For example, during the long eighteenth century the veridical status of ghosts drastically changed with the wide availability of cheap printing presses, new literary genres and forms such as ballads and pamphlets, all of which increased the forms and frequency by which ghost stories were transmitted. More clearly than before, ghosts were figured in literary genres as imagination’s tools and a common shorthand for thinking about time, death, and mortality (Handley 18). Incorporated by text and technology, ghosts were housed by innovative “mechanical techniques for remaking the world itself in spectral form” (Castle 137). Abstractions, whether technological or literary, “displaced, domesticated and relocated [the idea of a ghost] to the interior imagination” (Handley 19). The increasing precision of new technologies of visual acuity resulted in a growing internalization of spectrality as if to recognize the abstraction’s pivotal role. As new thresholds of vision came into focus, so too ghostly and phantasmal forms changed.

Technological increases in ghostly disembodiment become clear by examining how interrogative (or penetrating) technologies of vision and insight supplanted ancient understandings of the world in which objects are composed of ghostly layers of film. For example, the Roman philosopher Lucretius (99 – 55 BC) believed that vision carries the simulacra of things in films, “a sort of outer skin perpetually peeled off the surface of objects and flying about this way and through the air” (1994: 95). In this theory of vision, the likeness or *eidolon* was “physically received into the air via the iris” (Mirzoeff 2006: 387). Lucretius’ philosophy survived to be echoed by French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799 – 1850). According to the famous photographer and Balzac’s friend Nadar, the writer believed that “every body in its natural state was made up of a series of ghostly images superimposed in layers to infinity, wrapped in infinitesimal films” (qtd. in Sontag 159). Assumedly, daguerreotypes worked by peeling away and transferring the ghostly film that surrounds every visible object in a terrible material archive. Yet the technologies of vision that revealed Lucretius’ mistakes did not dispel ghosts. Instead, innovations produced new forms for old interpretations of how images are produced. In Greek, such images were called *eidola* or *phantasmata*; in Latin, *simulacra*; and, in English, “radiant species” (Warner 2006: 164). Whatever name they took, it was difficult to continue

thinking of images as such in the face of photography and x-rays without transforming the nature of the perceived object. In this way, technological media intensified questions of spiritual import without substantially *changing* the fundamentally ambiguous relationship of human to its abstract representations. Ulrika Maude argues that once the human body was “made perceptible through various medical imaging methods” such as x-rays, probes, and other abstractions, it became “rewritten, made virtual and – what amounts to the same thing – curiously disembodied” (127). Technological precision led to the opposite of a materiality of imaginative forms: ghostly disembodiment. Photographs, phonographs, telecommunications and, by the close of the nineteenth century, new psychological discourses together contributed to “a new metaphysics of the psyche” that united reflections of bodies, media expressions, and models for internal thought in a loosely phantasmagorical concept of the world (Warner 2006: 211).

Along a different tradition of spectrality, philosophies of memory have long associated ghostliness and specifically the *phantasm* with an inherent falsity of remembrance. French magic lantern shows of the mid- to late eighteenth-century were called phantasmagoria and regarded as illusions, if especially scary ones. Yet as a technical term *phantasmagoria* signifies an extremely disciplined method of assigning and retaining meaning for recall (Yates 1966). As these formal methods for recall have faded over time (Lyndon and Moore xii), it falls in part to ghost stories and narratives of haunting to speak of memory’s changes in a way that translates a new socio-technological world into popular belief and psychology. Although memory’s forms have changed, their constant intervention opens a door from the present world of experience to the imagined remembrance of the past. Remembrance is a haunting form of imaginative reconstruction. For poet Alastair Reid, acts of memory make “tangible a ghostly dimension” since “an instance of remembering can, without warning, turn into a present moment, a total possession, a haunting” (39). For writers, the haunting influence of remembrance is as much a technical property of poetics as it is a miracle of the human mind. The hauntings that shape the material of remembrance “are gifts to writers,” Reid judges, “for much of writing is simply finding ways of recreating astonishments in words” (39). Stripped of its intentional mental role as a chamber of a memory palace, the

more modern phantasm of the mind becomes closely allied to memory's sudden, serendipitous or unsought act of haunting.

At the close of the nineteenth century, two things were clear in the use of ghostly languages by psychological techniques and physical technologies. First, inventions such as the phantasmagoria (or magic lantern), phonograph, daguerreotype, camera, and x-ray were well known and internationally accepted. Such technological media abstract from the human body a ghostly secondary form: the spectral bones of an x-ray and the frozen images of photography. Second, and equally importantly, ghost stories themselves had remarkable transcultural purchase. Nineteenth-century sailor and soldier Joseph Donaldson represents an entire milieu of storytellers when, in his *Recollections of the Eventful Life of a Soldier* (1845), he notes that ghost stories were a favourite of the imperial British soldiery and navy, itself crewed by men from across the world (28-29). Sailors from England, Ireland, Europe, the American colonies, Africa, and Asia made British ships hubs that disseminated popular stories, of which those of ghosts were particular favourites. Circulating across the trade routes of the sea, written up in cheap narrative pamphlets, and passed along by word of mouth, ghost stories moved across the edges of the British empire.<sup>9</sup> As Handley discusses, ports in the West Indies were especially popular for these travelling tales. Stories provided homesick travelers reminders of familiar places and folklore, and the close relationship between ghosts, hauntings, and forms of *dwelling* answered this need. Stories from outside the Anglophone imagination produced an exciting cosmopolitan *frisson* generated all the more compelling through the familiar narrative genre of a ghost story (cf. Handley 189-91, 209).<sup>10</sup> The broad appeal of the ghost story transmitted through imperial means lasted through the *fin de siècle*, although the emerging publish market gradually formalized hitherto *ad hoc* storytelling communities of imperial sailors and soldiers.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) modernizes such a telling by codifying it along the lines of a serial novella. Conrad's narrator conjures up Marlow's story as darkness descends on board a ship moored in the Thames; its ensuing cast of characters and nightmarish plot gain ghostly currency as a result.

<sup>10</sup> This globalizing naval sharing of ghostly tales is today mirrored by internet communities, discussion boards, and tumblr posts in place of ocean-going ships, while new genres such as "creepypasta" open fresh spaces of haunting.

For his 1890 collection *Modern Ghosts*, American writer George William Curtis compiled a number of Norwegian, French, Spanish, Austrian, and Italian stories. Such diversity was tactically designed to reach an audience glutted on English, Scottish, and Irish fare. Curtis was also capitalizing on the Spiritualist craze that had hit a high point, piqued by the Fox sisters' self-invention as mediums in 1848. Spiritualism mirrored new radio and wireless technologies and played on the ghostly possibilities of superimposition in photography. Introducing his internationalist collection of ghost stories, Curtis thus drew on a range of philosophical and technocultural discourses familiar to the popular imagination. The corners of a shrinking world held the power to thrill and horrify. As Curtis writes,

These little tales, like instant photographs, bring us nearer to the life of other lands, and appraise us that, in an unexpected sense, we are all of one blood – a blood which is chilled by an influence that we cannot comprehend, and at a contact of which we are conscious of an apprehension beyond that of the senses.

(xv)

Curtis presciently anticipates the survival of ghost stories of all genres through to the twentieth century. Tales *like* photographs, he says. Comparing visual technology to tale-telling reveals the crux by which stories turn: the thrilling moment in which a ghost is *almost* seen but not. Instead, hauntingly obscure, the ghost is left to the imagination. In language, the nearest one can come to a ghost is through apprehension, a seizure of the senses that forcefully makes fact of feeling while deferring truth's possibility. However, the comparison between narrative and photography ends there, since the latter suffers from the expectation that its products serve as a veridical and not an indexical discourse.<sup>11</sup>

To sell his collected ghost stories Curtis further extended his claims by contrasting them against an earlier dramatic tradition of ghosts. In the same way that

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning that spirit photography as a genre seems to bridge photography and ghosts. The genre did not successfully prove the existence of ghosts, as some of its practitioners claimed, but it did allegorize photography's peculiar form of abstraction. In doing so it revealed "the fantasies of embodiment that would make the body both ghostly and material, transparent and palpable, light and matter both transient and fixed" (Dworkin 2013: 104).

Sigmund Freud's collection of art and archeological objects expresses a worldly confidence traced from appropriated cultures – a trait that culminates in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), published in the same year as George William Curtis' *Modern Ghosts* – so too Curtis suggests that his ghost stories tell of human universality. Where Frazer and Freud's universalism appealed to the psychological basis of humanity, for Curtis the universality of stories is measured in "blood," a fearful apprehension of what lies "beyond" the senses: death, meaning, and other people. A classic element of gothic horror, the invocation of blood reveals the type of affective state Curtis sought to engender in his readers. For all his *fin de siècle* gothic universalism, Curtis' introduction works *against* an equally bloody but more popular dramatic tradition of spectacular ghosts on the stage. His investment in modern, transcultural ghosts displaces a local English history of theatrical ghosts often vengeful, diabolical, and even corporeal by technological necessity, since before holograms or projects humans played a ghost's role. By no means "beyond" the senses, these ghosts were often the matter of cheap theatrics. Curtis' introduction treads a very difficult line that reflects his interest in telling ghost stories to a refined audience and not the general public.<sup>12</sup> Differing traditions of ghosts bear classist implications: as *apparitions* ghosts were palatable to belief, but as *spectacles* they were popular theatrical appropriations of public excitement.

The play of ghosts between belief and popularity owes much to the way ghosts instantiate *haunted logics* in technological media of relationships between people and the various abstractions that represent them. A "ghost of a story," or its lingering narrative influence on a reader or listener, is different from a theatre's pale or sheet-covered actor; meanwhile, a "ghost in the machine" is today a commonplace in new media technologies that speaks more of troubleshooting errors than of apparitions and beliefs, a distorted memory of the Grecian *deus ex machina*. "The things that haunt us can be tiny things,"

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<sup>12</sup> Popularity and belief have a vexed relationship when it comes to ghosts. Belief in ghosts "has always been vulgar" (Clarke 173). This has not changed with either the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, or the wars of the twentieth century, though the interest in a certain cadre of intellectuals revealed the complexity of belief. Even the guise of modernism and modernity has never exorcised ghosts; Luke Thurston writes that "the question of the ghost" is "directly relevant to modernism" itself (127). Marina Warner argues that ghosts have found new names as matters of spirits and spectres "flourished more vigorously than ever since the seventeenth century, when the modern fusion of scientific inquiry, psychology, and metaphysics began" (2006:10).

Gaiman writes, “fragments of ghost stories [...] which, nonsensical although the idea has to be, nobody ever remembers but you, and which simply isn’t there the next time you go and look for it.” A modern haunting can be as simple as a matter of jeopardized relationships, as Conor McPherson’s play *The Weir* suggests later in this study. To look at the specificities of haunting as a form of narrative I examine ghosts in drama, where their narrative is embodied by actors as performing bodies and, thus, is historically demonstrable and technologically contingent. Poetry’s ghost-effects differ, for they require readers perform the embodied act of witnessing themselves. Yet, before getting there, I must register some of the many ways in which ghosts have been interpreted.

### § GHOST TRACES AND THE SCIENCE OF HOPE §

For *fin de siècle* writers such as George William Curtis, ghosts seemed tantalizingly available to investigation. Every new technological medium promised to somehow reconnect the dead and the living. American psychologist and philosopher William James shared Curtis’ hope for discovering the nature of ghosts, as did the august bodies of the trans-Atlantic Society for Psychical Research (SPR, 1888-present) and the international Congress of Experimental Psychology (1892-present), many of whom were confident that ghosts could be defined by scientific observation.<sup>13</sup> From a literary perspective the approach seems difficult, and Curtis dryly notes that “science loves to speculate upon so ancient and strange a system of phenomena, or statements of alleged phenomena, and to try to reduce to order and marshal in well disciplined ranks these coy and evanescent hints of something that eludes exactness of observation.” Still, Curtis admits, the “not unwilling” agents of scientific inquiry “are ready to try the haunted chamber” (xii). Years later, Jacques Derrida echoes the hesitation intrinsic to the negative “not unwilling” while speaking to Bernard Steigler about technology’s phantasmal properties. “[A]s soon as one is dealing with ghosts,” Derrida argues, something “exceeds, if not scientificity in general, at least [...] the objective, which is not or should not be, precisely, phantomatic”

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<sup>13</sup> The SPR counted among its founding members writers such as Alfred Tennyson, Lewis Carroll, John Addington Symonds and John Ruskin; its later corresponding members included Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Henri Bergson (Sword x). These writers influenced much of modernist writing.



(2002a: 418). Yet for Curtis' contemporaries new media such as photography and phonography suggested that ghosts could be discovered.

It was precisely the strangeness of new forms of representation such as photography and phonographs that makes them compelling. Photography, Barthes writes, is "the return of the dead" (2010: 9). Likewise, phonographs "allow us to hear once again the voices of the dead" (Davis 2010: 64), and produce a similar melancholic relationship to reality as do photographs (Barthes 2010: 79). These are only two examples of "still more bizarre forms of spectral representation [that] have appeared in the twentieth century – the moving pictures of cinematography and television, and [...] the eerie, three-dimensional phantasmata of holography and virtual reality" (Castle 138). Aware of such technological reproductions, many scientists and members of the SPR hoped to find objective proof of the spectral phenomena intrinsic to the popular gothic. What they instead discovered was the widespread strangeness of vision itself. The society's publication of *Phantasms of the Living* (1886) related 701 case studies of visions and phantasms – images caught on the thresholds of the living's perceptual worlds – almost images from the "sleep side," as Anne Carson might say. What they found, then, were not ghosts but *apparitions*. *Phantasms of the Living* has been called the Society's "first and possibly greatest discovery" (Clarke 22), although the distinction between ghosts and apparitions had been drawn over a hundred years earlier by Daniel Defoe in *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727). The SPR's popularity suggests that stories about ghosts served as ways to explain resistant phenomena into obscurity by incorporating their appearances as internal mechanisms of human psychology.

As it happens, new media technologies only extended narrative's purview in evoking the dead and manipulating desire. While the SPR charted changing popular perceptions of ghosts, psychoanalysis did more to express the relevance of perceptual forms of justification. Thus can we approach Freud's great interest in Wilhelm Jensen's "phantasy" *Gradiva* (1902), a story where the titular character, Gradiva, is "nothing other than a mid-day ghost who had returned to life for the brief ghostly hour," Freud reports (1973: 19). Later in the story, however, the ghost reveals that its spectral currency is only an effect of psychological repression. Gradiva is simply the girl next door. Many

contemporary studies of fiction depend on a similar “revelation” drawn from allegorical critical assumptions. For his own part, having diagnosed the protagonist’s repressive psychological behaviour, Freud describes his feeling of “disillusionment” and allows that “the solution falls flat and seems unworthy of our expectations” (1973: 30). Behind Freud’s theory of repression lingers a hope that stories of apparitions could be something more than figments of mistaken vision and minds. Might a ghost quite simply be a figure caught out of time? Freud’s essay does much to link dream-images and apparitions and thus incorporates ghost under an assumed name into his interpretative framework.<sup>14</sup> Many studies of ghosts and memory’s fictions follow suit.

More broadly, however, apparitions generate gothic structures in human imagination and memory. This tendency has been evident since Augustine of Hippo’s separation of the secular imagination from the religious *psyche*, or spirit, in the early fifth century.<sup>15</sup> Terry Castle finds antecedents to psychoanalytically-derived gothic undertones in the history of late eighteenth-century phantasmagoria exhibitions that, for her, evidence the “absorption of ghosts into the world of thought” (29). By the twentieth century, Castle continues, the symbolic operations of the English language naturalized phantasms as a discursive constituent of thought itself, and today the metaphor of a haunted consciousness is so common that we “hardly recognize it as metaphoric” (Castle 125). It returns in the form of a secret. Phantasmagorias and their shifting play of uncanny images across a lantern’s alternating light and shadow may have disappeared as technology advanced, but a ghost’s deep affiliation with the imagination remains. What is a phantasm, after all, but a decreaded image: an immaterialized apprehension trembling on the threshold of perception? What is a ghost but the moment aesthetics stumble, directly before a sensation is either transformed into the evidence of outward phenomena or internalized and admitted as a memory that “speaks” to experience? No wonder that such a tantalizing subject was a focus of inquiry that, at its onset, sought to find the ghosts

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<sup>14</sup> In *Totem and Taboo* Freud discounts ghosts as objects of belief that supernaturally attempt to refuse death (25, 61).

<sup>15</sup> Nor was this a tenet of fifth century philosophy only. Reading a late tenth century dream-vision lyric, *Foebus Abierat*, Eavan Boland discerns ghostly effects in the poem’s “contemporary and unsettling” theme that suggest “that the ghost-lover outside the woman might be a ghost-emotion inside her” (2011: 242). The apparitions of memory are incorporated into the affective mindscape of the poem’s Church Latin lyric structure, if not the psychology of its poet.

*outside* of humanity's artifacts, thus missing the point entirely. Ghosts were always suspended before researchers' eyes. Their gradual recognition has been a history of attempts to define with precision the source and effect of something utterly undefinable.

#### § HAUNTED SPACES §

The beliefs and definitions commonly associated with ghosts in their British, Irish, South African, and Caribbean contexts share an uncommon number of similarities despite their geographical variation. European ghosts are often associated with inhabitations, places, and structures. This relationship is so strong that it has begun to be read backward onto architecture. If "a house, a building, or a city is not palpably haunted in its architectural features," Robert Pogue Harrison writes, "then that house, building, or city is dead to the world [...] cut off from the earth and closed off from its underworlds" (36). For his part, Michel de Certeau notes that "haunted spaces are the only ones people can live in" (108). The most spectacular of ghosts affixed to a particular place are *poltergeists* or "noisy ghosts." These occupy their own category of stories characterized by destruction and an often disruptive attachment to a particular person or specific feature of a place. Andrew Lang distinguished poltergeists from other hauntings: more than "ordinary ghost[s]" they are, he writes, evidence of a "diabolical possession" (209). Though Lang does not use the word *poltergeist*, his evidence from nineteenth-century Russia, China, and England, as well as famous episodes from Icelandic sagas such as *Grettir's Saga*,<sup>16</sup> leads him to conclude that "[a]s an almost universal rule children, especially girls of about twelve, are centres of the trouble" (221). The ongoing appeal of this tradition of poltergeists bound to children accounts for later films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Poltergeist* (1982). Yet poltergeists take many shapes. The stories of William Hope Hodgson and M.R. James, for example, figure solitary men as the protagonists of ghost stories in which the

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<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking, the monster Grettir kills, Glamr, should be read as a *revenant*, a figure of early Germanic legend that returns from the dead, although not in the form of a disembodied haunting. Peter Ackroyd argues that *Beowulf's* Grendel is *another* "revenant" who "stands apart from life ... is uncanny ... moves through walls, and cannot be touched by sword or spear" (1-2). Unfortunately Ackroyd, like Lang, misuses his terms. Grendel has nothing spectral about him; he is a monster, not a ghost. Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic stories of revenants must be understood in the context of embodied others who deform the boundaries of identity and cause visceral horror. They bear little semblance with the ghosts of Grecian antiquity.

poltergeist gains a variety of meanings, while in a different way the various hauntings of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* flirt with poltergeist territory. In general terms, then, poltergeists reflect a strong association between structures and haunting.

The social function of poltergeists and other efficacious ghosts is also important. Ghost stories of this kind are often written “from a perspective other than the authorized one,” Jeffrey Weinstock argues; thus reframed, efficacious ghosts can be useful for revisionary historical and cultural perspectives (2004: 5). The poltergeist's association with teenage girls demonstrates a way socially disenfranchised young women gained a measure of influence, for instance.<sup>17</sup> Ghost stories of all kinds had since the eighteenth century provided women without legal rights a redress for spousal violence and neglect (Handley 91). As the nature of ghost belief changed so too did similar appropriations for those in marginalized positions. Possessions and violent poltergeists greatly decreased “as the currency of diabolic intervention weakened” (Davies 177). In such a context, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) appears as a late flaring of an old history. The children's possible possession by ghosts of their former servants is notable not just for its elegant presentation but also for the drastic role reversal James effects therein.<sup>18</sup> If a ghost is seen as an unauthorized discourse that disrupts interpretative closure, reading ghosts might simply be a matter of contextualizing them as epistemologically challenging narratives that reintegrate a mind's closures into a dynamically changed world in which the imagination authorizes a discourse of the mind to take shape as a ghost. This social role, combined with the etymological derivation a ghost draws from the Teutonic word for *fury*, accounts for the poltergeist's dynamically efficacious and “demonic” powers: they are the result of human minds violently constrained by social discourses.

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<sup>17</sup> Using Alan Gauld and Peter Cornell's classic *Poltergeists* (1979) and studies by David J. Hess (1990) Owen Davies suggests that, of documented poltergeist cases, “nearly three-quarters [of those closest to the ghost's influence] were female and 78 per cent under the age of 20” (177). Clearly, these popular stories of poltergeists served to “transform the supernatural into domestic power, radically altering the dynamics of household relationships” (177).

<sup>18</sup> While the Hinton Ampner story that inspired Henry James loosely figures a poltergeist of noises and voices (Clarke 54 passim), James, placing decorum against vulgarity, shies away from these details and ends up making his ghosts less poltergeists of demonic possession (contra Beidler 149 passim) and more perceptual objects of narrative structure and infinite interpretation. The story's horror relies on its ambivalence. Symptomatic readings of *The Turn of the Screw* demonstrate that a definitive search for answers risks diminishing the story's aesthetic and affective powers.

Poltergeists differ from more ubiquitous *ghosts* or more continental *revenants*. A revenant, as Jacques Derrida famously describes in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), is a spirit who comes back for the first time. In contrast, a ghost can be reduced to a perceptual trace unsupported by material evidence. Traditional English lore separates the ghostly apparitions of the dead, who could conceivably be deemed revenants, from the ghosts of the living, apparitions of a person or thing that exists in an unimaginable location. One category of ghosts that blend these two is a ghost that does not understand it is dead. Common to West Indian belief and European traditions (Newall 82), this ghost's misunderstanding of ontological categories disrupts society until the "natural order" is reestablished and the ghost, understanding its new form, returns to the death from which it escaped to haunt the living in the first place. Why do ghosts return in the first place? Suiting their evanescence, ghosts have often been distinguished on the basis of their perceived intent and rarely on their actual mode of presence. As Peter Ackroyd observes, "the vast majority of ghosts seem to be without a purpose" (11). They simply *are*.

Regional histories interpret ghosts along different lines. In the Caribbean, for instance, the unwillingly diasporic descendants of Africans transported across the Middle Passage have long spoken of duppies and bugaboos and, to a much lesser extent, the *abiku* or *ogbanje* child. These figures have characteristics different than the all-purpose "ghost." Edward Long's infamous *The History of Jamaica* (1774) discusses "the apparition of spectres" to conclude that "[t]hose of deceased friends are *duppies*; others [...] are called *bugaboos*" (416).<sup>19</sup> Bugaboos were always malevolent, but even duppies, the returned spectres of friends, were received with suspicion. Matthew Gregory Lewis, an English writer of gothic fiction, observed in his *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1834) that African-born West Indians were "very much afraid of ghosts, whom they call the duppy" (98). Observations from colonial writers and the imperial archive obscure popular belief, however. Much West Indian preternaturalism is traced from West African

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Lou Emery points out that eighteenth-century writer and Jamaican plantation owner Edward Long not only "testified to the moral, intellectual, and artistic incapacities of the enslaved Africans on his estates," but also that his *History of Jamaica* "provided the evidence European philosophers needed to support an idea of the aesthetic based on the exclusion of Africa and black people from the domains of history, reason, and art" (13, cf. Hume's "Of National Characters" [1748], "Of the Standards of Taste" [1757], and Gikandi's "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic" [2001]).

*vodūn*, the root of Caribbean *voodoo*. Fractured by slavery's disruptions, surviving relationships are difficult to trace from afar. Multiplied across diasporic communities, one term can gain many associations. Take the example of a *duppy's* dwelling place, or haunt. Ashanti from Ghana and the Gold Coast believe that spirits of the dead cluster around cotton trees (called *odum* trees). Jamaicans in the late nineteenth century told stories of spectres living in large trees and only specifically the *odum* tree because of its "awe-inspiring, almost ghostly appearance [...] *duppies* inhabit the great chambers formed by its gigantic roots and congregate on the branches, sometimes even holding parties there" (Newell 74). The trees named for ghosts themselves became retroactively ghostly. The *duppy's* transformation takes a further shape in the fiction of Canadian-Caribbean writer Nalo Hopkinson's short story "The Glass Bottle Trick" (2000). Here, as Alison Rudd summarizes, "the spirits of the dead can be contained in bottles of blue glass, hung from trees, to prevent them from returning as *duppies*" (Rudd 56). The *duppy's* association with the *odum* tree clearly transformed in its migration from Ashanti belief to Canadian fiction. *Duppies* also evidence a strong pattern of associations with fear and sexuality. Their return is often attributed to their desire for continuing sexual relationships. Understandably, the living find this horrifying and sex with *duppies* is "thought to make a woman barren or cause her to bear dead children" (Newell 78). Bugaboos are objects of fear while *duppies* are associated with specific places (a tree or marital bed), just as so many English ghosts are associated with houses and structures.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Care is necessary while associating *duppies*, *abikus*, and British ghosts in postcolonial criticism taking up disparate cultural threads and theories of hybridity. Thus, for instance, the following generalization sacrifices clarity for a vision of multidirectional global exchange: "[t]he European ghost as revenant gains a new life in the service of the postcolonial, where it is transmogrified into the *duppy*, the *soucouyant*, the *Bunyip*, as hybrid manifestations created from European, indigenous and cross-cultural remains" (Rudd 169). Neither bugaboos nor *duppies* should be confused with the West African *abiku* (Yoruba), *ogbanje* (Ibgo), or spirit child, though they may share a common antecedent. The spirit child traces its own line of representations in Nigerian culture, for instance; it emerges from popular belief and into fiction through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Wole Soyinka's chilling "Abiku" (1967), and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). The *duppy*, as discussed above, has a different cultural resonance. Noting the spirit child's continuing relevance, in specifically *abiku* forms, Peter O. Ogunjuyigbe argues that belief in *abiku* continues to determine how ill children are treated in Nigeria. *Abiku* cannot be exorcised by contemporary medicine but only accommodated by traditional healing (Ogunjuyigbe *passim*; Peeren 116). The West African spirit child, whether *abiku* or *ogbanji*, translates the place of haunting to a space of relationships. Although recognizing these beliefs may seem to exoticize the West African subject, their recognition merely accepts the concise allegorical function of ghostly language and actions as an idiom through which it is possible to think and imagine political and global forces beyond one's control (Piot 127). In the Caribbean context the social history of the form is very different.

Many South African ghost stories take up a different web of networks than those in the confluence of British and Anglo-Caribbean cultures though there are certainly parallel genres and stories.<sup>21</sup> Some South African ghosts are familiar because of their colonial origin along both English and Afrikaner lines. In this regard, perhaps the most famous South African ghost story is that of the Flying Dutchmen, *Der Fliegende Hollander*. Reportedly, this Dutch ship sunk with all its treasure in 1641; sailors say that to see its phantom brings death. Other Afrikaans stories and travel tales told by Voortrekkers and in isolated rural communities are permeated by indigenous influences, and André Brink deems the traditionally “easy intercourse between the living and the dead” in popular African oral traditions from Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho linguistic groups as formative to the literature about spirits and ghosts of the time (1998: 26). Contemporary Afrikaner and English South African fiction is riddled with ghosts. Meanwhile, South African popular culture blends local South African discourses and figures familiar from globally resonant gothic discourses in the English language, which is also one of the nation’s *lingua francas*. For example, Greg Marinovich, one of the notorious early 1990s “Bang Bang Club” of photographers, tells a story of Joyce, a Xhosa woman who, living in the ravaged Sowetan township Thokoza, dreamed that her granddaughter returned to her in dreams after her death in the violence preceding Mandela’s release. This sad revenant brought a wordless sense of urgency. Although Joyce deems the apparition of her granddaughter a zombie, when questioned about her spectral logic she admitted to Marinovich that she “know[s] nothing about zombies, honestly. People say they exist for a long time, until God takes them. Then they die” (qtd. in Marinovich 98).<sup>22</sup> As Botting and Edwards point out, post-apartheid South Africa is a site of “seemingly archaic figures for postmodern times” (11) where ghosts and zombies mingle with local figures like the *tokoloshe*, an evil dwarf given to sexual assault and other forms of devastation: globalization in this fashion leads to new gothic epistemologies, the globalgothic (Botting and Edwards 12). Confluent hauntologies create a contemporary literature by writers such

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<sup>21</sup> Ghosts intercede even in the lives of writers: Breyten Breytenbach, a poet discussed in a later portion of this study, lived in a haunted house on Waterkant Street when he first arrived in Cape Town in 1958 (Dreyer 26).

<sup>22</sup> With great sensitivity for a man not much given to such reflection, Marinovich comments that “Joyce’s belief that Mimi was not really dead was not so different from my own belief that God would spare my mother from cancer” (98).

as Lauren Beukes, who puts an ultramodern spin on hauntology in her *Zoo City* (2010). Beukes transforms traditional Shona *mashave*, a belief in evil spirits, into a harrowing conceit for reflecting on Truth and Reconciliation's legacies. *Zoo City* is set in a dystopic future Johannesburg where guilt takes material form in the shape of an animal familiar connected to its owner's body. The demise of one or the other in this yoked pair brings on a shadowy force called "the Undertow" that kills the survivor. André Brink terms such transformed fantastical and supernaturalist influences in the European novel a form of African "magic realism" (1998: 26), but the confluence of globally recognized gothic terms combined with those of the many official South African languages argues for a term with more modern resonance – the globalgothic, perhaps.

#### § DREAMING, SLEEPING, HAUNTING – MIRRORS §

Regional variations aside, ghosts emerge along perceptual boundaries: hallucinations, dreams and the universal borderlands of sleep. In the early nineteenth century, both John Ferriar's "An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions" (1813) and physician Samuel Hibbert-Ware's *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions* (1824) argued that ghosts were waking dreams. Similarly, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's "Essay on Spirit Seeing and everything connected therewith" (1851) explained hallucinatory or sleeplike visual symptoms as phenomena of an internalized perceptual consciousness:

[T]he dream, somnambulistic perception, clairvoyance, vision, second sight, and possibly spirit seeing are closely related phenomena. Their common feature is that when we lapse into them, we obtain an intuitive perception that objectively presents itself through an organ quite different from that used in the ordinary state of wakefulness, that is to say, not through the external senses, but yet wholly and exactly as if by means thereof. (272)

Associations between such intuitive perceptions are durable and globally resonant. For example, duppies often appear in a person's sleep, an event where the duppy "dreams to" a person who serves as a host for the haunting (Newall 83). The ghost here actively *dreams the living* in a reversal of agency and subject-formation. While phantasms and dreams "have no concrete reality [...] they are nevertheless experienced with the



immediacy and certainty that characterizes waking, intentional perception” (Wolfson 128-129). Like fiction, dreams and hallucinations partake in the power of *haunting*, so-called for it is efficacious precisely despite its obvious intangibility.

The mirrored or reversed perspective afforded by dreams, phantasms, and the imagination refocus the media of recognition. Ghosts appear in them as objects of abstract contemplation: as in these technologies, mirror-like abstractions of humanity result in ghostliness. The dream, Maurice Blanchot writes, reveals “resemblance itself, the indefinite power to resemble, the innumerable scintillations of reflection” (1989: 145-146). Yet, as Ampie Coetzee writes of Breyten Breytenbach’s phantasmagoric *Mouir*, “works of art cannot be mirrors, but [...] they have the similar ‘elusive magic’ of mirrors in transforming realities [...] the world of the artist is the world of illusion, of mirrors that deceive the eye” (46). The mirror deceives the eye by necessity. “You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens,” Barthes writes (1977: 39). As a mirror deceives the eye, dreams, like ghosts, deceive the “I”; subjectivity divides in spectral reflection. “Between the one who sleeps and the one who is the subject of the dream’s plot, there is a fissure,” Blanchot writes. To mistake a fissure for a figure is almost inevitable, although “of course it is not truly another, another person, but what is it?” (1989: 141). Language intercedes at this mysterious “fissure” in human confusion over dreams and mirrors to become a threshold on which imagination’s phantasm perches – a figural space where we train our minds. The division goes deeper yet, for the mirror’s transposed identity through reflection invokes a transformation, the way it shows you “yourself.” A medium in everything but name, the mirror “looks at us from outside, but it is as if it were prying inside us” (Tabucchi 56). So too does a haunting invert the present’s solid and assumedly consistent identity where impressions from the exteriority of the senses move to the internal “self.” Yet a ghost cannot transgress onto questions of the integral self; instead, it reveals the failure of such a construction by its very failure to appear during self-reflection. “How do you recognize a ghost?”, Derrida asks, only to answer, “[b]y the fact that it does not recognize itself in a mirror” (2006: 195). Almost but not quite a border, a haunting is a threshold, a “medium that opens between two

things” (Teyssot 91). Phantasms walk the thresholds of human perception. In this act of tracing borders and boundaries, phantasms simulate to reify the abstractions of mirrors, dreams, photographs, textuality, and other media phenomena that prompt explorations of human subjectivity. For this reason, it becomes clear that a fascination with technological reflections of human perception “may come less from what they indicate about a belief in ghosts,” than from what they reveal about the way we as humans see ourselves mediated in them (Gunning 2007: 99).

Blanchot’s question – “not truly another... but what is it?” – moves us away from the traditional equivocation between hallucinations and dreams and toward the question of how the imagination and other mental processes relate to subjectivity and the forms in which subjects are represented. For Jacques Derrida this question is hauntological, and the subject ghostly *as such*. Refusing to recognize in the word “ghost” any “nature” whatsoever, Derrida writes that the “subject that haunts is not identifiable,” and that in a haunting “one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception” (2006: 169-170). Literature reflects the ongoing work of contemplation regarding these shifting identifications, for like mirrors, dreams, visions, and phantasms, linguistic creations substantiate an otherwise *inability* to identify, see, or localize the ghosts and other transitive figures in whose forms thought is exchanged for language: this is the work of *making*, of poetics. Technologies of recognition, including writing, paradoxically reiterate a fundamental embodiment in forms of human abstraction: this is the human-seeming shape of the ghost, or the subject. Thus Derrida speaks of the “return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever [...] [O]ne engenders some ghost by *giving them a body*. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in *another artificial body, a prosthetic body*, a ghost of a spirit, one might say a ghost of the ghost” (2006: 158). In this phantasmal shell-game where a counterfeit is counterfeited, the *text*, understood as a haunting prosthesis, produces ghost-effects in mirror-like reflexivity. These effects run the gamut from gothic tropes to mournful names to some readers’ ultimate dissatisfaction with the limitations of the book as a material object, when narrative itself “takes on a life of its own.” Thus stories, like songs, prove haunting beyond their actual method of

transmission. As an elaborate folding, such a definition of a ghost as the effect of haunting sounds complex only in theory. In practice, as many attest, to tell of a haunting is eminently ordinary. The most common ghost stories begin this way: “I thought I saw...” Just as anyone can dream, anyone can see a ghost. The power or meaning of a ghost, however, is found only in the act of interpretation: the creation of meaning and the makings of a thing from nothing: a poetics of the spectre – spectropoetics – in short.

Indexical figures such as a ghost forestall meaning’s creation (and put holes in narrative) by refocusing attention, however briefly, on interpretation’s ambivalence. As such, the gothic uncanny is a telling moment that betrays to the listener or reader what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “the form of the secret” (2003: 196). Not the secret itself, nor the matter of the secret, nor even the disruptive awareness that secrecy exists, but a knowingness that disrupts structures and paths of foreseeable possibilities. The moment in which the form of the secret is revealed, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is a sudden change. Quoting Henry James’ “In the Cage” (1898), the two suggest that it occurs when the London telegraphist, reading a telegraph in code, “ended up knowing so much that she could no longer interpret anything. There were no longer shadows to help her see more clearly, only glare” (qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 197).<sup>23</sup> “You cannot go further in life than this sentence by James,” the French theorists argue (2003: 197). As an operation of the gothic unknown in texts devoid of inherent meaning, ghosts articulate the *form* of the secret, but not secrets nor signs that *allegorize* secrecy. Only if pressed into interpretation’s service do they “reveal” so-called repressions and secrets and thus become mere *matter* for the secret. When that occurs, all ghost stories become fodder for

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<sup>23</sup> Ross points out that this line is multiply distorted, first by Deleuze and Guattari, who are quoting a 1925 French translation of James’ text, and then by Brian Massumi, the English translator of *Mille plateaux*, whose revised version again fails to include crucial words that the French translators had in the first place picked up on. With four versions of these two absolutely crucial lines – James’ original, the 1925 translation, Massumi’s version into English, and Massumi’s erroneous repetition of the original – we arrive at a situation where “Each time we turn to the Jamesian text, we return to it through a text [...] that exists virtually, not on the line of hard segmentarity but in the micropolitics of Jamesian style, in the molecular currents of *In the Cage*, whose use for Deleuze and Guattari is to give a model for abstraction that abandons interpretation and stratification in favor of a *productive* eternal return” (Ross n.p.).

detectives and the affair with interpretation becomes a fascinating lure for readings of narrative metaphysics. Such is the case, for example, in Michael Cook's *Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story* (2014), where ghosts are pressed into service as indicators of secrets to be solved and where ghost stories reveal an affiliation with crime fiction and the detective genre (12). So much is undoubtedly true. Detectives can invent ghosts to explain their intuitions. Yet if we listen to careful readers such as Derrida, even a secret *as such* poses a question of its form. "One always inherits from a secret," Derrida writes. Then he ventriloquizes a ghost: "read me, will you ever be able to do so?" (2006: 18). The interpretation of careful readers exerts a dangerous and considerable power. Unhinged from such penetrative desire, however, parsing the many hauntings of texts and tales might remind readers of all the text empties of even metaphorical meaning and what is beyond questions of things said or unsaid: such is what it is to be haunted. To see a ghost is to know the form of the secret. Next to this the *matter* of secrets is paltry indeed.

## 2 How to Tell a Ghost Story

### 2.1

#### Field Survey: A Brief History of Ghost Stories and the Theatre

“It is a useful spectacle for a man to discover the bizarre effects of the imagination when it combines force and disorder; I wish to speak of the terror which shadows, symbols, spells, the occult works of magic inspire. [...] I have promised that I will raise the dead and I will raise them.”

Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdoctiques*, V. I (1833)

Much contemporary theory about ghosts come from gothic and theatrical elements of popular culture in addition to a longstanding history of ghosts in classical theatrical traditions. From the pre-modern period to the twentieth century, many of the most popular hauntings in England were “forms of popular or street theatre” symbiotically related to literary and artistic cultures (Davies 216). Ghosts are deeply embedded in classic world drama traditions also. In Grecian drama, for instance, Aeschylus’ earliest surviving work, *The Persians* (472 BC) employs a funereal ghost. Another long-standing tradition, that of Japanese Nō, has since the fourteenth century traditionally employed ghosts for narrators, and Marvin Carlson goes so far as to call Nō “the most intensely haunted of any of the world’s classic dramatic forms” (20). In short, one of the most successful ways to tell a ghost story has traditionally been to tell it on the stage, even if the type of stage used varies. From the streets to theatrical drama, from film to television, and ultimately across multiple forms of abstraction and recognition, media transform the storyteller’s power to weave a haunting narrative in words, images, and gestures.

It must be clearly stated: when interpreting narratives as they are performed on stage, the nature of what constitutes a “ghost” is *always* a transitive metaphor for the embodied act of gestural movement and vocal recitation staged by the human body’s theatrical performance. Whether visible or rumoured, a ghost’s lingering presence in popular stories, oral memory, and cultural history is anchored in the narrative of its appearance in a given space and medium; in other words, ghosts are imbued with substance, which is to say that they are *interpreted into meaning*, by popular traditions of

audiences and actors. These histories of interpretations then shade into literary treatments and theatrical criticism.<sup>24</sup> How are staged tellings of ghost stories received?

The association of traditionally gothic ghosts with English theatre begins with the Elizabethan incorporation of *haunting* as a ghostly dwelling of habitual action that merited recognition on stage and in dialogue. Stephen Greenblatt observes that in Shakespeare, “there is again and again [...] a sense that ghosts, real or imagined, are good theatre” (2001a: 200). This critical judgement extends far back in English theatrical traditions. In 1711, Joseph Addison, founder of *Spectator* (1711-1712), noted that

there is nothing which delights and terrifies our English Theatre so much as a ghost, especially when he appears in a bloody Shirt. A Spectre has very often saved a Play, though he has done nothing but stalked across the Stage, or rose through a Cleft of it, and sunk again without speaking one Word. (186)

“[T]hough he has done nothing”: the reference to a ghost’s impotency is important since it begins to distinguish what are effectively ambiguous ghosts from the vengeful or diabolical ghosts of the Elizabethan or Jacobean stage (of whom Shakespeare’s Old Hamlet proves exemplary). Addison was not, however, against the notion of ghosts as such, especially “when they are introduced with Skill” (186). Nor did he disbelieve in

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<sup>24</sup> Existing scholarship on haunting and the global theatre is exemplified by two very different recent books: Alice Rayner’s *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* (2006) and Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001). Rayner’s phenomenological study examines the psychological resonance and quasi-metaphysical status of haunting, pursuing lines similar to Maud Ellman’s psychoanalytic take on ghosts and vivicentrism in “The Ghosts of Ulysses” (1992). Ellman’s “Cold Noses at the Pearly Gates” (2010), a study of animals’ ghosts in modernism that argues that these ghosts “tend to take the form of bodies without spirits, as opposed to spirits without flesh” (708) stands on its own. In contrast, Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage* favours a vertiginously cross-cultural exploration through history that justifies why, in his words, “all plays in general might be called *Ghosts*” (1). Whether from theoretical depth or a rich familiarity with theatrical traditions, each critic has much to offer. In a related field, Steven Bruhm’s recent essay “Butoh: The Dance of Global Darkness” (2013), charts a path between those of Rayner and Carlson by modelling the *globalgothic* suitably refashioned for the corporeal performance of dance (or the theatre). Bruhm suggests that we refashion gothic criticism to attend to the word *global*’s “medical, corporeal sense of encompassing or involving the same body or psychosomatic organization” (30). Locating my research along the fringes of a global body of twentieth-century Anglophone theatre, I hope to pick up on Bruhm’s middle way that explores the *global* human body in its *global* heuristic in order to trace a critical line that explores hauntings as non-transcendental operations of a haunted logic running through Rayner, Carlson, and the dramas alike.

ghosts as such: “we are sure, in general there are many Intellectual Beings in the World besides our selves, and several Species of Spirits,” he wrote in 1712, citing the “general Testimony of mankind” (571). Addison was simply against vulgarity in the ready (ab)use of a ghost’s literary influence. This qualified appraisal of stage ghosts and resulting appropriation of one line of ghostly tradition (the ghost who does nothing), kept in mind the *Spectator’s* genteel audience who might claim offense at vulgarity. It would be echoed by the line kept by Addison’s close friend Richard Steele in the *Tatler*.

The ghost’s perceptible confluence of delight and terror raised questions about the figure’s theatrical or poetic efficacy throughout the eighteenth century. In 1712, a year after his comments on ghosts in the theatre, Addison remarked that ghost stories create “a pleasing kind of Horrour in the Mind of the Reader” (571).<sup>25</sup> Where Addison and Steele (like Defoe before them) popularized ghosts as a force of moral weight, by Virginia Woolf and Peter Ackroyd’s time ghosts had mostly lost their moral authority. Consistent, however, is a ghost’s effectiveness at rousing popular interest by employing terror with a safety net, spectacles of revenge without teeth – all despite their powerlessness on stage. Henry Fielding, in *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), pronounced with distaste that the “only supernatural agents which can in any manner be allowed to us moderns, are ghosts; but of these I would advise an author to be extremely sparing. These are indeed, like arsenic, and other dangerous drugs in physic, to be used with utmost caution” (231). Who could give up such cheap thrills? Certainly not English playwrights. Fielding himself had previously adopted a ghost for his anonymously-published satiric play, *Tragedy of Tragedies, or The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731), in the eponymous hero’s dead father, Gaffer Thumb. But, by the end of the eighteenth century, *The Times* of London disapprovingly spoke of “the ghosts that of late have infested the stage” (qtd. in Davies 231). The purposeful if less believable “avenging ghost of the

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<sup>25</sup> This observation recurs in twentieth-century criticism in studies as different as Ackroyd’s survey of English ghost stories and Woolf’s essays on ghost stories before that. For Ackroyd, most ghost stories in the English tradition of popular gothic tales are “alarming but also oddly comforting” (4). Meanwhile Woolf describes how the “strange human craving for the pleasure of feeling afraid” accounts for a popular “love of ghost stories” (1918: 293).

murdered became a requisite element of any self-respecting early-nineteenth-century gothic melodrama” (Davies 231). In this effort playwrights such as M.G. Lewis, John Richardson, and William Moncrieff led the way.

Given that enjoyable terrors are usually those without immediate material ramifications, the audiences so eagerly enjoying stage were not necessarily the same as those who continued to believe in the supernatural. Entertainment changes ostensibly shocking material into conventional forms; or, as Edgar Wind argues, “shock wears off when it becomes familiar, and the device by which it was first achieved receives a place in the long gallery of modern devices where [...] it attracts and satisfies the dispassionate pilgrim, or just arouses his curiosity” (10). The sublime – awe and terror mixed – is similarly cordoned off as an aesthetic regime. Albeit polemically, Robert von Hallberg argues that the Burkean sublime idealizes an aesthetic of sordid and “nasty” affects wherein “[t]he mind swells only so long as it observes the terrible from a safe reserve. One wants an illusion of terror, not the real, demeaning thing itself” (235). What was once unsettling becomes consumable and, more trenchantly, toothless. Wind persuasively argues that this change marks a clear difference between classic thought and that of the post-Romantics. While Plato failed to see that spectators may become immune to art’s dangerous and unsettling powers, Wind writes, Hegel “could not imagine that art would ever again become dangerous” (15). In the case of ghost stories on the stage these arguments became one and the same: spectators cocooned in a privileged relationship to the spectre understood its role as an inoffensive narrative mechanic and were therefore able to watch stories of unsettled histories and death’s horror with agreeable ease.

While ghosts both bloody and tasteful were being performed in London’s theatres, however, a different phenomenon was occurring across the city’s streets. Outside the ghost stories told on stage, unscripted appearances by rumoured ghosts pervaded the streets as did a surging popular interest, if not belief, in ghosts, all bolstered by the remarkable stories told on stage. The assemblage of vast crowds interested in reports of ghosts inspired police and governmental apprehension. One such crowd grew to two thousand people gathering nightly through July 1830 in the hopes of witnessing the



Grange Road clergyman's ghost in Bermondsey, a district in south London (Clarke 171). In general, however, ghosts of the street did nothing: not only did they refuse to tell of salacious secrets or murders most foul, they most often failed to show up at all. Since they were believable, these ghosts were cause for social unrest beyond their performative absence. Historians such as Clarke or Davis observe that Londoners dressed in white were sometimes mistaken for ghosts and, albeit rarely, killed by fearful observers. Meanwhile the gatherings proved the London constabulary's worries about dangerous assemblage correct as ghosts continued to show up, or (as nearly always was the case), when a ghost revealed itself to have been a fabrication all along: a crowd's unhappiness could easily turn violent at the non-performance of a ghost. And yet, even in the case of ghosts without stories or visible presence, the draw for crowds was in part to construct a communal narrative that accorded the supposed apparition some social significance. The most believable ghosts were the ones that never appeared, and whose stories could only be speculations. This popular form of theatre illustrates the vertiginous appeal of a ghost story's refusal of interpretative closure. With no sure narrative and diffident opportunities for commercialization, street ghosts suggest that the production of "nothing" can be fascinating, terrifying, and entirely popular.

While purposeless ghosts may have been the most believable ghosts in the popular imaginary, English theatre audiences continued to be treated to more spectacular fare in more traditional dramatic performances. On stage and in culture more generally the imbalanced effect of shock drama – the ghost as paper tiger – led to their easy caricature and resulted in writerly cautions, as in Fielding's reserve.<sup>26</sup> Large crowds interested in street ghosts had, by this point, faded away, though belief remained. As popular imaginations changed so too did melodrama and parody emerge as the genres of choice: while engaging audiences cynical toward the supernatural, these stories also neutralized the potentially disruptive possibility of hauntings, since a haunting often speaks to a

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<sup>26</sup> Dickens would later exploit the oscillating (dis)trust in ghosts throughout saccharine Christmas tales that ironically portray ghosts as figures who trade in their potentially unsettling influence for a jaded appeal to an audience's skepticism of superstition. This tendency is also evident in Oscar Wilde's *Canterville Ghost* (1887).

discourse breaking free from silence or oppression. If a ghost is most believable in its mysteriously incommunicative, bare appearance, then the active, agential “ghost,” or inevitably the hoax, when it was almost inevitably revealed as such was pleasingly obvious in their unreality. The more substance ghosts were imbued with, the more fantastical the plays which delivered them became, and the less they mattered as ghosts. Only when resolutely ambiguous does a ghost retain its full dramatic effect. Thus, although vengeful ghosts were more palatable than purposeless ghosts, Owen Davies notes the latter remained firm objects in the popular imagination despite the theatre’s rival sensations (239). Ethnographic sources suggest that “hordes of silent memorial ghosts” only gained in popular belief from the eighteenth century onward (Davies 40). The purposeless ghost is unsettling, its existence intransitive despite a brief appearance. A purposeful ghost, conversely, may as well be labelled as *deus ex machina* for all the mystery and belief it engenders: in this light, the play’s adoption of haunting has been taken up as a technical tool for narrative. Conversely, while it was *believable* to stage apparitions and purposeless ghosts, at times they effectively fail to propel a story’s narrative engine: an apparition is a spectacle too purely in the realm of potential, and cannot lead audiences into the safety of details and guidance – or narrative manipulation.

#### § TECHNOLOGIES OF ABSTRACTION §

All of which raises the question: how is a ghost seen? The technologies of recognition in theatrical drama have always made its ghosts the most *visible* compared to other genres: visible in their bloody efficacy, or visible in their effective absence, the ghosts of the stage are crucial vectors in a field of technologically embodied performances which results in a strong tradition of *ghost stories*. Far from the vengeful bed sheets of cynical Jacobean playwrights, but in a tradition consistent with that time’s understanding of the powers of the imagination and the eye of the mind, the late twentieth-century ghost stories of Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, Athol Fugard, and Samuel Beckett weave iridescent gothic threads into the fabric of the everyday or the ordinary. And although the ghosts in these stories boldly expose their own unreality, their narrative integrity does not suffer in consequence. How, then, does the ghost story of a play differ from the ghost-effect of a

poem? The answer is in the technique of embodied performance. Although plays have texts that record their scripts, they occur *as events* and instantiate or stage the work of art in the gestures and breath of their actors.

One of the most striking divergences between plays and poetry is the question of voice. Barring naïve arguments that align the material text with the personhood of its writer, a poet's "voice" is ever kept in quotation marks to signal discontinuities between the author, the page, and the poem's reader; meanwhile, the actor's voice brings to life a theatrical script that flickers to life in dramatic events. When a poem speaks *of* ghosts or even when it speaks *to* ghosts, they remain bodiless save, of course, for the material shape of language itself. In an embodied performance, the actor's voice carries the thought of ghosts and translates textuality's mechanisms into an immediacy of oratory illusion. The difference drastically influences affect: a poem's ghosts are more likely to be melancholic and introspective, whereas on stage or screen the stories of ghosts are more commonly vehicles for spectacular manipulations of audiences and affect. The ghost story occurs theatrically in a way ultimately very different from the textual page because while a sign's materiality *duplicates* human form, a theatre's actors are merely separated from their audience by a stage or a screen. In this doubleness all theatre is ghostly, as is all television. But more interesting than this generalization is to follow the various iterations of hauntology in specific instances of cultural media.

As the formative incorporation of ghosts in the theatre suggests, the temptation and even function of theatre is to bestow on its ghosts bodies clothed in technological devices and techniques. Historically, this development roughly coincides with technological changes in the way images were projected and perceived: from the mind's eye in Athanasius Kircher's early magic lanterns, and the public shows of Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's phantasmagoria 150 years later, to the optical inventions and devices of entertainment media such as cameras and the cinema that displaced the eye of the mind for the camera lens. These technologies of representation taking up "the eye of the mind" as their perceptual locus demonstrate what Marina Warner calls "an intrinsic, unexamined equivalence between the technology of illusion and supernatural

phenomena” (2006: 138-9) that influenced writers as different as Lewis Carroll, James Hogg, and Goethe (Ibid 153-4) and continues to the present day. My focus on theatrical tellings of ghost stories recognizes these latter-day descendants of the *camera obscura* and the magic lantern (or the *phantasmagoria*), and thus seeks to demonstrate a mutually assured sense of the haunted nature of vision’s technology and technological visions of performance. Ghosts in theatre and technology are no less haunting today than they were in the past, and they continue to reveal themselves as functions of recognizably artistic work. Ghosts are self-evidently stories *told* to audiences by a body on stage (or an abstraction thereof), and yet they lose none of their power.

In light of the above history, the following analyses seek to recognize the common genesis of ghost stories in an ordinary or momentary *image* of genesis, one speculatively isolated by the metaphor of the “mind’s eye” and derived from a certain relationship or mode of relation: narrative. The analyses will thus eccentrically track the telling of ghosts from conventional stage drama to theatre as a medium for nationalist meditation, spontaneous conversation, technological abstraction, and then as a transnational vehicle in a field of globalizing forces. The different ways of “telling” ghost stories change their various semiotic devices but leave intact the moment of haunting at which ghosts reflect the influence of both past *and* future over what becomes the present, just as hauntings’ shapes delve into uncanny and technological methods of recognition.

## 2.2 Major Argument: About Telling Ghost Stories

What we do is return words from their metaphysical to their everyday use.  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §116 (1953)

[T]he traffic between storytelling and metaphysics is continuous.  
John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984)

The transatlantic success of many of the works studied below argues for the continuing importance of twentieth-century ghosts on a wide variety of stages.<sup>27</sup> This study pursues a

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<sup>27</sup> The rippling spread of Irish theatre is only one story of cultural change along global lines in twentieth-century dramatic history, but it is fairly representative. From J.M. Synge’s incantatory *Riders to the Sea* at the Abbey Theatre to Samuel Beckett’s quiet BBC2 teleplay *Shades* and Marina Carr’s incendiary *By the Bog of Cats*..., the tradition of Irish

globalgothic mode different from local traditions of the popular gothic but also from the long stage history of vengeful ghosts to examine rapidly changing global relationships that employ ghosts at a fundamental level. This critical endeavour combines thematic comparison, historical context, and textual analysis, and is unified by an admittedly centralizing attempt to come to terms with globalization. In addition to socioeconomic features, ghosts raise complex questions of theme, language, and artistic form in the work of artists whose imaginations are restless and transcultural. Cultural traditions and the social relations they influence are not as materially clear as are economic structures, but their changes shape the representations and thought that modulates economic activity. The act of telling a ghost story collects these threads: so what does it mean to tell a ghost story? How does one speak to *haunting*?

*Haunting* has become a dead metaphor so deeply engraved in global discourses that its supplemental ghosts and gothic narratives only uneasily coexist with the everyday world or national imaginaries. Whether as phantasms of technology, apparitions in the brain, or, most pertinently, narrative engines for the theatre, ghosts imply that their stories could be told. A ghost's lack of definition is its own "tell-tale" evidence that prompts an interpreter's narrative intervention: failing to *properly* see a ghost, a story is told instead in the place of that absence. In this way absence is made to "tell." The word "haunting," long a paradigm for figuring relationships between the imagination and memory, endures from the *phantasmata* of Grecian philosophy through to the present

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drama reveals a globalizing force throughout the twentieth century. Irish dramatists capitalized on transnationalism in the nineties as they migrated from the Irish Republic to the cultural hub of London but, unlike the colonial exploitation that drew dramatists such as Dion Boucicault, Oscar Wilde or even W.B. Yeats, this new movement was the result of globalizing neoimperialism and cultural capital. All of which is to say that in the twentieth century, theatrical forms and ghost stories migrate across cultures with ease, and resultantly had an influence beyond the usual nationalistic ambit. For instance, Synge's work in the early years of the century shaped a transformative conduit for Derek Walcott, who found Synge's linguistic power admirable but exchanged the Irishman's meditative ghosts for another kind, one more full of rage and more relevant to his concerns. A recognition of Beckett's global significance by dramatic movements from Dublin-based companies to Athol Fugard's *Serpent Players* in South Africa indicates another rippling tide of nominally Irish but more substantially globalgothic or transnational drama. While of Irish descent, South African playwright Athol Fugard drew wholly from his and his collaborators' experiences of apartheid to write *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, a play which, in touring Europe, America, and Africa, traces another line of global influence.

day in a survival nothing short of astonishing. In the global spread of new media, the possible uses for ghosts as a language for expressing human relationships become remediated into new variations of the uncanny. Phantoms, like ghosts and hauntings, “objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious,” psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham observes (1987: 288), and yet terms such as *haunting* and *ghost* rarely remain entirely metaphoric, especially in narrative’s metaphysical construction. More often than not they seep into the operations of everyday life as the object as well as the metaphor of narration. For this reason, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren venture that in its own way, “secretive [and] ungraspable,” the everyday world is “like a ghost [...] and is itself beset by ghosts” (xiii). Returned to an everyday field of signification, metaphorical Anglophone stories begin to resemble other phantasmagoric metaphors similar in operations and effect, if historically contingent.<sup>28</sup> A parallel paradigm of interpretation is evident in dramatic media’s multiple tellings of ghosts in stories about personal relationships, national heritages, media representations, and mourning processes. Language becomes *intense* on the aesthetic thresholds of these models of everyday living, which is to say that it is stretched so that it almost manifests emotion. This is not because the events themselves are cast in a supernatural light, as the presence of gothic ghosts might suggest, but rather because like the ghosts of late seventeenth-century English ballads, they operate in close proximity to everyday discourse as part of the everyday world and addressing “real-life dilemmas” (Handley 55).<sup>29</sup> The continuing relevance of ghostly discourse to new media technologies show how the gothic continues to survive.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Alternative traditions of interpreting ghosts in West African nations such as Nigeria and Ghana, for example, situate signs of haunting in a “reigning ontology,” Esther Peeren writes; like those societies for which consciousness is itself haunted, these cultures view ghosts not as perceptual mistakes but as things that “are simply *there*” (Peeren 109), and which, in many cases, are the ironic effect of Pentecostal repression of village religions (Piot 61). Far from credulous supernaturalism, such West African views address symptoms also taken up by post-Romantic ghosts and ghost stories.

<sup>29</sup> Thus too begins one gothic tradition with the famous early eighteenth-century story of Mrs Veal, a ghost who took tea and discussed small inheritances. The “Canterbury Tale,” as it was called, eased the transference of ghost stories into novels and gothic fiction (Handley 82). The roots of ghost stories in everyday matters helps to contextualize their later resurgence but also helps to explaining the near-ubiquitous word *haunting*. The “Canterbury Tale” was taken up by *A True Relation* (1706), a proto-novel attributed to Daniel Defoe. The work’s provenance suggests that ghost stories provide one important root of the novel as a genre in the English language, and in it ghosts contribute to a rich assortment of narrative features, such as “dialogue, verisimilitude and a description of physical actions,” as well as an editorial narrative voice (Handley 96). These features also constitute English novels in the eighteenth-century. Prior booklets, chapbooks, and proto-novelistic works were not often considered as an art form but instead placed with

Performative acts of *telling* show how ghosts accrue haunting power, as their stories dramatize artistic conceptions of a world that *resembles* the everyday but differs in crucial ways, often in what could be called sociopolitical interventions or reinforcements. As David Lloyd notes, every performance in the theatre or outside it describes “a consensual fiction that organizes a community and its relations to authority” (2003: 199, n. 21). The tellings of ghost stories are often less concerned with awful spectacles than with mediations of human relationships within or at odds with imagined communities. Crucially, the dramatic world occupied by ghosts is uncannily close to the “real” yet not of it but doubled somehow, excessive yet entirely habitual and homely. The intimate proximity of ghosts with the real offers a textbook version of *heimlich/unheimlich*. Narratives that come pre-interpreted, such as those designed for shock or religious and didactic purposes, put this strength of haunting into jeopardy, as do all types of stories that rob ghosts of homeliness. Writing on the impotence of uncanny figures, Freud judges that “[s]o long as they remain within their setting of poetic reality, such figures lose any

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everyday material goods (Couégnas 314). In this context, the prevalence of ghosts and ghost stories makes sense, as does their shift into predominantly gothic narratives. Gothic features were enormously influential for nineteenth-century novels due to their “fantasmic, plastic aesthetic” and “exceptional quality of ‘transgenerativity,’ or the potential to circulate freely from one literary register to another, and even more, from one medium to another” (Couégnas 318). The mundane but very suggestive nature of the ghosts in these gothic discourses (especially those transformed into the novel as a form of middle-class epic rising from a technologically-enabled spread of the popular printing press), has been obscured by traditions that would present ghosts and their tellings as dramatic spectacles or fetishized symbols of an outmoded or superseded supernaturalist credence among susceptible, which is to say “premodern,” people.

<sup>30</sup> Couégnas asserts that at the heart of the eighteenth-century gothic novel is an “iconographic memory” that exchanges the assumption of a reader’s interior structure (transforming the art of memory’s traditionally modest *loci* into a baroque castle, a gothic cathedral) for a narrative structure that conjures up the phantasmagoric properties of the imagination for its own aesthetic sensibility: a combination of “realism and dream” (320-21, 323). The relationship between ghosts and the pre-gothic novel continues to influence fiction. Defoe’s fascination with ghosts (Handley 99ff), for example, produces an echo in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has discussed the value of such ghosts in an theoretical reading searching for an ethics of fiction (1999), but the connection’s implications for a history of genre and transnational imagination has not yet been made. Although my study focuses on drama and poetry, the telling of ghosts involves the development of the novel just as much as in these other genres. Of immediate relevance to the present study is the ensuing adoption of ghost stories by *literature* and away from the veridical discourses of biographical and observational sciences. *A True Relation* “eased the assimilation of ghost stories into novels, verse and works of gothic fiction in the later eighteenth century” (Handley 100), whereas Defoe’s later *History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), a volume of pseudo-empirical evidence arguing for the existence of spirits, distinguished between the over-general “ghost” and Defoe’s more preferred term, “apparition” (102). The way literature assimilated *A True Relation* in turn transformed ghosts from objects of belief into meditations on human relationships, and equally permitted the creation of *The Turn of the Screw* from a discourse that, as Defoe’s *History and Reality of Apparitions* suggests, otherwise resulted in the dead-end researches of the Society for Psychical Research.

uncanniness which they might possess” (“The ‘Uncanny’” 250). Only when returned to a world staged as real but possessed and haunted does the power of artistic provocation return to everyday ghosts. It must not be forgotten that tellings of ghosts possess a charge generated by the consensuality of performance and its implicit intercession into communities and authority. Near to every telling as performance rests the question of the spectacle, even and especially when the objects of narrative interest are visual ambiguities such as spectres and ghosts.

In drama, modernity shows its hand across increasingly technologically-mediated relationships of time and space. Modernity’s signature is most clearly revealed in moments of transformation and change. In the theatre are inimically singular ghosts. The legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century media is the technological space of otherness where displaced human affects find slight purchase: voices on the radio or across a phone line; faces and bodies on screens and photographs, perhaps in a governmental bureau’s information bank, perhaps on a domestic television set showing the BBC; or, most currently, distributed identities over an electronic web of computers and data flows. These sites are fertile spaces for “ghosts in the machine” in a media folklore where technology serves in the role of “uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds” (Sconce 4). In the works studied below, a Dublin mother’s story of her daughter’s phone call in *The Weir* stages a ghost in the phone line, while the South African state’s apartheid governance mediates the very forms of imagined existence for workers in Port Elizabeth. Delving into the exploratory mediaverse of Samuel Beckett, ghosts can be found in Krapp’s old tapes, radio’s airwaves, and the display of static television. In many of the ghost stories considered on stage, spectres share the everyday world despite our diffuse perceptions about technological or supernatural “otherwheres.” Thus Conor McPherson finds in everyday technologies a new type of ghost, while Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona reveal identity’s mobile spectrality under the bureaucratic gaze of panoptic and industrialist laws enacted by racist lawmakers. At just about the same time as the South African play was performed, Samuel Beckett’s trilogy of teleplays *Shades* demonstrated how ghosts have become mechanical media of



remembrance itself. Telephone calls, documentary photographs, and television sets are not generally regarded as esoteric spaces, yet fugitive ghosts take up these media.<sup>31</sup>

§ A SEA CHANGE §

Transformation is another of the chapter's major themes. Ghosts, the gothic, and the globalgothic are sensitive to myriad transformations as their reach penetrates global markets, modern discourse, and technological media. In McPherson's *The Weir*, a classical ghost story becomes Jake's story of lost love, while in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* the female ghost of a nationalist *aisling* of Cathleen ní Houlihan becomes an absent mother. Earlier in the century, Derek Walcott's and J.M. Synge's plays present tell parallel stories of the linguistic and cultural change intrinsic to ghost-ridden expressions of mourning; at the same time, the two plays testify to globalizing patterns of influence. In the plays to be discussed ghosts are reinvented along political, social, and formal lines. Such is only to be expected: by definition ghosts are specious agents defined by their perceivers more than they are defined by intrinsic features.

For Virginia Woolf, the onset of modernity evident in Henry James' work marked a sea change in twentieth-century ghost stories. In 1921, Woolf observed that modern ghost stories provoke fears of death and of the darkneses held *within* people. Thus,

Henry James' ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts – the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origins within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. (Woolf 1921: 324)

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<sup>31</sup> Historical differences do reflect across a broader framework of cultural artworks. As Jeffrey Sconce elaborates: "The first 'ghosts' of television [...] did not speak through the technology (as did the 'spirits' of telegraphy and radio), but seemed to actually reside within the technology itself. Radio 'broke through' to the land of spirits. Television (and other visual media to follow) seemed capable of generating their own autonomous spirit worlds. Over the past half century, diverse accounts of television have frequently targeted the medium's paradoxes of visual presence, playing on the indeterminacy of the animate and inanimate, the real and the unreal, the 'there' and the 'not-there' to produce a new folklore of electronic media that continues to thrive in contemporary accounts of cyberspace and virtual reality" (127).

Woolf discovers in James's stories a growing acceptance of spectrality in everyday life that had begun centuries before (Wolfreys 2010: 5); her observation holds true as much for drama as it does for the narrative prose Woolf is discussing.<sup>32</sup> Older figurations of ghosts as the traumatic, violent, or repressed residue of unfinished processes were increasingly considered alongside ghosts as registers of intensity that reveal the precarity of human involvement in signifying and non-signifying media.

In Woolf's understanding of a modern *episteme* of haunting, ghosts are present when the ordinary world and mundane objects are defamiliarized or estranged. Like Daumal, for whom a ghost is "an absent being amidst present beings" (91), Woolf suggests that we, the living, are the estranged beings perpetually transforming the circumstances of modern, everyday life. If ghost stories are traditionally understood as forms of failed deixis – narrative moments that gain power from an inability to point at "that there" and be quickly, readily understood – resulting from their signifying opacity, then one way of telling a ghost story is by pointing a finger at what isn't there. This is a problem since, at its core, one of textuality's promises is that it is precisely indexical: that it can point at the things it does not encompass. Ghosts betray the lie. For them, as Gertrude Stein said, there is no there there. The following analyses of ghost stories, attending to this idea of a ghost, argue that the fearful shaking of the pointing indexical finger is a haunting sign intrinsic to storytelling media. This latter telling, phrased as a mystery, could be called "The Case of the Phantom Locative" and count for evidence the mysterious ghosts of everyday life.

In theatre the fundamental illusion of narrative accommodates this dramatic gesture by surrounding the failed gesture with voices that speak to its success: the voices of other actors, performing roles in polyphonic and thus dramatically convincing fiction; the voices of the audience, in whose shared imagination a play gains traction as a

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<sup>32</sup> Other writers of the time echo Woolf's insights. James' fellow American H.P. Lovecraft argued that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind [sic] is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (12). For modernists such as Woolf, James, Conrad, and J.M. Synge, similarly, the self *as such* was contigent on uncanny forces.

historical document; and the voices of the belated critics, in whose reconstructions the phantasms of memory converge on the signs left by theatrical tellings, scripts and photographs. The chapters that follow examine selected plays for the ways in which ghost stories *are told*. Rather than foreground a dominant critical narrative, however, my chapters take up diverse elements of critical interest to articulate differences in the ways that ghost stories are told and retold on stage. I hope that this articulation challenges the perception that ghost stories tell only of disquieted personal or historical events. Such a metaphor bears intimidating strength. But ghosts have other meanings that are often technological and transcultural and that resist the desire that subtends many readings about ghosts who return “to right a wrong.” The study of ghosts in contemporary world theatre demonstrates a plurality of stories and narrative potential with no sure end. Ultimately, a ghost story separates the teller from the tale, the actor from the act, the body from the ghost. In this act of separation interpretation intercedes; from it, ghosts emerge.

To conclude these theoretical remarks, then: what is represented by “a ghost” has transformed through history, all while the figure’s position at moments of crisis remains consistent. Once objects of belief and tangible as phenomena of the natural world, ghosts have increasingly become understood as markers in mediated discourses of relationships. An almost-empty sign or figure of pure signification, a ghost’s irremediable ambiguity opens it to interpretative exploitation of many kinds. Given the various popular understandings of ghosts, Sasha Handley observes that from a sociological perspective “it is better to think of them [ghosts] as an underlying cultural resource which could be called upon at moments of social, political or religious tension” (212). Handley points out that ghosts are often adopted by the dispossessed or the marginal to afford ways for wives to speak of abusive husbands, for children and servants to sow household discord, and, as I would extend her argument, for storytellers to discursively expose perspectives rarely seen or understood. The insubstantiality of ghosts entails a burden that can only be understood by examining the methods of interpretation themselves. Outside veridical discourses of observable phenomena, ghosts depend on asserted or suggested relationships and are therefore often taken up on the stage as historical agents. The more

spectacular the ghost, the more intense its story if it remains plausible. If hauntings afford narrative machines of interpretation – read: *tellings* – for connections and relationships, ghosts figure the objects of fixation and the absence of things which a play gestures towards but cannot itself contain.

Tellings of ghost stories incorporated these elements and, gradually, culture changed to reflect technological advances, imperial globalization, and a transforming literary and philosophical imagination. As a result, the ghosts of narrative structures became predominantly evident in creations with an essential but absent *relation* at their heart. Defoe's terminological shift from "ghost" to "apparition" marks the origin of this trend in the early eighteenth century. Incorporating ghosts into the gothic mode and the novel form more generally heralded a paradigmatic shift in the long-amorphous shape of hauntings. Now, more than ever, they were abstracted from the physical world but they gained a strange affinity for realism within the form in which they now dwelled. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English ghost stories demonstrate empiricism's flexibility in adapting, exploiting, and opposing ghosts when necessary (Handley 214). It is not that ghosts were unavailable to questions of efficacy and reality. Instead, their investigation broadened to encompass absence itself, and thus dropped any appeal to the truth of an observable fact. Explanations of ghosts as superstitious relics miss crucial historical developments where they shed theology and, immensely popular on the stage, in the streets, and in new media, proceeded to take up the business of human relationships. Ghosts occupied multiple fictive discourses that, while playing formative roles in developing historically significant concepts as the sublime, Romanticism, interiority, and the gothic (Handley 216), felicitously resurrected Grecian philosophical roots of imagination and memory in ghostly echoes of the *phantasm*. New media technologies such as French *phantasmagoria*, photography, film, and television re-enshrined ghosts as figures of imaginative relationships, while theatrical ghosts continued to change their roles. One constant across these transformations is the continued appropriation of ghosts as figures of relationships.

## 2.3

Speaking of Ghosts: Conor McPherson's *The Weir*

**Figure 1: Brendan Coyle and Jim Norton as Brendan and Jack in *The Weir*, Royal Court Theatre, 1998. Photograph Tristram Kenton**

Of the many contemporary Irish plays that tell ghost stories, Conor McPherson's *The Weir* perhaps most strongly exemplifies the transnational success of the genre. The play was first produced in London at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1997. Two years later it was produced on Broadway at New York's Walter Kerr theatre and, experiencing great transatlantic success, the play became a theatrical staple that launched the young playwright's career just as it established its haunting subject as his calling card. As Cassandra Csencsitz puts it, haunting is a "signature invocation" in McPherson's work (36). Different forms of haunting are evident throughout his following work. After *The Weir* (1997), haunting serves as a central feature of both *Shining City* (2004) and *The Seafarer* (2006).<sup>33</sup> McPherson's directorial adaptation of fellow Irish playwright Billy Roche's short story *The Eclipse* into a film (2010) also employs ghosts as a major element, while his *The Veil* (2011) returns to haunting as it takes up the Irish "big house" genre.<sup>34</sup> Unlike Irish plays that gain their effect from English dramatic conventions or Irish local traditions, McPherson blends a considerably deracinated English tradition of ghost stories with Irish folk tales of fairy roads and regional differences. The composition is harnessed to an entirely familiar British setting: a small pub. McPherson is mostly

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<sup>33</sup> At the end of *Shining City* a ghost appears for an extremely brief four to five seconds. In performances this event is shocking and, while the playwright concedes that some "think the ending is gratuitous" he actually wrote the entire play around this one event. McPherson conversationally allows that "the end of that play is the first idea I had; everything else was: how do I get there?" (Roche 2015: 187).

<sup>34</sup> Haunting is not McPherson's only supernatural entanglement. The uncanny's relation to the everyday takes vampiric form in his *St. Nicholas* (1997) and a more ethereal sense in his adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* (2009).

content to work within the dominant tradition of Anglophone drama. In return, *The Weir* achieved transatlantic success as a “talking play” that rehabilitated the Irish tradition of verbal narrative that confronts its audience with a small group of tale-telling characters.

*The Weir* is significant here for a very particular reason. Self-consciously, McPherson gives the ghost story a contemporary twist – a modern turn of the screw – as his play recites a litany of possible forms for modern ghost stories. Where earlier plays such as those of J.M. Synge structure their dramatic languages around the intensities of mourning and dialectical English for dramatic traction, the structure of McPherson’s play takes place on a simpler plane of affective language with a narratively complex effect in which many different stories are told while adopting colloquial, everyday language. Thus, unlike more spectacular theatre, speakers in a “talking play” discuss events and give language centre stage. Talking plays such as *The Weir* also provide an elegant formal structure for the exhibition of multiple types of ghost stories – a good place to begin describing the various types and effects of modern ghost stories in contemporary drama.

McPherson’s style of theatre has its share of detractors who argue that “talking plays” are antithetical to the dramatic potential of the stage. Even sympathetic reviewers occasionally express frustration at the perceived lack of action in McPherson’s plays. In her “Is Conor McPherson Simply Too Good for the Stage?,” Susanna Clapp asks about what is gained “by seeing his plays spoken, by actors obliged to stand, isolated and scarcely moving [...] as if they were taking part in a verse-speaking competition?” (10). A full exploration of the stage’s sensorium is missing in this caricature of drama where movement and action are sacrificed to narrative delivery; in *The Weir*, human bodies are employed as psychosomatic vessels of artistic emplacement. The play is a story about people who tell stories. In his Afterward to *The Weir* McPherson reveals his awareness of such a reception: “Some characters telling each other ghost stories in a pub[?] [...] Why should we care about the people who told them?” (305). Reviewers also question his use of hauntings. Louise Kennedy, discussing the characters of McPherson’s later play *Shining City*, ends her article with her hands in the air and her patience worn: “Yeah, yeah, they’re both haunted. And?”

Such criticism poses questions of meaning-making and of perceived presence: *what happens?*, it asks; *how can bare speech on the stage and intimations of hauntings make for good theatre?* A few characters sitting around talking about ghosts on a minimalist stage with virtually nonexistent theatrical effects: can this be a success? Ironically it is precisely the raw presentation of a storyteller in his or her social element that generates *The Weir*'s affective power. Instead of telling *a* ghost story, the compact, one-act play presents a range of stories in dynamic fashion, thus involving its audience with the relational content of the storyteller's motivation for telling a story while also exposing the range of material from which the tellers draw. The ensuing ghost stories are elegantly drawn and affectively charged; when taken together, the five very different stories demonstrate a veritable masterclass in stories of the popular gothic or a tour of the ghost story's canonical forms.<sup>35</sup> To summarize, *The Weir* assembles five characters on the stage: four men and one woman, four drinkers and one bartender, four rural Irish locals and one Dublin-born newcomer; these characters' interlinked stories reveal a tight skein of desires and frustrations common to each character. For them ghost stories are an important medium because of a ghost's tendency to reveal *relations* or shared patterns that connect the living, the dead, desire, and the unknown.

#### § MORE BOCCACCIO THAN BOUCICAULT – RECITING GHOSTS §

A man called Jack tells the first story. He is older and slightly jaundiced, and his traditional story has been passed down from a woman named Maura whose name echoes that of Synge's Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* (1905).<sup>36</sup> As in Synge's play, Jack's story emphasizes the isolation of women in rural Ireland and uses the language of folk superstition to express its unsettlement. It is ironic, then, that Jack tells this story at the behest of comically over-gregarious Finbar, himself angling to give the visiting Dubliner

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Ruffles, tracing a pattern of ghost stories in the cinema, similarly reads Alberto Cavalcanti's *Dead of Night* (1945) as a "compendium of ghost stories" albeit with complications (144). The difference between *Dead of Night* and McPherson's *The Weir* is that the film ends in a repetition of its first story, implying a spiralling movement back into the supernatural. In contrast, the later play's conclusion translates the idea of the ghost out of its supernatural trappings and into the familiar realism of the play's frame story.

<sup>36</sup> While drama critic Anthony Roche strongly implies Synge's influence on *The Weir* during a conversation with McPherson, the dramatist himself seems cautious to accept the suggestion (Roche 2015: 184-6).

Valerie a story of local colour. However, while Synge's *Maurya* sees a *púca*, or ghost horse, Jack's tale revolves around the more common belief in fairy roads. More concretely, it describes the moment that traditionally inaugurates any supernatural visitation: the knock from outside, an uncanny physical reverberation with no apparent cause (Davies 27, 31). In the popular gothic this sign is frequently associated with poltergeists and is "often the first inklings of a haunting" (Ackroyd 9). However, befitting its preliminary placement in *The Weir*'s overall structure, this knock is a delicate exercise in careful ambiguity and most clearly not a poltergeist's customary violence of self-annunciation. No ghost appears. Instead, in Jack's breathy delivery, "there was a soft knocking at the door. Someone. At the front door. And Bridie [Maura's mother] never moved" (32). As in *The Weir* proper, it is the immobility of living people that is the truly fearful thing. As the story progresses, the ghost moves to the back door

where the next knocking was. Very soft, Maura said, and very low down the door. Not like where you'd expect a grown man or a woman to be knocking [...] And then *it* was at the window. Maura couldn't see anything out in the night, and her mother wouldn't let her go over. And then *it* stopped. But when *it* was late and the fire went down, Bridie wouldn't get up to get more turf for the fire. Because *it* was out in the shed. So they just sat there until the others came back, well after midnight. (32, my emphasis)

Maura and Bridie simply do not budge, the elder woman apparently frozen stiff with fear. Jack's storytelling is carefully ambiguous. The ghost or the fairy is not named, although the characters discuss how the house was built on a fairy road. (The knocking would thus signal that passing fairies are disturbed by their road's blockage.) The story's uncanny element remains purely linguistic, an "it" that efficiently conflates auditory sensation with an imagined figure outside. Predictably, given its supple but scanty telling, in Jack's story *nothing happens* save the apprehension of "it." Maura and Bridie's isolated paralysis remains the most striking image of this ghost story that could otherwise be credibly interpreted as a story of branches tapping the sides of a house in wind.



Jack's story is a classic example of a popular ghost story, *the knock from outside*, with a keen sense of dramatic pacing and contextual details that echo the delicacy of Henry James' prose. The story initiates Valerie, a Dublin girl, into the Irish world of rural isolation; so too is the otherwise sophisticated theatre-goer of London or New York introduced. Making the story's unfamiliarity accessible and effectively advertising his native knowledge, Jack becomes ironically self-depreciating. Untethered from pretentious supernaturalism, however, the story freely assumes its uncanny guise. It is worth noting that structurally, like Maurya's great vision in *Riders to the Sea*, Jack begins his haunting story in the past but, mid-telling, loses track of where he is and thus dissolves the present time of relation into a blur of affective description and explanations of rural life:

And in those days, Valerie, as you know, there was no electricity out here.

And there's no dark like a winter night in the country. And there was a wind like this one tonight, howling and whistling in off the sea. You hear it under the door and it's like someone singing. Singing in under the door at you. *It was this type of night now.* Am I setting the scene for you? / [*They laugh.*] (31)

The telling starts in a grand manner, anaphorically sprung and intensely focused on the senses of sight and sound, the two perceptual channels from which apparitions and phantasms emerge, and upon which the knocking ghost's presence will depend. The "scene" eerily recalls the Inishmore islands of Synge's play in its conjunctural anaphora of tale telling ("And... And... And..."). As Maurya also observes, the islanders' world is buffeted by wind and surf: "the wind breaks from the south, *and* you can hear the surf is in the east, *and* the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, *and* they hitting one on the other" (26, my emphasis). Like Synge's characters, Jack's Irish-influenced English breaks normative syntax to draw together times and find a storyteller's charismatic and self-referential intensity in words otherwise empty of semantic content: "*It was this type of night now,*" he says, saying precisely nothing but confirming his presence as a speaker. But McPherson's play comes almost a century after Synge's play, and these latter-day characters laugh at Jack's invocation of a strange world and archaic language just as they laugh when Jack nervously clears the air after his telling

by offering to buy his listeners all a drink (33). Such laughter is as much a sign of the changing opinions towards expressions of hauntings as it is also a conversational marker that normalizes McPherson's characters, aligning them with conventional expectations. Who would believe that a strange knocking is the work of a ghost? And who would trust the story's origins given Birdie's known identity as "a character [...] a bit of a joker" and Maura's reputation as a committed drinker (30)? Jack's story introduces familiar traditions of Anglo-Irish ghost stories with a very modern – and ironic – sensibility.

*The Weir's* next ghost story is told by Finbar, a vain entrepreneur who escorts Valerie around town as much to parade her before old friends as to show her the town's attractions. Finbar's story concerns a young girl named Niamh Walsh and while his listeners are initially laughing – the stage directions have Finbar's audience laugh heartily four times in as many minutes while he comically bumbles through the story's arcane elements – the story settles gradually into a classic apparition of the recently dead. As Finbar tells it, Niamh sees a woman on the stairs who looks at her and whom no one else can see. At that point, none other than Finbar was called in to comfort Niamh. Just as the young girl recovers herself, however, the phone rings with the information that the old woman who had once looked after Niamh as a child had been found dead at the bottom of her stair just that day. The dead nurse and the woman Niamh saw at the top of the stairs are one and the same. This familiar structure reflects strong emotional connections between two individuals: a person dying will appear to another at the precise moment of their death. This apparition, usually classed as a timely hallucination, gains its unsettling power from the practical inability of the visionary to have known about the other's death.

Knowing that this type of haunting is often dismissed as pure invention, Finbar gives his story of the recent dead's apparition a knowingly mundane spin. Playing the modern skeptic, he quickly dismisses Niamh's claims of supernatural visions so that his own coda to the story can be imbued with confidence. "And alright, whatever, coincidence," he says, while concluding his story:

But ... eh, that night, at home, I was sitting at the fire having a last fag before the sack, and, Jack'd know the house, the stairs come down into the, the main room.

And I had my back to it. To the stairs. And it's stupid now, but at the time *I couldn't turn around*. I couldn't get up to go to bed. Because *I thought there was something on the stairs*. [Low laugh] And I just sat there, looking at an empty fireplace. And I sat there until it got bright. (39, my emphasis).

The living's immobility is again juxtaposed against the felt presence of the dead. The story has an old twist: the nonbeliever has a change of heart, or something close to the heart, for with Finbar the change is of a different sort. "Obviously there was nothing there and everything," he concludes, "but that was the last fag I ever head" (40). A similar transformation might once have reflected new conviction in supernatural belief. The modern storytellers of *The Weir* are less sanguine. Finbar's unsettling is transposed to unease at smoking, an activity closely associated with the presence of what was, perhaps, a ghost, and not coincidentally itself hauntingly creative in smoke and ash. Despite any skepticism, real change has occurred in the world. Unlike the beginning of Finbar's story, his conclusion's clumsy rhythm of broken sentences and simple words is not disrupted by laughter, even when Finbar himself, anticipating scorn, makes a joke. The next bout of laughter comes when he tells his companions that they probably think he's crazy, "loolah" (42). The teller's concern with the likely reception of their story recurs again when Valerie takes her turn, and signifies the increasing seriousness of *The Weir's* ghost stories. An old oral folktale does not cause Finbar to quit smoking. Personal experience does. Building on the folktale structure of *The Weir's* first ghost story, its second telling raises the stakes of what a ghost story might possibly achieve.

Following Finbar's tale, a character named Jim gives a monologue. This third ghost story is characterized by a deliberate pace, direct relation, and – indicatively, as they defer the absolute possibility of truth – disclaimers of the teller's possible fever at the time of the story's events. Like its slow and simple teller, this straightforward story relates a graveyard haunting, one of the oldest types of ghost stories. It suffers no interruptions and goes on for some time. As Jim tells it, the ghost of a dead pedophile appeared to him and made an appeal for access to a young girl's grave; or, as the story goes, while waiting alone at the side of a grave he's just dug for a young man, Jim is confronted by a man convinced that he's at the wrong grave. Leading Jim to a new grave,

where Jim promises vaguely to “have it done” – presumably relocate the just-buried corpse to another grave, above which is a picture of a young girl – the strange man leaves. The ghost (as the young man is, of course) is that of the man whose corpse lies in the ground at Jim’s feet. The story is a classical tale of the gothic ghost with skeletal, spine-tingling effect; Jim’s revenant conjures a similar power to those ghosts of more sensational plays from *The Persians* to Shakespeare’s *Old Hamlet*, all plays that tell of funereal ghosts whose lingering desires provide their plays with clear narrative coherence. “[G]hosts come back because there’s some sort of unfinished business,” McPherson observes of this type of very typical haunting (Grobe 566).

Like the two preceding stories told by his drinking companions, Jim’s tale has a twist that renders its commonplace narrative deeply disquieting, namely, that

The fella who’d died had had a bit of a reputation for em ... being a pervert. And Jesus, when I heard that, you know? If it was him. And he wanted to go down in the grave with the ... little girl. Even after they were gone. It didn’t bear ... thinking about. (48).

Most unsettling to the story isn’t simply the revenant’s insistence on a task undone. The “task” is not a wrong left unfinished but a malingering perversity, a man’s desire for a young girl that has failed to dissipate with either’s death. Jim’s audience responds to this evidently shocking twist with short, nervous laughter and Finbar’s immediate “Jaysus, Jim. That’s a terrible story, to be telling” (48). The drinkers are unsettled by the revenant’s continuation of desire after *all else*: after bodily existence, after the possibility of desire’s consummation and after ethics itself. The story tells a corrupted version of the ghost who returns to right a wrong; it replaces justice with horror. In fact, Valerie departs looking unwell, after stutteringly asking if Jim “think[s] it was a, an hallucination” (49). Although McPherson’s characters do not venture into political allegory, the pedophile is, in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, a figure marked with enormous social implications after the infamous scandals of the later twentieth century.

Valerie's departure, shepherded by barkeep Brendan, occasions a fight between the remaining men over the appropriateness of telling ghost stories: their narrative "telling" has been only too "telling," or efficacious, as Finbar points out. This debate allows McPherson's script to evaluate the contemporary relevance of ghosts, since argument articulates the three men's different feelings about Valerie, and since too the debate about the relation of ghosts accompanies a discussion of the characters' own relationships. The stories occupy a symbolic as well as an affective role. Finbar gives Jim a tongue-lashing. "That's some fucking story," he says, "To be telling a girl, like. Perverts out in the country. For fuck's sake" (49). In Finbar's patronizing concern to sell the countryside to Valerie as a potential home, he trades on the currency of his town's good name. Since the three male bar patrons have each told a tale, they agree to conclude the tellings. "I regret the stories" Finbar rambles; "I don't think we should have anymore of them [*sic*] [...] let's not have any more of them, and that's all [...] no more stories" (50-51). Despite the ghost stories' ironized distance from the characters' own beliefs (in *The Weir*'s modern world ghosts garner laughs, not screams), their ability to reveal isolation's fixed loneliness and the lingering powers of desire proves unsettling. Paralysis and fear attend these stories: Bridie and Maura flinch before the knocking from outside, Finbar is inability to rise from his seat to look for a ghost behind him, and the dead man overwhelmingly desires to be buried with a dead girl.

In this dependence on paralysis, McPherson's stories echo the ghostly touch of early twentieth-century writing by James Joyce. The measure of these stories' modernity, in fact, is that they echo of the host of paralyzed characters in Joyce's *Dubliners* (1912).<sup>37</sup> While Joyce is not telling ghost stories as such, his collection arrives at the same effect achieved by *The Weir*: an unsettled recognition of perceived hauntings. McPherson and Joyce tell of desire's lingering effects through stories about uncertainty, loss, and death. Just as *The Weir* stages a bar full of ghosts, *Dubliners* tells of a city haunted by desire, and "The Dead" concludes *Dubliners* on a markedly uncanny note. In Gabriel's vision of

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<sup>37</sup> Modernity, or perhaps postmodernity, given that they reflect on the modern condition before them? A rabbit hole.

Michael Furey, the Irishman's crying eyes mistake his wife's memory of a past love for a vessel of his own desire. The act blurs distinctions between eschatology and ghosts:

The tears gathered more thickly in his [Gabriel's] eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which the dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. (287).

Coming at the onset of modernism's collusion with experimental realism, it is worth remembering that these lines are echoed in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* ten years later: "Unreal City / [...] so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (ll. 60-63). While Eliot and Gabriel both see worlds populated by ghosts, Gabriel recognizes his own disappearance into the unearthly crowd as the "solid world itself" reveals its transience and "the real" is revealed as an effervescent affair entirely.

While such ghosts perhaps mark modernism's aesthetic function, where Joyce, Eliot, and McPherson are aesthetic citizens of a world of haunted abstractions, spectrality extends further back into the transnational formation of modernity. In Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1865), for instance, Maud Ruthyn recounts a moment following her encounter with a Swedenborgian mystic: "looking upon that solemn wood, white and shadowy in the moonlight, where, for a long time after that ramble with the visionary, I fancied the gate of death, hidden only by a strange glamour, and that dazzling land of ghosts, were situate" (15). In her *fancy*, understood here as a technical term for the imagination, Maud prepares to see her mother's ghost. Whether modern or modernist, such urban ghost stories are reminders that "the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us" (Jameson 2008: 39). They emphasize the spectrality inherent to human creations. This confluence of history, urban life, and rural superstition helps shape the spectrality of *The Weir* and its forebears.

Jack, Jim, and Finbar's firm resolution to tell no more ghost stories is twice-broken. First, Valerie returns to the room determined to tell her own story about her reasons for leaving the city. Despite Finbar's joking that the ghost stories are risible – "We won't be able to sleep in our beds!" – Valerie persists, saying "No, see, something happened to me. [...] It's important to me. That I'm not ... bananas" (53). Although warily begun, once told Valerie's story marks the crossing of preternatural tales into the present moment. They reveal a believer countenancing modern skepticism. Valerie, it emerges, has lost her daughter Niamh, and in a long speech told in conversational Dublin English, Valerie explains how her daughter has died in a freak swimming accident, and of the ensuing emotional distance from her husband. Her mournful, but more precisely melancholic tale ends in a phone call. As Valerie tells the story (worth recounting in full),

The line was very faint. It was like a crossed line. There were voices, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. And then I heard Niamh. She said, 'Mammy?' And I ... just said, you know, 'Yes.'

[*Short pause.*]

And she said ... She wanted me to come and collect her. I mean, I wasn't sure whether this was a dream or her leaving had been a dream. I just said, 'Where are you?'

And she said she thought she was at Nana's. In the bedroom. But Nana wasn't there. And she was scared. *There were children knocking in the walls and the man was standing across the road, and he was looking up and he was going to cross the road.* And would I come and get her?

And I said I would, of course I would. And I dropped the phone and I ran out to the car in just a T-shirt I slept in. And I drove to Daniel's mother's house. And I could hardly see, I was crying so much. I mean, I knew she wasn't going to be there. I knew she was gone. But to think wherever she was ... that ... And there was nothing I could do about it. [...] She still ... she still needs me.

[*Pause*] (56-57, my emphasis)

The barrenness of Valerie's words is the culmination of emotional pain and incredulity; equally as simple, her story compels its listeners through rhythmic intimacy. Like Jim, Jack, and Finbar, Valerie employs anaphora to maintain her locative relationship with her listeners. She forsakes ornamentation for a yearning sense of repeating conjunctions. The phone line is crucial to Valerie's ghost story for, like an anaphoric repetition, it strings listeners along. In the phone line the ghost no longer needs to be visible at all. It takes shape in the *medium of communication*; quite literally, the ghost is in the machine. To signal the importance of her story, almost a crescendo, Niamh's haunting phone call recursively incorporates the ghostly signs of all the other stories Valerie has heard during the play. There are "children knocking *in* the walls," remembering Jack's audible spook; the ominous man recalls Jim's predatory ghost; and, finally, Niamh's name calls to memory Finbar's young companion, as does the structurally pivotal but newly repurposed haunting telephone call that orients Finbar's and Valerie's stories along modern lines.

To a suspicious listener, this layered telling betrays Valerie's self-conscious and combative crafting of a story from the pieces she has heard. Such evidence argues that she is trying to best the men's storytelling abilities. It also indicates that these stories "are cut from the same cloth, a shimmering weave of the mundane and the ineffable" and that each "deepens and expands the others" (Brantley, n.p.). The assembled stories of *The Weir* create a prismatic range of shapes possible to a ghost story. Gathered together they create a syncretic, modern story of haunting despair shared by the four bar patrons at Brendan's pub. Perhaps the most important difference between the men's stories and Valerie's is the *movement* of people in her tale. Although paralyzed in her inability to *do* anything for her dead daughter, Valerie nevertheless rushes to meet the ghost's call to action. While her physical actions mask a deeper psychological inability to accommodate the loss she suffers, Valerie's prospective move to the country accomplishes something Joyce's Dubliners never quite manage: escape from the city. And yet her story leaves her where she is at the moment of enunciation; in a sense, then, Valerie's tale is that of a truly modern haunting insofar as she carries the ghost's influence in her own actions and body.

Adjusting to the intimate revelations of this modern Dubliner's story, Jim, Jack, and Finbar all betray discomfort in their attempts to account for the phone call. They try



to debunk the ghost story and reveal themselves familiar only with the usual defences against folkloric ghosts. “You don’t think it could have been a dream you were having, no?” asks Jack, looking for a phenomenological crossing of perception and vision (57). Finbar plays the modern psychoanalyst. “[Y]ou were after getting a terrible shock, Valerie,” he says, “Your ... brain is trying to deal with it, you know?” (57). Jim, oldest and simplest of the three, wonders whether “It might have been a wrong number” (58). In their own way, each man suggests there is “some kind of explanation for it” (58). Over Valerie’s protestations, what follows is a confessional double-take where each of the men’s stories is reviewed with an eye to its ambiguous origins: Jim’s delirium, Maura’s later reputation as an alcoholic, and the dismissal of Niamh’s family in Finbar’s tale as lunatics, “a bunch of fucking headbangers!” (59). Severely unsettled, and more than a little drunk, Finbar and Jim depart. At this moment that *The Weir* shows its hand as more than simply a dramatic masterclass in the telling and explaining of ghost stories, for it allows time for a final, excessive story just when the audience desires closure. This last telling ventures beyond the gothic trappings of those already told; in fact, it confronts the paralyzing haunting that was so disturbing to both folktales and to the modern Dubliner.

Alone with Valerie and Brendan, Jack opens up about his own personal history: the reason why, echoing Valerie, *he* is there. Another haunting story emerges, but this time without ghosts. Jack tells of a past relationship with a girlfriend who, after long neglect, left him to marry another man. Paralyzed first with arrogance and then, by the time he tells the story, with remorse, Jack finds that time’s passage has rendered his feelings moot. He returns to the story much as the characters of Beckett’s *Endgame* return to their moments of ethical decision-making: long after the moment of decision has past (Boulter 2008: 46). Beckett’s play and McPherson’s shift settings, but not subject. Frustrated with the absence of meaning in his past actions, Jack feels haunted by his sense of missed potential. “Ah, you get older and look back on why you did things, you see that a lot of the time, there wasn’t a reason,” he admits (65). And yet Jack’s new tale *does* create a moment of human connection all the more important in a play where each character seems isolated and adrift. Not by chance, Jack’s remembered human connection occurs in a pub. As Jack tells it, after leaving his once-girlfriend he went for a drink.

I sat there, just looking down at the dirty wooden bar. And the barman asked me if I was alright? Simple little question. And I said I was. And he said he'd make me a sandwich. And I said okay. And I nearly started crying – because, you know, here was someone just... [...] Such a small thing, but a huge thing in my condition. It fortified me. (66-67)

These chance connections solidify the characters, they *fortify* them and create structures of relation to give the world's ephemerality substance. They unite the quiet, haunted feeling of regret with the characters' lived reality and grant reciprocal substance. Jack's story end with the most clichéd words offered by lost lovers. "And I'll tell you," he concludes, "there's not one morning I don't wake up with her name in the room" (67). With such an armature, the metaphorical resonances of *haunting* as a narrative device and as a phenomenon of thought blur. In this moment, Brantley writes, "you have strayed into territory that scrapes the soul. Suddenly the subject [of *The Weir*] isn't just things that go bump in the night, but the loss and loneliness that eventually haunt every life" (n.p.). No one laughs as Jack concludes his second tale. Characters and audience alike have revealed a belief in ghosts.

As a collection of ghost stories, *The Weir* modernizes and rehabilitates familiar stories and situations through the emotional intensities of characters who feel haunted by lost but dearly held relationships: a dead child, a lost love. These intensities oppose the gothic ghost stories that are historically told and interpreted as veridical or spectacular discourses and in which ghosts are either objects of debatable reality or pure devices of theatrical whimsy. The play poses the characters' relationships against the pressing weight of their personal histories. The emergent friendship between Jack, Valerie, and Brendan is an unheralded change in lives otherwise paralyzed by ghosts. *The Weir* suggests that to tell a haunting story it is not enough to adopt gothic machinery, nor play on popular superstition, although these stories too have their place as stories told by characters unsettled and suspicious of them. The modern turn evident in these ghost stories is that they expose the machinery of desire and the position of the teller as one who feels, as Hamlet did so long ago, that the time is out of joint. Underneath their

trappings of modernity, however, things haven't changed so much after all: irony and alcohol are still the registers of modern life.

Jack: Well. That wasn't a ghost story. Anyway. At least, ha?

Valerie: No.

Jack: We've had enough of them. [*Pause*] We'll all be ghosts soon enough, says you, ha?

Valerie: Mmm.

Jack: We'll all be sitting here. Sipping whiskey all night with Maura Nealon. (67)

### §

*The Weir's* great success comes from its many storytelling twists. The play tells modern stories of human relationships while also reciting traditional ghosts and accounting for distressing memories. In a ghost's twofold relation (as story and as *storytelling*) McPherson found what a dramatic monologue desires most: a relationship. Posing ghost stories as the fulcrum for the characters' relations to each other, McPherson bares the skeleton of relationship's structure in the haunting fear of loneliness. *Staging* a haunting is, in his hands, a question of relation – how else is a haunting conveyed? – and of relationships, whether ghosts are interpreted as memories, psychoanalytic introjections, phantasmal visions, or lingering feelings left by someone's absence. On McPherson's stage, what was once metaphysical – the structure and aura of belief in ghosts – reveals itself as ordinary and, in doing so, is exposed as a narrative mechanic crucial to a play's success. Given the medium in which the haunting reveals itself as a narrative – the stage – McPherson demonstrates how something entirely absent, an apparition yet to appear, powerfully influences stories of everyday relationships.

## 2.4

An Irish Gothic: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...*

**Figure 2: Olwen Fouéré as Hester Swane and Eamon Kelly as Father Willow in *By The Bog of Cats...*, Abbey Theatre, 1998. Photograph [www.olwenfouere.com](http://www.olwenfouere.com). Accessed 22 June 2013.**

Ghost stories on the stage are not always as straightforward or as self-contained as in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, nor do they need to investigate the many English and Irish folk beliefs that go into ghost stories in order to twist popular lore into a prosaic version palatable to modern skeptics of the supernatural. There are other ways in which ghosts transform modern drama, the most pertinent for Carr's purposes is to invent new gothic figures drawn from classical, local, and global literary traditions. I wish now to turn to another Irish play, Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...*, first directed by Patrick Mason in 1998 for the Abbey Theatre's Dublin Theatre Festival and, rather auspiciously, opening to coincide with Halloween. A number of signs betray Carr's signature, the clearest of which is the dramatic audacity with which its central character, Hester Swane, is drawn. In recognition of this intense centrality, actress Olwen Fouéré won Best Irish Female Actor

Award as Hester in the play's inaugural run.<sup>38</sup> In the play's innovative transformation of tropes unearthed from multiple lineages of literary and nationalist traditions, *By the Bog of Cats...* breaks new ground in the tradition of gothic Irish theatre while also recognizing the disintegration of strong Irish nationalism amid a range of forces. Carr's transforming ghosts and in particular her framing invention of a "Ghost Fancier" demonstrate the creative potential in a still classically-drawn production.

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Ghosts...* weaves together three strands of ghost stories. Her play responds to the competing discourses of local and global forces by offering itself as a dramatic crucible for transhistorical and transcultural hauntings. The first type of ghost in Carr's play, and the most recognizably transcultural, is the ghost who disrupts time and returns from the dead. This type of ghost is equally familiar to Shakespeare and Derrida; it betrays the lie of homogeneous, linear time and demonstrates rather its nature as something accretionary, ontologically impure, and ultimately gothic. The second ghostly strand of Carr's play and perhaps the most important to readings of nationalism's disintegration in late twentieth-century globalizing imaginations is the ironically absent *aisling* figure, Big Josie. The *aisling* has an old history in Irish poetry, and its disappearance signals a change in how late twentieth-century writers approach traditional conceptions of Irish nationalism. And yet the *aisling's* plaintive song is sung by Carr's characters in memory of unity: literary nationalism is not easily erased. Third, the Ghost Fancier creates a new gothic role of Carr's invention. Tragicomic and seductive, this new ghost represents fate and, thus, death. He diverges from and thus maintains authorial control against accusations of Carr being too influenced by Athenian classical tragedy or Shakespearean ghosts. The Ghost Fancier is the signature of an erotic, troubling contemporary gothic. These hauntings tell recognizably modern ghost stories: densely allusive, ecologically grounded, and tragicomic, they envision the deep power of ghosts in a story staged as a theatrical illusion.

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<sup>38</sup> See Keating on Rose Malague and Billington on Holly Hunter for further indications of how much the play's general reception is influenced by the proficiency of the actor who plays Hester Swane – though the latter run of over a month, opening just three days after 9 September 2011, was reportedly seen by over eighteen thousand people (Russell 149).

An uncanny coincidence of a resurgent “Irish Gothic” theatre surrounds the emergence of Carr’s plays. It is worth inquiring into the play’s context first and only then examining these three developing strands of ghost stories told by Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*... Ghosts are a recurring theme in Carr’s work, as is actor Olwen Fouéré’s strong, tragic heroine. Carr’s prior *Portia Coughlan* (1996, dir. Garry Hynes) relies on both spectres and Fouéré. In this earlier play, the ghost of a dead twin brother haunts Fouéré’s Portia Coughlan until his high-pitched melody lures her to a watery suicide. This essentially domestic drama is very traditional as a ghost story: it tells of furious unrest at a disturbed past. More interesting is its structural complexion, recognizably derived from classical, Shakespearean, and Irish influences. For example, Portia’s brother’s death precisely inverts Ophelia’s death in *Hamlet*. Other critics identify Carr’s debt to Samuel Beckett and J.M. Synge (Roche 2009: 246; Bourke 135). *By the Bog of Cats*... retains *Portia Coughlan*’s strong female protagonist and startlingly bleak gothic atmosphere. Just as *Portia Coughlan* was playing at Dublin’s Peacock Theatre across town Sebastian Barry’s *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) was being produced at the Gate. Like Carr’s play, Barry’s is also haunted by the ghost of a young child – Willie Dunn, familiar as the protagonist of Barry’s later novel *A Long Long Way* (2005).<sup>39</sup> What can explain the surge of interest in ghosts? Anthony Roche attributes the timeliness of such stories to two factors: first, that ghosts dramatically represent “the persistence of the past in the present, a particularly if not exclusively Irish obsession,” and second, that with the Catholic Church’s decline, concomitant with the Irish Tiger boom of economic prosperity, ghosts represented “a return of the irrational” and an “unslaked” atavism grown in an increasingly destitute spiritual culture (2009: 250). Roche’s conservative argument recalls that of Timothy Bahti and Richard Klein in “The Ghost of Theology,” where they argue that hauntings evidence a culture digesting the death of God and of transcendent philosophies. Although theology and supernatural belief are largely superseded, Bahti and Klein write, “we cannot fail to repeat [such belief], hollowly,

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<sup>39</sup> Barry would return to ghosts in his later plays *Dallas Sweetman* (2008), commissioned by the Canterbury Festival on behalf of the Canterbury Cathedral, and *Tales of Ballycumber* (2009) commissioned by the new Abbey Theatre.

mechanically, in a ghostly fashion” (1). The ghosts staged by Carr, Barry, McDonagh, and others challenge these fairly traditional ideas about the significance of hauntings. The narrative structures differently exemplified in *The Weir* and *By the Bog of Cats...* reveal a flexible mode of telling that charges ordinary experiences with great intensity. The characters of these plays are detached from the popular gothic and from religious narratives alike. Yet they tell ghost stories all the same. How?

§ SINGING GHOSTS, NATIONAL GHOSTS, AND THE IRISH STAGE §

*By the Bog of Cats...* exists in a lineage of markedly nationalist ghost stories, and so I want now to attend to the particular politics of the iconic ghost of Irish nationalism in the *aisling*. W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory’s jointly written *Cathleen ní Houlihan* (1902) exerts a major influence on *By the Bog of Cats...*, as do the earlier play’s nationalist themes of appropriated domestic structures and gendered roles. *Cathleen ní Houlihan* represents a fusion of two strong dramatic tendencies in the work of the Irish National Theatre Society at the Abbey Theatre: mythic nationalism and folk culture.<sup>40</sup> The play narrates a visit to a peasant cottage in 1798 by the spectral figure of Cathleen ní Houlihan, also recognizable as the spirit of a free Ireland, performed by Maud Gonne at the play’s premiere in April 1902. In an attempt to maximize supernatural elements in his play, Yeats published *Cathleen ní Houlihan* in the October 1902 issue of *Samhain*. *Cathleen ní Houlihan* merges gothic themes with a female role intending to inspire a generation’s dreams, for although Yeats and Gregory’s character is named “The Poor Old Woman,” Maud Gonne lent the role her activist fire and vivacious reputation for anticolonial resistance.<sup>41</sup> In Yeats and Gregory’s anticolonial story of Ireland’s long occupation by the

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<sup>40</sup> The first plays staged at the Abbey in 1903 made the theatre society’s priorities clear. On one hand, Yeats’ *On Baile’s Strand* raised questions of myth and transcendental nationalism, while on the other Augusta Gregory’s *Spreading the News* was firmly concerned with the peasant culture crucial to the emergent nationalism in early twentieth century Irish drama. This latter structure of peasant belief was a vital component of Yeats’ misty, ghost-ridden idea of a (mostly manufactured) Celtic past.

<sup>41</sup> As Roche points out, there is “a direct line of continuity between her involvement in *Cathleen ní Houlihan* and the theatrical nature of Maud Gonne’s appearance on political platforms, preaching violent revolution and embodying the role of Mother Ireland” (2015: 35). In Gonne’s figure audiences recognized the violent return of the *aisling* as a spirit of the nation similar to the figure of Dark Rosaleen. Yet it was a literary symbol in flux and was hitherto most famous from the poetry of nineteenth-century Irish nationalist James Clarence Mangan and, before Mangan, the poetry of

British “[t]oo many strangers in the house”<sup>42</sup> have put the nation’s ghost wandering; thus colonized, its “four beautiful green fields” have been overrun (81). Gonne’s *aisling* foretells the death of young men fighting for independence and the reclamation of traditional lands. Having boasted of many lovers during the play, the “Old Woman” becomes a young woman by its end and thus makes almost-tangible her erotic promise to the nationalist cause.

For Yeats, Gregory, and Carr alike, a relationship between ghosts and the lyric is crucial. In the case of the former two playwrights, the *aisling*’s call to immediate action forbids melancholy and mourning; in Gonne’s voice, the spirit of a nation calls for blood.

Do not make a great keening  
 When the graves have been dug to-morrow.  
 Do not call the white-scarfed riders  
 To the burying that shall be to-morrow.  
 Do not spread food to call strangers  
 To the wakes that shall be to-morrow;  
 Do not give money for prayers  
 For the dead that shall die to-morrow ... (86-87)

Speaking against the usual assortment of the past’s lingering presence in the current moment, Gonne’s *aisling* assimilates all rituals and ambiguities surrounding death in order that her nationalist fervour preempt gothic introspection. All is sacrificed to the cause, including the Irish *caoine* (or “keening”), mourning rituals, hospitality rites, and

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Aodhagán Ó Rathaille (1670-1726). The *action* Gonne embodied was new. She granted what was previously a thinly romantic figure with the breath and force of life and, before Carr, transformed traditional ideas about the *aisling*.

<sup>42</sup> The precisely uncanny nature of the “strangers in the house” thematic in Irish dramatic tradition, where the known domesticity has been disrupted by a ghostly presence or visa versa, can be traced to Douglas Hyde’s one-act play *Casadh an tSúgáin* [*The Twisting of the Rope*] (1901) and, from there, on through Yeats and Gregory’s play, Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, and up to the present day.



remembrance of the dead; so too do poetry and literature turned to the cause, their vaunted autonomy sacrificed to political allegory. Just as Maud Gonne's activism led her admirer Yeats to turn from folkloric poetry's melancholic romanticism and toward the pragmatics of Irish politics, so too *Cathleen ní Houlihan's* Old Woman appropriates the rites of continuity between the living and the dead into one figure's symbolic presence – the *aisling* – and, by a straightforward act of reversing the illusion of the stage the new young woman of the nation who stands before her audience and exhorts them to action: Maud Gonne again. Yeats and Gregory's play tells a ghost story of nationalist sacrifice. It forces from the *aisling* a song of furious resistance and the grave's demand for recompense over and beyond the living's ambivalent regret. This ghost *sings* fury.

*By the Bog of Cats...* makes of its haunting themes a song with different words. For Carr, writing long after Yeats and Gregory and in a much changed political climate, few of the *aisling's* nationalist associations remain desirable. Tellingly, in the later play the song's composer is absent and its influence decidedly ambiguous; having thus been displaced by its very lyric shape (the song survives without its original singer), the *aisling* vanishes. It takes with it the embodied nationalism Gonne so powerfully conveyed, and in that place allows themes and ambiguities of the gothic to flourish. Thus the hauntings of Carr's play reinvent the classic gothic ghost as a figure who returns with fury by refusing to give this tradition material shape, and instead employs its memory as a trope for a melancholic, eponymous song. "By the Bog of Cats..." is first sung by a young girl, Josie Swane, whose innocent rendition reflects the audience's own lack of awareness about the gothic events about to unfold, namely, its protagonist Hester Swane's troubles with an estranged lover and with her brother Joseph whom she murdered long ago. The play ends as Hester murders her daughter Josie – the song's first audible singer – and then proceeds to kill herself in a dance with a strange figure called the Ghost Fancier. However, the song's fatalistic intimacy precedes all of these events.

By the Bog of Cats I dreamed a dream of wooing.  
I heard your clear voice to me a-calling  
That I must go though it be my undoing.

By the Bog of Cats I'll stay no more a-rueing –  
 [...]
   
 To the Bog of Cats I one day will return,  
 In mortal form or in ghostly form,  
 And I will find you there and there with you sojourn,  
 Forever by the Bog of Cats, my darling one. (262)

Thrown off kilter by the grotesque dead black swan that Hester drags through the bog in the play's striking first scene, audiences might not recognize the foreshadowing in Josie's haunting lyric. The song's promise to haunt the bog precedes the girl's death and makes her almost a revenant: her ghost will return, the song implies, but for the first time. Just as in *Portia Coughlan*, where a ghost's song lures a woman to her death, Carr links the structure of a song's refrain with the troubling return of a ghost. The lyric is haunting, speaking in terms of emotion, theme, and technique.

At the beginning of Act Three, "By the Bog of Cats..." is sung again, but this time against a background of failed weddings and burning buildings. Emphasizing the song's gothic nature, its second singer is the ghost of Joseph Swane, Hester's brother and Josie's dead uncle. Yet Joseph sings only the first stanza and thus gestures toward the reconciliation that he seeks from his sister Hester, while also subverting the lyric's romantic posturing against the darker truth of how murderous intimacy can hold familial relationships together. "By the Bog of Cats I finally learned false from true, / Learned too late that it was you and only you," Joseph sings. He proceeds to the song's gothic end: "Left me sore, a heart brimful of rue / By the Bog of Cats in the darkling dew" (317). The lyric is the home of ghosts; from it, they communicate with the living, and in its provenance they walk the borders between life and death. A dead man's ghost sings to his living sister, and while neither character can see the other, Hester can hear Joseph's song.

By the time the siblings find each other, of course, the audience already knows of Joseph as part of the play's familiar gothic trappings. In the beginning of Act II, looking for Hester, Joseph finds Catwoman. Ghost stories are not always deadly serious, and the

tired seer greets this bloody apparition with modern irony. “Ah Christ,” she says, “not another ghost. [...] Go ‘way and lave me alone. I’m on me day off.” For Catwoman ghosts are a daily bother and “[she’s] not talkin’ to ghosts today” (299). As it turns out, the ghost of a young child also appears to Catwoman; farcically, “all she wants to do is play Peep” (300). Nor does the waiter bat an eye at all of this. Although Joseph’s ghost isn’t singing, the voice is again an important feature of his relation with the living, as the Irish seer promises to lead Joseph to Hester through a trail of her speech. No character sees Joseph’s ghost, only the audience. Instead, his song and Catwoman’s voice shape his ghost’s interactions with the play’s dramatic action. Joseph’s ghost-rags are an ironic concession of traditional costuming for the audience’s eyes only; as it turns out, his bloody rags should remind us that Hester has slaughtered Joseph with a fishing knife. And yet, in tune with his song’s plaintive air, Joseph’s is a pacific ghost. His only wish is to speak with Hester. “I’m not here to harm ya” he says, and, later, “I just wanted to say hello” (318-21). In contrast, Hester is agitated and vengeful, furiously threatening to kill him again were it possible. In the context of traditional ghost stories that reveal human agency in its paralyzed moments of indecision, Hester flips the ghost’s perceived agency and reveals that the mere apprehension of a ghost is enough to set the living in motion.

For a third and final time, “By the Bog of Cats...” is sung in the lead-up to the climactic scene by Hester and Josie together as they dance. It is of little surprise that, following the folkloric “rule of three,” the third singing is the most potent. Despite its seeming cheer, the lyrics foreshadow a haunting act to come when Josie dies at her mother’s hand. Each time the song is sung it brings the play closer to the death promised by the Ghost Fancier at the play’s beginning. This time around, the meaning can be clearly interpreted as foreboding by the audience since, by this point, the song has been sung by young Josie to her grandmother, then by Joseph to his sister Hester, and finally by Josie and Hester together, a mother and daughter conjoined first in life and then in death. The relationships become closer just as a noose tightens; each and every singing contributes to a melancholic view of relationships at the bog, and all gesture toward the song’s genesis in its writer, who is also Hester and Joseph’s mother: Big Josie.

Every time it is sung, “By the Bog of Cats...” calls back a memory of its songwriter, Big Josie, who in turn, is strongly reminiscent of *Cathleen ní Houlihan*. Finding a predecessor in the gothic shape of W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory’s Irish revivalism, Carr tropes Cathleen as Big Josie, thus modernizing the *aisling* but also ironizing its idealism. Melissa Sihra illustrates the transformation in *By the Bog of Cats...* by assembling a description of Big Josie from the way other characters speak of her:

Yeats’ “Mother Ireland” now metamorphoses into a “rancorous hulk” with a “brazen walk ... and her reekin’ of drink” as opposed to the comely young girl who previously had the “walk of a queen”. Illegitimate and unapologetic, like her daughter and grand-daughter, Big Josie is an outlaw spending her nights “Off in the bars of Pullagh and Mucklagh gettin’ into fights”. The nation as female is now depicted as an overweight, erotic, foul-mouthed transgressive energy who, according to Xavier Cassidy, was “loose and lazy and aisy, a five shillin’ hoor”, in contrast to Yeats’ martyred wanderer. (258)

Like the “Old Woman” of *Cathleen ní Houlihan*, Big Josie’s legacy is ambiguous at best. “Every day I forget more and more till I’m starting to think I made her up out of the air” (320), Hester admits. She does remember enough to mock her mother’s “vicious whiskey temper” and tendency to lie; Big Josie, it appears, told her father that Hester had died at birth (320). In the association between family and nation, it is not difficult to read severely mixed feelings about Gonne’s and Yeats’ Irish nationalism into the relationship with Big Josie and the children’s absent father, while the strangely missing daughter, Hester, in reality present all throughout but occluded because of her mother’s spite, speaks to the public occlusion of women in Irish politics after the events of 1916.

Another character remembers that Big Josie “was a harsh auld yoke,” and comments that there was “somethin’ cold and dead about her except when she sang and then I declare ya’d fall in love with her” (323). Big Josie’s song enlivens its “cold and dead” author, just as Maud Gonne’s song in *Cathleen ní Houlihan* was a calculated effort to inspire Irish hearts and hands for national restitution. Enough has been made of Yeats’

artistically sublimated infatuation with Gonne to see a clear paradigm at work: the ghost's song is made and crafted by the living, but crosses over into the land of the death through the voices of those who sing it; both songs unite the living and the dead. However uncanny Big Josie's legacy is, however manufactured the *aisling*, Hester knows that there is yet a living power about the song that gives life to the ghost. "[S]he's alive," Hester says, "I can smell her" (318). So too Irish nationalism. Before Big Josie can appear in the play, however, fate intervenes in all its gothic trappings. The Ghost Fancier beats Big Josie to the draw and draws Hester to him. (How far do the parallels go? Yeats' Celtic Twilight always hid behind and yet preceded Maud Gonne's ardent nationalism.) While the nationalist dream of the *aisling* masquerades as a woman, and where Big Josie ironically responds to nationalism's appropriation of femininity, the Fancier is a sensual and more recognizably gothic ghost. Between the intensified themes of the gothic and nationalism, it is, by the end of the play, the gothic that carries the day on Carr's stage.

#### § A FANCIER IN THE BOG §

A mysterious apparition who appears at the play's beginning and end, the Ghost Fancier casually disrupts time in a spectral time-keeping common to many ghosts. His appearances create a black humour as he mistakes his timing, appearing in the morning and not the evening. This mistake betrays something about the Fancier, namely, that his time is *jetztzeit*, an eternal present or "now-time." Mortality's fatal arc is beyond his reckoning. Olwen Fouéré observes that "the Ghost Fancier is confused by mortal time" (597). "I'm too previous," he admits in the play (266). The Ghost Fancier's interest in Hester allows for a sense of playful interpretative license since it is, in the end, as inscrutable as death, but also and just as clearly sensually driven by desire, a memory, perhaps, of the medieval *danse macabre*. "What do you do, Mr Ghost Fancier," Hester asks: "Eye up ghosts? Have love affairs with them?" (265). Despite her bluster, the Fancier's appearance tells Hester and the audience that her death is near; as an event, it controls and delimits the ensuing narrative much the same way as, for Barthes, a photograph "tells me death in the future" (2010: 96). If Hester is dismayed when the Fancier departs at the play's opening, she is equally dismayed when he returns at the end

of the play to collect. “You’re late, ya came too late” she tells him, implicitly comparing his disjointed time signature to her own tragic arc (340). As a ghost story frozen in its moment of intensity – the spectacle of Hester’s death – the play reveals a modern frustration with ghosts. The lived experience of daily life makes for an ugly contrast with the pleasingly fated arc of a ghost’s prediction of death, which is more an aesthetic conceit than it is a reflection of human life. This strongly fated tragic arc is a clear influence Carr takes from Euripides’ *Medea*, along with her filicidal subject. Its audience are possibly reminded of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as much as by its Grecian heritage.<sup>43</sup> While shocking, the fatalism of a mother’s murder of her child is ambiguously situated and contextualized by Big Josie’s prior abdication of her maternal role and Hester’s long grief. “I’ll take ya with me,” Hester tells her daughter, “I won’t have ya as I was, waitin’ a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don’t Josie, they don’t” (339). For her, hope disappears when familial structures collapse, as have national structures prior. While Hester’s murder re-enacts Euripides’ climactic scene, as reviewers and scholars have noted,<sup>44</sup> her suicide is predicted only by the Ghost Fancier, whose innovative presence introduces questions about fate, suicide, loss, and sensual experience.

In this new type of ghost story, the Fancier reveals himself a ghost that only Hester (and the audience) can see. His final appearance on stage triggers what stage directions call a “*death dance*” with Hester; during its course, the knife Hester used to kill both her child and her brother plunges into her heart. Upon Hester’s death the Fancier immediately exits. Ghosts are again associated with dramatic irony since, seeing the Fancier, the audience witnesses something the characters cannot. Just as Joseph Swane’s ghost rags are a theatrical memory of institutional traditions, the Ghost Fancier traces the narrative structure of the play without wholly intruding on its action. He shapes

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<sup>43</sup> Perhaps seduced by superficial similarities between ghosts, Russell argues that the Ghost Fancier’s fateful appearance should remind its audiences of J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (155). For a critical version of Synge’s influence on Carr see Merman, 159. I am unable to verify Russell’s assertion that the name Maurya means *fate*, however; instead it means *bitter* (155). In fact, *pace* Russell and even Nicholas Grene’s reading of Synge’s play, I do not see fate as the sign of tragedy in either play. Rather, Maurya’s visionary state is triggered by recognizing the inaccessibility of the dead and the inevitability of death. Hester, equally sanguine, welcomes death and its fate.

<sup>44</sup> Douglas Keating deems the play a “recasting of the *Medea* story in rural, contemporary Ireland” (n.p.).

interpretation, but does not give himself to the matter of what is interpreted. Correspondingly, while other characters understand Hester's death as a suicide, the audience sees her death as a sensual embrace through the dance with the Fancier.<sup>45</sup> Examining Hester's corpse, another character announces "She's cut her heart out – it's lyin' there on top of her chest like some dark feathered bird" (341). To audiences, the physiological absence suggests a less gruesome fate. Having lost her emotional investments in family, Hester gives her heart to the Ghost Fancier, metaphorically speaking, and risks herself and all she holds dear in the promise of death and in the Fancier's inscrutable desire. Joseph ironically sang a melancholic and romantic lyric, but, in perhaps the most disturbing implication of the play, like the perverse ghost of Jim's telling in *The Weir*, Hester extracts from her mother's song its disquieting message of a desire beyond death. With the fading vision of the Ghost Fancier before them, the play ends with the verbal image of a heart autonomously extracted from its body, thus presenting different levels of narrative illusion for the audience to interpret.

While there is no question that Hester's murder of her child is disturbing, the ambivalent circumstances of Hester's death implicate her life in a differently fated arc with its own relationship to the spectre of death. The seductive play between the Fancier and Hester implies her willed acceptance of an ending just as black as the dead swan she dragged across the snow in the play's opening scene. The verbal association between Hester's gorily exposed dark heart and the "dark feathered bird" ties an imagistic knot.

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<sup>45</sup> Unlike Japanese *butoh*, another dance prominently associated with death, Hester's *dans macabre* gains intensity from maintaining the subjects positions of Fancier and Hester. It thus separates (if messily) the dancer from the dance, and distinguishes the living's unpredictable actions from the immanent motions of the ghost, which promise death. In contrast, the *butoh*, as choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata writes, is a pattern where "dead gestures inside my body die one more time and make the dead themselves dead again" (77); in other words, as Steven Bruhm writes, *butoh* refuses the question of an individual subject as such, and "the *butoh* dancer is charged with the task of becoming a conduit for all identities, and for none at all" (2013: 30). Dance here cleaves to what neurologists call *anosagnosia*, a deep neural misperception of the body's constitutive parts often placed under the category of madness called *somatophrenia phantastica*, most notably not just a lack of kinaesthetic torsion but also an affective state of utter shock, hilarity, and deep horror. The condition is a kind of inverted phantom limb effect. Indeed, *butoh*, as Hijikata writes, is rooted in uncanny signs and portents such as the "feeling somewhere in your body that your arm is not your arm" (75): a dance where the dancer's body is dispossessed of its subject, seemingly evacuated of humanity. In contrast to this inhuman unsettlement within one's own body, Hester's prominent identity and heavy investment in an individualized symbology (the black swan) align Carr's theme along more conservative symbolic lines.

The play thus asks audiences to retrace an hermeneutic circle and see the play's initial scene as Hester carrying the burden of her own death. The black swan haunts Hester as the external image of her own heart and emotional interiority: although dead, it moves, and it waits only to be interred. Josie's killing seems the crude price of tragic intensity. As in Euripides' *Medea*, read symptomatically, the heroine "dies" with her child even as an afterimage of her lives on.<sup>46</sup> But Hester's death returns Medea's survival with a moral note of regret addressed to the socially resistant but intransigently horrific act of infanticide.

One last element of Carr's play deserves our interest in a comparison of its hauntings. In a work whose transatlantic successes and major American runs otherwise exemplify how quickly theatre can be uprooted from its ostensible local context into a global space of performance, the play's setting in the Irish bogs is one of *By the Bog of Cats...*'s most rootedly *local* features. Bogs are themselves often associated with uncanny or gothic tropes ranging from the dark *pùca*, a horse similar to the *night mare* that brings evil dreams, to malevolent *water sheeries* (souls refused from the afterlife) and *bog sprites*, as well as the effervescent will-o'-the-wisps common to much contemporary fantasy literature. Few fears have a history as long and shrouded as the *boggard*, a creature whose lineage descends from the Celtic *bwg* or "ghost." Bogs are also at the root of *bugbear* and *bogeyman* (Ackroyd 6), terms now more common across English speaking areas. In terms of political environmentalism, however, bogs are signs of a disappearing Irish identity once marked by its material reliance on peat moss. Writing in 2011, Derek Gladwin notes that, since "92% of raised bogs [are] now lost in Ireland, it is particularly poignant that Carr would create such vivid settings around bog landscapes, emphasizing their role as sacrifices to the globalized economy" (395). In the play's exchange between an incipient globalization and a cynical nationalism, the bog nostalgically hosts ghosts, grounding

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<sup>46</sup> For Euripides Medea biologically and politically survives her act of infanticide, and yet Eilhard Schlesinger points out that, in a sense, "Euripides' heroine perishes with the children [...]. The granddaughter of Helios may stand in triumph on her dragon-chariot, but Medea the woman is dead" (89). Hester survives in images and symbols: a severed heart and a black swan. But where Medea's survival is that of the embodied political icon, Hester's is of a ghost, an afterimage of the theatrical illusion which, as the dramatic irony surrounding the Ghost Fancier and Joseph indicates, punctures the illusion of narrative autonomy. Both women choose and serve penance in response to an act they commit which refuses the masculine worlds in which they find themselves living and in which they have few to no rights.



their gothic themes in an old etymological history that subtends the play's dramatic action.<sup>47</sup> A bog defies global space and recognizes its own strongly haunted nature to perform sedimentary labour. Like its titular setting, *By the Bog of Cats...* adapts traditional stories, especially that of the *aisling* or ghost of the nation, for its own purposes. To show its hand, the play introduces two major figures in its first scene: the black swan and the Ghost Fancier. The bog's long associations with peculiarly gothic hauntings signals that this is a play deeply concerned with Irishness. *By the Bog of Cats...* tells a story of ghosts and a Ghost Fancier to again move these traditional Irish Gothic themes again into the world stage of the globalgothic.

Conor McPherson and Marina Carr's globalgothic ghost stories are strongly marked by Irish traditions and an oblique relationship to the "Irish Tiger" period of Irish prosperity in the late nineties. Yet the types of hauntings their stories employ reveal a consistent pattern in contemporary theatre. Ghost stories tell of disjunctive relationships between characters responding to material and psychological loss; further, they often self-consciously focus on the performative relation of the tale itself. Changes in tradition and technocultural media influence the shape of the figures through which ghosts "tell" their shadowy existence. Such tellings by ghost story are by no means limited to Irish drama. The genre explodes with vibrancy and creativity in multiple dramatic cultures and I cannot do justice to this multicultural richness in this dissertation. In lieu of coverage, I will next provide a reading of a play that employs haunting as a mode of social survival in order to demonstrate the political range of tellings open to the ghost story. With that, I turn to the South African ghost story co-authored by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona: *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972).

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<sup>47</sup> This setting's deep-seated ecological and historical sensitivity to some measure answers criticisms of Carr such as Victor Merriman's argument that *Portia Coughlan* and *By The Bog of Cats...* "propose a rural Ireland full of self loathing, and dogged not by the events of its own history, but by tropes from Shakespeare and Ancient Greece" (152). While dramatic ghosts bring with them a weathered Shakespearean "time out of joint," just as Carr employs elements of Euripedes' *Medea*, the tragicomic figure of spectrality and death that is the Ghost Fancier reminds audiences that a new aesthetic sensibility is dominant here.

## 2.5

Staging South African Photography and the Ghost of *Sizwe Banzi*<sup>48</sup>

To kill a man on the side of truth is to plant his body like a maize seed, and to expect a harvest of ghosts.

Sam Ukala, “*Harvest of Ghosts: The Story of a Collaboration*” (2001)

When is playacting rebuked by reality? When is fictionalizing presumptuous?

Wole Soyinka, *This Past Must Address Its Present* (1986)

Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s play *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* is relevant to the study of ghost stories in at least two respects.<sup>49</sup> First, it stands as a hybrid narrative about the daily lives of black South Africans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and thus illustrates a different context for ghost stories with social and political relevancy in a world literatures framework.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, by resisting apartheid and drawing on unforeseen technical byproducts of photography, the story of the play turns on a ghost’s figurative power without overt recourse to traditional Anglophone representations of ghosts from folklore.<sup>51</sup> For Fugard and his co-writers the investment in ghosts is made with some reservations: after all, a ghost’s promised survival is ambiguous, even conservative; exploiting technology to resist disciplinary bureaucracy, it can offer only temporary solutions. Photography promises the ability of “ghosting,” a desperate adaption of the deep split between a photograph and the person whose photo is taken.

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<sup>48</sup> The commonly accepted spelling of Sizwe Bansi with an “s” in place of “z” is traceable to an early printer’s error.

<sup>49</sup> Fugard’s work is not totally removed from Irish theatre. His second play, *Klaas and the Devil*, performed with the Circle players in the late 1950s, adapted J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* to give it a South African dimension just as Bertolt Brecht had given it a Spanish Civil War setting in *Senora Carrar’s Rifles* (1937). Fugard later attempted to write a play called *A Man without Scenery* while influenced by the ghostly world of Samuel Beckett’s drama.

<sup>50</sup> A landmark in South African drama, *Sizwe* “first revealed what the blend of creative talent, experience, and responsiveness to the daily pains of ordinary black South Africans could provide in the theatre” (Walder 545).

<sup>51</sup> Ghosts have always played a quiet role in Fugard’s plays. For instance, in his *Hello and Goodbye* (1965), a father’s ghost in a room next to the play’s action serves as the triangular pivot of the relationship between its two characters. The paternal spectre facilitates desire’s movement between siblings, just as for Freud a ghost sublimates repression in order enable relationships. Ghosts only became more prominent for Fugard when he began to collaborate with John Kani and Winston Ntshona and as his work turned toward the everyday problems of black South Africans.

*Sizwe Banzi is Dead* is a constituent play of Fugard's *Statements* trilogy devoted to exploring various aspects of apartheid-era South African life. The play responds to globalizing trends in capitalist economies – the spread of material extraction and industrial production from the developed nations to places where labour and resources can be obtained more cheaply and less responsibly – by asking how local collectives and individuals can respond to material change through gothic elements of a technocultural regime. Although the play is a collaboration between Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, the latter two South Africa's first "professional" black actors, Kani and Ntshona had to be registered as domestic servants to circumvent apartheid laws. The play was composed through the trio's improvisation, which explains the looseness characteristic to their Serpent Players work more generally.<sup>52</sup> Improvisation was a material exigency: Kani and Ntshona themselves joined the Serpent Players to replace previously arrested actors. Given the apartheid government's hostility to mixed-company dramatic groups, an ability to improvise stories and roles for different audiences was necessary to avoid censorship. Dramatic success bred repression for the three and, despite much caution from Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, *Sizwe Banzi's* planned 1972 opening in Cape Town theatres was forcibly closed by military police. At the re-opening on the next night, the play's audience was intimidated by plainclothes policemen. For these reasons, just like the trio's following play *The Island* (1973), another *Statements* work, *Sizwe Banzi* did not officially gain a written script until it was internationally produced and recognized (Walder 541). The play's *written* form, as opposed to its improvisational event, exceeds national boundaries as its script was created and published in a final form only upon the play's emergence from its Port Elizabethan or Cape Town contexts. Yet international audiences were no sure guarantor of safety for South African performers.

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<sup>52</sup> Improvisation also forms the core of *The Coat* (1966), *The Last Bus* (1969), *Friday's Bread on Monday* (1970), and *Sell-Out* (1970), all plays of everyday New Brighton life performed by Fugard's Serpent Players in the Eastern Cape. These plays not only speak outwardly to watching audiences but also "giv[e] physical voice and bodily presence to those who have been marginalized by the metropolitan centre" (Innes 118-119). If, as Mbembe as well as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren argue, ghosts can figure the marginalized and the nearly-invisible in the globalized workforce, then drama such as that of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona gives the ghost body and voice in plot as in medium itself: the body of the worker, the bus rider, and the everyday material conditions of life is what circulates in their improvised plays.

Even the broad recognition the Tony Awards granted to Kani and Ntshona in 1975 did not stop Transkei police from arresting the two actors the next year, following a performance of *Sizwe Banzi* in the Eastern Cape bantustan.

The improvisational roots of “ghosting” as an embodied phenomenon are extrapolated from the dramatic capabilities of what some call Athol Fugard’s peculiar two-hander technique that owes much to the pastimes of Robben Island inmates. In 1968, shortly before beginning work on *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, Fugard wrote of the improvisational, identity-blending dramatic technique perfected by “Jake,” a prisoner of Robben Island. In Fugard’s notebook observations, Jake’s sketch flowered into the potential of “ghosting” as a form of dramatic resistance and a technical model.

Jake – unsung mime artist of Robben Island, a “must” at every show: “We want Jake!” One of his sketches: bus queue in Johannesburg – argument between two men, one of whom is trying to push in; then the old Zulu municipal policeman gets involved, the bus arrives and the conductor gets drawn in too. Finally a white inspector arrives on the scene and he also gets involved – Jake switching from one character to the other without a pause, *changing body, voice and even language* (Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, English) so fast and effortlessly that *finally there were a dozen people on the stage*. (1983: 176-177, my emphasis).

The example of a man who could so easily switch identities through commonplace gestic signs inspired Fugard and his collaborators to incorporate improvisation in dramas of everyday life: the effect is brilliantly phantasmagoric. A dramatic contrast in *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* illustrates the thoroughness with which Fugard assimilated Jake’s lesson. The play requires John Kani to play two distinctly separate roles, Styles and Buntu, and consequently destabilizes audience associations between named identity and actors’ bodies. For Winston Ntshona’s character, Sizwe Banzi, the play inverts the effect. While Ntshona’s character transforms from Sizwe Banzi to become Robert Zwelinzima, his *narrative* role as the migrant worker or “ghost” remains singular. Associating the actor’s body with not one stage identity but with many – imagine an actor posed for a soliloquy,

hand outstretched, and now run backward along the arm as if in synecdochical contagion from the hand of the *same actor* to see another face, a new identity, a new ghost haunting the man or woman in the performative act – permits the stage to recursively thematize its dramatic conventions by making recourse to hauntology as an axis of identification.

If, as I have argued, a ghost's importance to the theatre is through its mediations of relationships, then contextual information is necessary for my reading of the play. Following *Sizwe Banzi's* successful transatlantic tour, Kani and Ntshona were jointly awarded the Tony Award for Best Actor in 1975. A year later they were jointly arrested in the Transkei homeland of South Africa. Their arrest, unlike the award, raised the group's profile as committed activists and notable actors, and led to an international outcry for their release.<sup>53</sup> After many subsequent tours, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* has gone on to be colloquially rated "among the supreme testaments of the dehumanizing nature of apartheid" (Billington 18). This is no small testament to the play's exhausting touring schedule, a virtual life's work for its principal actors.<sup>54</sup> It is no exaggeration to judge the world-travelling *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* an eminent case study for globalgothic criticism, for the play articulates a transforming gothic figure in a network of local and multinational cultural, political, and technological forces.

Yet the play is already situated in a sharply political web of aesthetic judgements that attack Fugard's writing, perhaps because of the play's prominence and international tensions over the apartheid-era of South African history in which it emerged. The play occasioned critical disdain from reviewers and critics (and sometimes, with private

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<sup>53</sup> The extent to which the Tony judges perceived Kani and Ntshona as professional actors performing roles is debatable, and it is possible that their performances were interpreted by international audiences as simply giving access to their personal lives since, of course, the play combines personal experiences and speculative narration. As Cima summarizes, the two "were celebrated as struggle actors who played themselves onstage each night, not creative artists who, along with Fugard, had crafted their experiences into a profoundly universal story of human survival" (105).

<sup>54</sup> Kani and Ntshona took the play out for ten continuous years following its international debut in London (1972), touring South Africa and then back to England for what was called "The Fugard Season" at London's Royal Court Theatre from January to October, 1974. Kani and Ntshona then took the play through America (opening in New York on 13 November 1974) until they moved the production back to the African Transkei homeland in 1976, at which time the two were arrested. Following their release, the trio reunited to take *Sizwe* back to London for a revival at the Royal Court in 1977, and then back to South Africa for a last, more sporadic run of performances in Johannesburg's Market Theatre in 1978 and Cape Town's Baxter Theatre in 1982. There have been many revivals since.

anguish, from Fugard himself) as cheap “agitprop” that privileges politics over aesthetic cohesion. Other critics deemed *Sizwe Banzi* a “superficial” entertainment lacking the penetrative philosophical depth required for a work to be truly “harrowing” and thus, one assumes, effectively political; thus, as Hilary Seymour writes, it is one of many “statements on racism which ignore its class basis are not in essence radical” (274-75).<sup>55</sup> South Africa offered writers no easy route to acceptance and success, and to dismiss the play’s politics would obscure its challenge to bureaucratic apartheid culture and championing of creative forms of survival in desperate times. In particular, such criticism has yet to grapple with the ways that *Sizwe Banzi*’s *gothic* narrative helpfully disrupts oppressive legal hurdles in the daily lives of black South Africans whose material labour was so incredibly important to the global Anglophone economy. Yet today Fugard’s plays are seen as landmarks in socially-conscious South African drama.

#### § PHOTOGRAPHS AND PASSBOOKS §

The global importance of South Africa’s national economy and its adoption of new technologies of surveillance for apartheid governance are relevant to the question of ghosts in *Sizwe Banzi*. To put it another way, the play’s ghost story is told at the precise and lived juxtaposition of apartheid’s exploitation of black workers and photography’s role in creating workers’ passbooks; pass laws provoke *Sizwe Banzi*’s dramatic conflict over identity.<sup>56</sup> Pass laws dictated the movements, living arrangements, and working opportunities for black South Africans in an impersonally punitive state apparatus. As a character, *Sizwe Banzi*’s problem is that he has come to Port Elizabeth to find work since there is none at home, and yet his permit only allows him to stay in King William’s Town,

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<sup>55</sup> In much the same way Fugard’s earlier plays such as *Blood Knot* were criticized for their seemingly apolitical nature and “almost reprehensible lack of bitterness about apartheid” (Gellert 315-16), even though the play was cause enough for Fugard’s passport to be revoked by then Minister of Justice and future Prime Minister B.J. Vorster.

<sup>56</sup> Named with a perverse doublespeak, the Bantu Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act (1953) produced a system known as “influx control.” This act symbolizes the entire apartheid system and gave near-total control over African labourers to their (mostly white) employers, while relegating those labourers to township living, unless their employer granted otherwise (Olaiya 90). Because of his activist plays Fugard was prohibited from entering these townships early in his career, and so depended on the first-hand reports of friends such as Kani and Ntshona.

almost 250 kilometers away.<sup>57</sup> Yet Sizwe wants a safe job, one not in the mines where black labourers were largely permitted to work. Like those he represents, Sizwe's cheap labour was crucial to the South African industrial economy and, by direct extension, to British and American economies. The apartheid government found it necessary to carefully regulate black South African workers, and the global economy held their products dear. Writing in the late seventies when *Sizwe Banzi* was being staged, Peter Dreyer observed that more than ten percent of Britain's total foreign investments were held in South Africa. Losing these would effectively "cause a serious drop in the British standard of living" and entail multiple knock-on effects in the myriad economies dependent on vital South African resources (204). In particular, South Africa supplied much of the world's platinum, gold, vanadium, chromium, uranium, and manganese; it also nurtured petroleum and diamond industries, making the country a desirable target for foreign investment and development.<sup>58</sup> In light of the resource economy the play's title character rejects, it is mildly ironic that *Sizwe Banzi* itself circulated along the same globalizing lines as did the country's other precious resources. Sizwe's obvious predicament, when framed as a socio-economic matter, demonstrates the complex and international base of tacitly racist and exploitative measures that propped up the domestic apartheid regime. This system led to the global economic support for South Africa's apartheid government that *Sizwe Banzi* takes as its target (Olaiya 76).

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<sup>57</sup> Should he have wished to stay in Port Elizabeth legally and was lucky enough to have a white South African willing to employ him, Sizwe Banzi would have to proceed as follows: take a letter from his prospective employer in Port Elizabeth to the Native Commissioner in King William's Town, who would then write a letter to the Native Commissioner in Port Elizabeth. Sizwe would then travel back to Port Elizabeth with both letters in order to gain a third letter from a second Native Commissioner. Taking all three letters, he would present them to a Senior Officer at the Labour Bureau, who would stamp Sizwe's pass book and give him a fourth letter. Sizwe would take all four letters to the Administration Office in New Brighton – the oldest of Port Elizabeth's black townships – to qualify for an application for a Residence Permit, this being no sure thing. His journey of over 800 kilometres would depend on the kindnesses of white South Africans and their Kafkaesque bureaucracy. As Buntu says, with biting irony, "Simple" (26).

<sup>58</sup> Dreyer, again, clarifies how much of the world's resources were mined in South Africa: "92 percent of the world's platinum reserves, 72 percent of the gold, 70 percent of the vanadium, 69 percent of the chromium (with Zimbabwe), and a very substantial percentage of the uranium and manganese besides"; in light of this, Dreyer argues that "a South Africa under majority rule [...] would dominate the entire subcontinent – if not all Africa – politically, industrially, militarily, and socioculturally. It is only apartheid that stands in the way of all this" (204).

Quintessentially a South African play, *Sizwe Banzi's* subjects are nonetheless transnational. The play begins with a character who describes Henry Ford Jr.'s visit to a South African factory. The American's appearance reveals the international arm of capitalist apartheid and the American parent company, represented by its symbolic founder's son, callously disregards the horrific exploitation at its South African factories (Olaiya 84). Styles, one of the play's characters, bitterly mocks the liberal spectacle of international aid and industry improvement: "So and so from America or London made a big speech: '...going to see to it that the conditions of their non-white workers in Southern Africa were substantially improved.' The talk ended in the bloody newspaper. Never in the pay pocket" (4). In this, the American company's influence over South African labours indicates a relationship very similar to, for instance, Apple's use of Taiwan-based Foxconn factories across the world today. Yet the Ford factory, like the mining companies, relied on domestic legislation to provide its labour force. A complex system of pass laws called "Influx Control" regulated the black townships that supplied muscle to the companies exploiting South African resources. This system allowed the state to prosecute on the basis of officially issued pass books, each of which bore the inevitable grainy photograph of its bearer. Influx Control was universally applied to black South Africans. Prosecutions under its name reveal how oppressive these laws were. Shortly before the play's composition, in 1969,

the average *daily* number of prosecutions under these laws and regulations was 1,732. This adds up to several hundred thousand prisoners a year, even excluding those arrested but not prosecuted. Neither was that an exceptional year. In his report for the year ended June 20, 1976, for example, the commissioner of prisons notes that 273,373 sentenced prisoners and 243,965 prisoners awaiting trial were admitted to prison, i.e. more than half a million people. (Dreyer 24, citing statistics from *A Survey of Race Relations*, 1971: 73; 1977: 92.)

Half a million people imprisoned in a nation of approximately twenty-five million: one-fiftieth of the entire country's population was either sentenced or waiting for trial. Black South Africans prosecuted under the pass laws made up a majority of the nation's prison



population. In 1975, out of a daily prison population of 99,000, one-third of these were jailed for infringements of pass laws. Twenty-five percent of black South Africans were arrested annually for technical infringements of laws (Callinicos and Rogers, 161). Athol Fugard worked in the Native Commissioners Court for six months in 1958, where he was charged with handling such state offences at a reported rate of thirty per hour. As Fugard remembers, the experience exposed him to the systematic injustices of the South African apartheid state (1983: 7). Ntshona and Kani's relationship and thus familiarity with the pass laws is comparatively clear cut, since their lives were as regulated by the pass laws as were any other black South Africans.

After the pass laws themselves, photography shapes *Sizwe Banzi's* narrative action; as the reference technology of the governmental pass books, photography is a vulnerability in the bureaucratic system that tracks and prosecutes individuals. Buntu and Sizwe Banzi take advantage of the passbook's technologically mediated relationship to individual identity in its point of weakness: the small photograph used by the police to ascribe identity on black bodies. A photograph reduces human identity to a statistically-friendly pictorial fact and is in and of itself "an indication of photography's profound, central applicability to industrial capitalism" (Berger 1978: 49). It is also subject to resistances and modifications in the hands of those it purports to identify. Thus, while *Sizwe Banzi's* ghost story takes shape in Athol Fugard's recurring concern with photographic technologies, it also calls to mind George William Curtis' description of ghost stories as "little tales, like instant photographs" (xv) and Roland Barthes' description of photography as "the impossible science of the unique being" (2010: 71).<sup>59</sup> This "impossible science" yielded results for legislative and dramatic discourses alike. Photography's power to appropriate from life a sketch of memory produces a dream of continuity between the form ostensibly represented and the living human being whose

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<sup>59</sup> The third of Fugard's *Statements* plays, of which *Sizwe Banzi* was the first, is *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (1974). The story of this play turns on a series of six photographic moments frozen as if in *tableaux vivants*. In August 1972, Fugard wrote in his notebooks that these staged photographic moments "were, and remain [...] the essence of the experience I wanted to explore" (200).

likeness it captures. In turn, this dream shapes the haunting desire to *possess* an image in what is otherwise “a simple rectangle / of thirty-five / millimeters,” to recall Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema*. “How can you speak of photography without speaking of desire?” Hervé Guibert asks (83). For Derrida, the appropriative symbol of this “simple rectangle joins, in a single system, death and the referent” (1987: 280-81). The media system in a convincingly affective ecological function harnesses the desire for those things that do not exist toward an epistemological search for the ways in which things look. It captures images of humans but not their humanity; as a result, they become ghostly. The body, Derrida says, is “spectralized by the shot [...] captured or possessed by spectrality in advance” (2002: 418). Like language, itself another media ecology, a photograph appropriates an image from its referent and from death. If the photographic dream, effectively deterritorialized here, can be fashioned into a statist and bureaucratic system of surveillance and discipline, then it can be deterritorialized once again. *Sizwe Banzi* demonstrates this process precisely by telling it as a ghost story.

Henry Styles, proprietor of the photography studio in *Sizwe Banzi*, translates his knowledge of photography’s dream and its various appropriations into a pragmatic register. “You must understand one thing,” he explains to the audience, “[w]e own nothing except ourselves. The world and its laws, allows us nothing, except ourselves. There is nothing we can leave behind when we die, except the memory of ourselves” (16). Memories of life are charged with loss. “I know what I’m talking about, friends,” Styles says, “I had a father, and he died” (16). Into this vision of existence, photography intervenes as one of the least-expensive globally available technologies for remembering the dead. For many, those small frame holds death and hope conjoined. Extrapolating from this preservative effect of a melancholic relationship of photographs to reality, John Berger argues that “most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made” (1978: 56). Yet photography desires more than suffering: it can represent hope, optimism, and the emergence of imaginative narratives. A photograph can be fixed, but it can also be dreamed. As it happens, Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona’s play originated through an improvised skit performed by the three as they

playfully sought to resurrect the memory of a photograph they had found in an old album. This photograph was not that of Styles' father, of course, but one of an unknown man. Fugard remembers the subject as "a man with a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in the other" (xi).<sup>60</sup> As it began, then, the play was an extended "what if" improvisation about what circumstances led to that photo; its survival prompts an echo. The spectral image-making process of new media technologies license the playacting of imagined identities appropriated through technological deformation. This improvisational skit germinated a process the play reflexively narrates through the transformation by which Sizwe becomes Robert Zwelinzima. This act turns on a kind of improvised death that echoes the old form of racial "passing" and bears many implications for today's global networks of migrant and stateless workers.

An improvised death opens the way, and in this the ghost story of *Sizwe Banzi* bears tracing out in its narrative particulars. Characters Sizwe and Buntu stumble home after a night out in Port Elizabeth mourning their inability to circumvent pass laws and thus permit Sizwe to stay in the city. Accidentally urinating on the corpse of a man killed by tsotsis (gangmembers), Sizwe compassionately examines the dead man's pass book for details about where to bring the body. He discovers that the dead man, named Robert Zwelinzima, had lived in one of the massive hostels for working men. Fearing for his safety, Buntu refuses to return the corpse. At this moment two things happen: first, Buntu seeks a way to repurpose the situation to preserve both their lives while secondly, Sizwe seizes on what he sees as a gross injustice of humanity. Performing moral indignation, Sizwe tears off his clothes in a dramatic *cri de coeur* to reveal his bare, anguished body, what Fugard might call his "absurd and bruised carnality" (1983: 68). Sizwe's ensuing questions breach theatrical conventions and address the audience in the same way that Shylock might stand before his accusers in *The Merchant of Venice*. "What's happening in the world, good people?", Sizwe asks; "Who cares for who in this world? [...] Look! I've

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<sup>60</sup> There is some debate over the question of who first saw the photograph and even about what the photograph in fact depicted. See Cima (who deems the photograph in question "haunting") 99-100, 112-113.

got a wife. I've got four children. How many has he made, lady? [*The man sitting next to her.*] Is he a man? What has he got that I haven't...?" (35). The play metonymically strips Ntshona of clothing's social identification and verbally dislocates his ideas of ethics and self-possession; thus it prepares the audience for an ensuing "double-hander" that pragmatically switches Sizwe and Robert's identities, for Buntu, looking for a way forward, suggests that Sizwe take up Robert's passbook. Although the act of adopting a dead man's identity is simple, its morality is complex. Buntu's simple act of replacing Sizwe's passbook picture with that of Zwelinzima's grants Sizwe the legal power to stay in Port Elizabeth and look for work. It makes of him a man haunted by the dead *and* by the living: by the man whose identity he has taken up, on the one hand, but also by the man he once claimed to be on the other. In the ensuing debate between Buntu, Sizwe, and sometimes even audiences the exchange proves contentious. Against Sizwe's claim that he "cannot lose [his] name," Buntu persuasively counters this nostalgia for ego with the biopolitical equation between names and power that legally regulates black bodies. "As Robert Zwelinzima you could have stayed and worked in this town," Buntu reminds Sizwe; "[a]s Sizwe Banzi...? Start walking, friend. King William's Town" (36). After some comic misunderstandings – Sizwe wonders what his wife will do once "Her loving husband, Sizwe Banzi, is dead!" (37) – the act's appeal seems settled. Of the many hauntings offered by photographic technologies (haunting images, haunting desires), Sizwe and Buntu radically appropriate the object of contention, and subvert the avenue of control. An adjective becomes a noun; a haunted man becomes a ghost.

Sizwe's real question is how he can "live as another man's ghost." Buntu's quick response is to ask "Wasn't Sizwe Banzi a ghost?" (38). Two distinct figures are hauntologically merged. The passbook's photograph blurs Robert Zwelinzima's ghost with apartheid's undifferentiated vision of black South Africans. As it turns out, global capitalists care little about individuals. They instead depend on the exploitation and segregation of black labour. Sizwe was already a ghost in a world of normatively oppressed identities in a culture of apartheid and dehumanization. Buntu asks, "When

the white man looked at you at the Labour Bureau what did he see?" The answer is the definition of spectrality: not a "man with dignity" but

a bloody passbook with a N.I. number. Isn't that a ghost? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out, 'Hey, John! Come here' ... to you *Sizwe Banzi* ... isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you 'Boy' ... you a man, circumcised with a wife and four children ... isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling yourself. All I'm saying is to be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into. Spook them into hell, man! (38)

A real ghost! That is to say, a figure of perverse paradox. Buntu turns apartheid's dehumanizing structures and discursive logic to Sizwe's advantage by adapting the very nature of drama and materializing illusion. An echo sounds here too of the ghostliness Jean-Paul Sartre detected in European philosophy and literary criticism around which, as he wrote in his introduction to *Black Orpheus*, the imaginary idea of Africa dances like a "phantom flickering like a flame, between being and nothingness [...] Africa, an *imaginary* continent" (21). Hallucination's knife cuts both ways: "an ever-present but concealed negritude haunts [the African subject of racist discourse]" Sartre writes, identifying the deleterious phantasm of racist discourse. Taking advantage of this phantasmagoria, Buntu proposes to flit from shadow to shadow, from ghost to ghost. Survival's dream appropriates the state's haunting logic by means of the equally spectral possibility of photography. The effort is by no means passive. There is no question that apartheid's policemen intend to allow their shadowy underworld of townships to become productive sites of opposition such as Henry Styles and, behind him, the playwrights themselves suggest they could become through the spectral medium of photography. In the narrative logic of ghost stories, understood as an historical and globalized medium of communication and memory, a form of adaptation is evident here. Sizwe and Buntu propose a radical adaption of gothic fatalism – one must die in order to be born again – to thwart strict and punitive governance. Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona tell ghost stories by juxtaposing dreams against the global economic constructions of subjectivity. In this way the play pits photography and survival against apartheid society and industrial capitalism.

## § SURVIVING THE GLOBE – THE GHOST WHO DREAMS §

This ghostly presumption of survival through adopting identities speaks beyond its immediate South African reality, and in the time between the play's initial staging and today's increasingly connected world *Sizwe Banzi's* ghost story has gone global. The story proposes a form of spectral replacement in order to survive: Robert Zwelinzima is dead, so Sizwe Banzi haunts his identity by taking up his name; thus Sizwe is haunted by his former self. In the absence of folkloric ghosts, the process itself, a form of double consciousness, is haunting. Today it goes under the name of identity theft or "ghosting," a form of passing that "unblock[s] global passages that would otherwise remain unsurpassable" (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren ix). "Ghosting" depends on living people surreptitiously operating in technologies of bureaucratic surveillance; correspondingly, it "offers a fascinating prospect of a fluctuating world map where haunting can become a thing of, and for, the living" (Pilar Blanco and Peeren, x; cf. Olaiya 80). By adapting the deracinated identities effected by photography's spectralization, those who are tracked can mask their bodies in disguised technological visages. *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* spins its ghost story out of this survivalist gesture while also demonstrating how gothic language functions in representations of everyday life on the world stage.

Critics of "ghosting" argue that the social strategies adopted by Styles and Sizwe Banzi are limited in their applicability and individualist at best. Extrapolating from Fugard's liberal politics and quietly minimizing the play's collaborative genesis, Hilary Seymour argues that "individual survival is the play's major theme" (278). This idealism, or "dream," is endemic to photography and is precisely the avenue of malleability on which Styles and Sizwe rely. Styles boastfully acknowledges that his photography studio is a "strong-room of dreams." Indeed, he supports the effort and reclaims its operatives: "The dreamers? [...] My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books [...] People who would be forgotten, and their dreams with them, if it wasn't for Styles" (12). The idealistic conceit that photography "remembers" elides disappearing biological bodies in favour of a photograph's material survival and its attendant memories of psychological complexity, hopes, and aspirations. Styles

exuberantly manipulates and creates dreams in his studio. “Imagine it, man, you, Robert Zwelinzima, behind a desk in an office like that!” he rhapsodizes, imaginatively launching an entire career from the dream of a single photograph with its subject seated behind a desk. It is an aspirational hope, bourgeois and even liberal. “Quick promotion to Chief Messenger. I’ll show you what we do” (20). Behind the generation of dreams lurk photography’s darker nature. After a photograph is “taken,” it is out of its subject’s hands and will, Derrida points out, “be reproducible in [their] absence.” Since this precondition is widely understood, Derrida continues, “we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here” (2002: 418). Hauntings are ambivalent. In the play, Sizwe Banzi and Buntu argue about the point for some time, and articulate concerns many critics also raise against the play’s implied logic of survival. What kind of life can be gained through usurping another’s identity and leaving your own behind? Is survival an end in itself? For how long can you maintain a dream?

Dreams may not *themselves* be the tools of survival. They are threatened by future appropriations. The state might catch on to Sizwe’s ruse. Nevertheless, dreams extend hope for survival. It helps to inquire about the nature of survival, the classic provenance of ghosts who, whatever else, linger beyond traditional allotments of time and space. Fugard defines survival as a way of being that “can involve betrayal of everything – beliefs, values, ideals – except Life itself” (1983: 164). To access this power, the play’s characters appropriate photography’s haunting futurity and the way its images transform the living into ghosts. Through this gothic appropriation of surveillance technology, they evade legal control over names and biopower; they ghost into identity theft. While photography claims to memorialize individuals, and thus offers a compromised survival that has exchanged biological materiality for technological archivization, *Sizwe Banzi* tells a story about how to use photography to survive *without* dying. The stakes of survival are unheroic. Sizwe Banzi’s choice actively rejects egoism. He gives up on his own name to survive. His memory will survive only in the retrospective creation of the play.

What is the work of theatre? Is it only to tell ghost stories? Is there more to the telling, or even less? Wole Soyinka argues that some dramaturgical recreations of

supposedly inspirational or confrontational acts are presumptuous and dangerously soporific in their perennial repetition. Increasingly toothless, plays risk exorcising the ghosts whose fury motivates revolutionary change; they might bring the dream of change to ground (271-2). Or, as Hilary Seymour argues, the dreams that art offers themselves might hinder progressive social change as they “encourage the illusions and self-delusions of the black working class” and only “provide them with temporary catharsis, emotional escapism and a fantasy world of unrealizable aspirations, all of which serves to maintain a system of economic and racial exploitation” (Seymour 278). Fugard, Ntshona, and Kani roughly dismiss the question. If you “Start asking stupid questions,” Styles remarks, “you destroy that dream” (13). They know that to deny theatre its singular mode of affective power and social influence is a dismissal tantamount to a wholesale denial of art’s audience.<sup>61</sup> It forecloses the capacity of South African audiences to imagine alternative forms of life in performative media, and it discredits the play’s liberating gesture made through technological *détournement*. A dream takes up “neither reason nor unreason” but shapes modalities of history and culture in an epistemological struggle over

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<sup>61</sup> Seymour’s stringent critique exposes a horror of politically disengaged South Africans such as those who buy into Style’s dream-photography. As she writes, “Styles’ commercial success depends upon the gullibility, sentimentality and good-natured naivety of his customers. They are all stamped with the same quality of amiable simplicity and exhibit a certain dull docility” (284). While Seymour’s aim is to link this with Alan Paton’s and Peter Abraham’s liberal stereotype of “passive black characters in South African fiction of the liberal, Christian, humanist tradition” (284), he neglects to mention that *Sizwe Banzi* ironizes the traditional trope of rural and urban black South Africans. It is, as Albert Wertheim describes, “a special Eastern Cape version of the ‘Jim goes to Jo’burg’ archetype, which presents the young black man who leaves his native village to seek work in the Johannesburg mines, where he finds adventures and misadventures awaiting him. [...] But as Sizwe Bansi’s story continues, the audience comes to realize that his version of a picaresque narrative lacks the upward mobility of Lazarillo’s, Fielding’s, Eichensdorff’s, or Twain’s white Eurocentric picaros. For the black picaro, the journey just plods on, without social or economic rise, from Dorman Long to Kiloment Engineering to Anderson Hardware to Feltex” (84). Without granting the black South Africans enough perspicuity to understand this ironic use, Seymour undermines their critical intelligence on the basis of his own suspicion of racial discourses. Further, Seymour’s statement that “the audience is left feeling uneasy about ‘Robert Zwelinzima’s precarious urban future’” (286) stands in sharp contrast to the engaged and acutely lively debate evident in the first performance of *Sizwe Banzi* in New Brighton. Fugard, watching the play, reports that when Buntu exchanged the photographs one audience member spoke up – “Don’t do it brother” – and another member shouted “Go ahead and try. They haven’t caught me yet.” Fugard writes that what followed was “the most amazing and spontaneous debate I have ever heard [...] The action of our play was being matched [...] by the action of the audience” (1983: 26-33). As Cima summarizes, more than just watching the play, “the New Brighton audience – and hundreds of other audiences like it throughout *Sizwe*’s production history – created a one-time-only coauthorship of the play that, like Kani’s opening improvisatory monologue, lives in memory rather than the archive” (106). South African audiences of Seymour’s time were more than capable of seeing through fears that they could be preyed upon of gullible, simple, and docile, and they understood how the play’s “celebration of dissent,” if individualistic and masculinist, still “provides an oppositional model for anti-globalization movements,” to adapt the words of contemporary critic Kolawole Olaiya (76).



imaginative interpretations (Spivak 2012: 457). From the play's story – the dream of a man who might live to be, as Buntu says, a “real ghost” – a transnational ghost emerges.

#### § SUBJECTS OF GHOSTLY POWER §

The operational context of ghost stories shifts in South African literature with the case of *Sizwe Banzi* and the gothic language of disrupted life calls for particular comment. For Achille Mbembe, discursive structures such as apartheid organize “forms of social existence in which, vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)” (2003: 1). A ghost tells two stories in Mbembe's work. His parenthetical admission – (ghosts) – of the spectrality that forms of social organization force upon populations accords with Buntu's view of how black South Africans are seen by white South Africans and subtly implies a comparison between Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona's South Africa with the postcolony (despite South Africa's idiosyncratic status as a postcolony with revitalized internal colonizers). In this world the everyday is ghostly and transient, but instead of using the term to describe psychological interiority, as writers such as Terry Castle would, for Mbembe one's ghostly status results from “an everyday horror of hunger, poverty, riots, corruption, civil war, and dictatorships” (Peeren 114). Instead of calling peoples subject to such conditions “ghosts,” Mbembe prefers the term “wandering subjects.” Esther Peeren concludes that these “living-dead *subjects of ghostly power*” possess “a certain agency, freedom of movement, and possibility of escape” (114). For Peeren spectrality is an effect of power. Yet the “real ghost” proposed by Mbembe and Buntu complicates this non-agential reading of gothic positions. Read through *Sizwe Banzi*, ghostly power is an effect of someone assuming a dead man's identity and of thus actively dreaming into a different life. Peeren's definitional shift, where spectrality is not a result of constrained subjectivity but an effect of power, allows her to distinguish “wandering subjects” from what she calls “celebratory accounts of fragmented subjectivity [that use the term “ghosts”], including Derrida's” (114), but Peeren's definition also excludes the existence *Sizwe Banzi* claims for himself. As a form of power that is everywhere and nowhere, spectrality can be empowering (thus *Sizwe*) just as it can be dehumanizing (Mbembe). Therefore, I see spectrality as *both* a

constituent of the subject as well as an effect of power. Neither a subject's body nor power's discursive effects are wholly recognizable as "a ghost," if we must use a singular term. Spectrality is the threshold across which the two interact. Similarly, Mbembe aligns himself with histories of popular thought that associate doubleness with the ghost's generalized uncanny. He argues that the "metaphor of the mirror [...] allows us to envisage ghostly power" (2003: 1), and, later, that "the mirror – or, rather, the experience of ghostly sovereignty [has much to do with] imagination and remembrance" (2003: 3). He could easily have added to that short list *photography*. The photographic medium weaves together imagination and memory in its layers of light. Peeren's "celebration" of fragmented subjectivity is a red herring that disguises the real effect of what Mbembe identifies as ghostly power or ghostly sovereignty, processes where understanding *how* ghost stories are telling influences and shapes subjectivity.<sup>62</sup>

From the tenuous strands of a popular belief that entered Anglophone lexicons at a deep level – the *haunting* intrinsic to economies of thought and speech – ghosts emerge from Athol Fugard's South African stage as globally-relevant figures technologically equipped to transform dilemmas of the living-dead into those of potential survival. Mbembe describes the terror of ghostly power's "demiurgic surgery" transforming subjects into horrific figures of mutilation such as "crippled bodies, lost parts, scattered

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<sup>62</sup> Perhaps the accusation of "celebrating fragmentation" fits prose best, but here we find acute examples that recognize a ghost's problematic identity. In Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, for instance, the main character is told by his fellow villagers at the end of the novel that "the juju have told us that unless we kill your ghost, everybody in Dukana must die [...] The juju said that your ghost is moving round killing everybody because when you were killed by the way, they did not bury you properly" (180). As Ato Quayson points out, *Sozaboy* acquiesces to this judgement and "comes reluctantly to believe that he may indeed be a ghost without knowing it. [...] He suffers a dematerialization of his sense of self in a reflection of the effects of the war on his social universe at large" (Quayson 96). Saro-Wiwa thus gives another example of a material form of Mbembe's observed gothic language but decidedly *not* a celebratory one.

Implicit here is a complex equivocation here between the ghost's form and human identity. In many narratives one sign to the dreamer that they are alive and not a ghost is to breathe upon a mirror. If the mirror fogs, the dreamer is alive. If not... Paradoxically, the most common Latinate descriptions of ghosts circulate around words such as *vapour*, *smoke*, and *wind* (Ruffles 15), thus accounting for the present colloquialism for death, to "give up the ghost" or to cease breathing. This test of breath or pneuma (and the deep echo of soul is only too appropriate in this bit of dreamlore) emerges most commonly in discourses of the voice. But the voice is a property of spirits through the related term psyche, and the psychology which, if it is evident, is so primarily because of the voiced assertion of identity through narrative. The difference is that the air carried in the breath of pneuma only haunts psyche's domain. Thus the breath upon the mirror and the way it lets us "envisage" and "experience" ghostly power translate into the discursive rhetoric of dreams and thought, but is generated from the internal biosphere called consciousness.

fragments, misshapings and wounds, the libidinous dance of hopeless wars, in short, general dismemberment” (2003: 10). Less horrifically, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* situates its dilemma at the moment when the usual happenstance of life brushes against the uncanny and the deathly: a chance encounter with a murdered man in the middle of the night. On this threshold spectrality’s ambiguity becomes a possibility for opportune survival. The play’s brusque refusal of supernaturalism imbues its gothic tones with real power for its audience just as the play also addresses apartheid-era technologies of identification that, stripped of their particular trammels and resurrected in the form of contemporary international security clearances, interact with new forms of transnational movement. “Ghosting” becomes a common phenomenon of undocumented migrant works subject to ambiguous forms of power and survival. First told of by plays such as *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, today this ghost story plagues politicians, bureaucrats, and workers. The disguised migrant no longer simply “passes” to be socially and politically normative. He or she becomes a ghost and disappears into bureaucratic homogeneity.

In *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona’s dramatic improvisational tactics strike a precise symmetry between performed narrative identities as a new way of telling a story about ghosts: about living ghosts whom societal norms fail to individuate, and about those ghosts who have taken up the identity of the dead in a bid for survival. They dramatize strategies of resistance, challenge, and creation long before the ANC would accept the “technical capacity of cultural people” to influence anti-apartheid change, as Gordon Metz, an ANC organizer, put it in 1982 (Newbury 238). Nevertheless, in its focus on photography the play is concomitant with the groundswell of resistance in the work of photographers such as Ernest Cole in the late 1960s. If audiences pretend to dream the law of dramatic conventions into being, so too do the pass books of the state dream the identities of replaceable workers into being. Yet where drama turns emotions and imagination into further dreams, transnational industries such as Ford demand the body’s labour as they capture workers through new forms of technology. For Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, felicitously, both dreams and work permits rely on the medium of photography, but at the same time can be grounded in the everyday realities of black

South African life, as is the gothic language of ghosting used by Buntu and Sizwe. The photograph, although imperfectly available on stage (a frozen image or *tableau vivant* must take narrative being at some moment, if only pragmatically speaking) proves an apt analogy in the hauntological processes of the theatre: its essential composition as a product of light provides a neat analogue to the common idea of the apparition as a product of perceptual difference, an act of identifying a flicker of light as a person – almost – or a ghost. Thus emerges one form of the globalgothic generated from photography and dreams of identity. In the end, it is a pale reflection of those often stateless migrants whose decision to “ghost” the world has removed them from technologies of surveillance and from narratives of contiguous identity. The play poses further questions about the relationship between ghosts, technological media, and the theatre, specifically in the realm of moving pictures: film. As if taking up the terms I have been using, Alison Butler argues that early film has two parts: “the history of a technology, and the history of dreams” (417). I follow suit, following the dream’s promiscuous ghost dance into new media; from dramatic stories of photography, I move now to those that speak of and on the television screen.

## 2.6

### A Haunting Machine: Theatrical Technologies and Samuel Beckett’s *Shades*

If Beckett has been searching for the “literature of the unword”, perhaps the figure of the ghost – alive and dead; a body and not a body – is the inevitable objective correlative of language, and a subjectivity, always on the verge of fading out of existence . . . the posthuman subject can only claim a spectral agency or interiority.

Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2008)

Perhaps the clue to the whole affair is its ghostliness. The four are indistinguishable. Ghostly garments, ghostly speech.

Samuel Beckett, Letter to Reinhart Muller-Freienfels, 5/3/84 (1984)

So far in this argument ghost stories on stage have consisted of a straightforwardly supernatural interpretative economy that circulates “hauntings” of actors and ideas with thematic or narrative elements. Ghosts account for relationships and relate stories; in this technical sense, like their supernatural counterparts, ghosts can be read as “tell-tale”

agents whose unquiet histories seemingly tell the tale, albeit perversely, through the medium of silence. I have suggested that the shape of the story, and not necessarily the content that it offers, is the domain of ghosts; consequently, changes in dramatic media must influence the shape of ghost stories. Theatre gives way to television. In *Quad*, one of Samuel Beckett's last works for television, first one, then another, then another, and then finally four hooded, hunched figures walk complex patterns across a rectangular space with an increasingly mad soundtrack of demented xylophones or maybe detuned marimbas. Broadcast in 1981, *Quad* was Beckett's last work for the German public broadcaster Süddeutscher Rundfunk, after his earlier work for the BBC, and its strangely depersonalized figures bear a ghostly history. As this chapter will argue, the three teleplays that make up *Shades* (1977) are the product of a gestational period in theatre and television work that Beckett pursued with the actor Billie Whitelaw. In contrast to the more commonly nationalist frameworks for understanding the preceding plays, Beckett and Whitelaw's collaborations occupy an incipiently global space of production and reception, as the drama was designed for German and British general broadcasting, but also with an eye for the American parallel culture of televisual and film gothic.

Together, Beckett and Whitelaw told ghost stories of astonishing clarity in which gender roles, bodily disappearance, and collaborative ethics play important roles. Film and television have long been a space of ghostly creation. In 1896 Maxim Gorky observed that Lumière's Cinematograph in Paris created "life without colour and without sound [...] the life of ghosts" (qtd. in Skal 1993: 31). Some years after, Graham Greene deemed the cinema screen "full of ghosts," reasoning that a figure onscreen might move even past the time of their actor's death (511). On the screen, one's time of death is entirely beside the point and, like photography, the medium is haunted by this temporal dislocation. Technology effectively permits ghost stories an entry into the intimate spaces where popular culture becomes individual entertainment. The influence of such ghosts results in a loss of definitional stability around ideas of time, space, and identity, though the effect is often masked by spectacles of entertainment. The ghost stories of television, like those in the theatre, function in an interpretative economy that circulates actors and concepts

through thematic or narrative elements in a “haunting” media technology. Samuel Beckett and Billie Whitelaw’s role in this dissertation is twofold: first, they exemplify an increasingly collaborative and transcultural modern element in drama; and, second, their transforming work traces the disappearance of human bodies from the theatrical stage onto the television screen.

On stage or screen, ghosts symbolize metaphysical relationships and narratives. All are theatrical agents of the “memory machine.”<sup>63</sup> Like their supernatural namesakes, “ghosts in the machine” or tell-tale agents of hauntings have unquiet histories, yet beyond their thematic relevance, the *machinic* aspect of ghosts is important too. Historically, photographic techniques of superimposition have contributed to “hauntings” in dramatic media that have resultantly changed the shape of ghost stories. Beckett’s pivot between the stage drama of *Footfalls* (1975) and the televisual dramas of *Shades* (1977) marks an illustrative change in this regard since, moving between stage and screen, Beckett’s work with Whitelaw illustrates a thorough transition of ghost stories from plays to teleplays. Pursuing an aesthetic shape in machinic media, Beckett told of ghosts not *in* a machine, but *of* it. As a result, the shapes of humans and machines blur. Humanity had already begun “to seem insubstantial, [even] ghostly” in Beckett’s plays (Brown 47). His media aesthetic further assimilated mechanical elements and actors’ bodies to shape a televisual technics of spectral forms. To illustrate this transformation, Billie Whitelaw gradually performs a disappearing act in the passage of *Footfalls* to the television version of *Not I* that closes the *Shades* trio of teleplays. By adopting a narrative media archaeology tuned

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001) but also Andreas Huyssen’s *The Shadow Play as Medium of Memory in William Kentridge and Nalini Malani* (2013). Huyssen argues that the *form* of the shadow play, like my idea of a haunting as the form of a ghost story, “stages not just the content but the very structures of memory, evasion, and forgetting” by including multiple technical elements of praxis that include theatrical performances, installation, video, and film media, and more traditional visual arts such as painting and drawing. Such inclusivity makes the shadow play a “paradigmatic figures for any discussion of global art” – again, like a haunting, but with the added similarity that “the hidden afterlife of past violence that keeps erupting time and again” is crucial to the memory machine/plays of Kentridge and Malani (15-16). Shadow plays take as their ambit “the problematic of memory and the forgetting of political trauma with [...] a deeply textured understanding of the present in the past and the past in the present,” Huyssen writes, nicely articulating the time and space of a certain kind of theatrical ghost (49). Further, the shadow play, like the teleplay, moves in global space; “it is avant-gardism as a challenge to think politically through spectacular, sensuous installations that create baffect both on the local and global stage” (74).

to changing epistemological conditions, this chapter describes the structure and shape of how ghost stories moved from theatrical stages to television screens in a pivotal history of twentieth-century media. Beckett's work charts a path from stage drama in the mid-1950s through radio plays to teleplays in the 1980s.

For Beckett, technology invokes a sense of spectrality in categories that classical drama holds fixed: characters, bodies, and the stage. All are flattened on-screen, but, through a deft play of fluid technical features, a near-continuous metamorphic erasure of forms and faces creates a near-metaphor for the machine of memory. Beckett's plays confront theatre with technological modernity and a stripped lyricism. The result? Ghostly abstractions devoid of embellishment. Jonathan Boulter suggests that Beckett's search for a "literature of the unword" reaches for ghosts as "the inevitable objective correlative of language, and a subjectivity, always on the verge of fading out of existence" (2008: 83). For other critics, Beckett's ghosts in the machine remain indicative of human expression and represent "consciousness as ineluctable suffering" (Brown 43). Informed by media archeological precepts, I take up ghosts as an index of medial aesthetics derived equally from human affect and technological prostheses. If a ghost *in* the machine is a product of memory, ghosts *of* the machine are those remnants of humanity that continue to circulate without clear and objective reality. Süddeutscher Rundfunk's loan of advanced film cameras to Beckett in the early 1970s facilitated his innovative use of new media, but the playwright had long engaged with technological media as SDR director Reinhart Müller-Freienfels recognized when he cited Beckett's "extraordinary awareness of camera technique" to explain the loan (qtd. in Weiss 8). Actor Rosemary Pountney judges that effective performances of Beckett's work have long depended "on the seamless integration of the technical effects" (73).

For the playwright, however, technology's influence was unstable at best, and at best an opportunity for investigation of the relationship between machines and human identity. In an austere and precise array, each of Beckett's plays isolates a particular technological effect for examination. One of their central concerns, however, and the crucial element for spectrological study, is that in these dramas or teleplays memory

mediates and is mediated in content and in medium. It would be a mistake to view Beckett as an innovator in media forms. Instead, working through influences from dramatic traditions and multiple forms of technology that include late Victorian “ghost photography,” early cinema, and the layered shadow-objects of his own stage aesthetic, Beckett crafted a creative but thoroughly mechanical admixture that responds to a difficult question of visibility: how does memory *appear*? Moving from the stage to teleplays, Beckett encountered new technocultural ideologies, of which the most obvious is that of television itself. From the 1950s and onward television had promised to integrate audience and media as its watchers experienced “a sense of ‘being there,’ a kind of *hyperrealism*” (Spigel 133). This “ideology of liveness” transformed television screens into gateways to “a dynamic, exciting, and perpetual present” (Sconce 130). The immediacy of televisual images confuses viewer’s perceptual time with their narrative movement and consequentially suggested to audiences a solipsistic but engaged and “permanently alive view on the world; the generalized fantasy of the television institution of the image is exactly that it is *direct*, and *direct for me*” (Heath and Scirrow 54). This media illusion fed dramatists’ desires for the total immersion of audiences. Beckett’s teleplays challenged audiences seduced by this utopic individualism through his forbiddingly spartan aesthetic. With Brechtian effect they do not resemble works of commercial postmodernism (as, for example, *Max Headroom*, 1987-88) as much as they do gothic and horror television and film classics. Thematic similarities are alluring but treacherous, for Beckett’s ghosts emerge from a modernist interrogation of human time and not a thematic tradition of haunting. Riven by spectrality, the time of new media is out of step with the world around it. This disjunction shatters the ideology of televisual liveness into ghostly fragments that occupy the mythical space of “real time TV” and thus enacts a modern return to Gorky’s alienation in the late nineteenth century and a reflexive layering of media affect.

Adapting ghosts as the subjects of televisual drama, Beckett unexpectedly joined the company of 1960s American television series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *The Outer Limits* (1963-1965). These series responded to the anxieties raised by



television's uncanny influence in the household by thematizing ghostliness (Sconce 133). Domestic television seemed indissolubly gothic; from it, mysterious stories emanated. The episodic narratives of these series suggested that "television itself is the ghost in the home" (Ledwon 268) as they returned to a spectral aesthetic space made of light, dark, time, and repetition. Each episode of *Twilight Zone* begins with Rod Sterling announcing that viewers are entering "a dimension as vast as space and timeless as infinity [...] the middle ground between light and shadow." *The Outer Limits* ominously opens, "*There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical.*" Compare Beckett's *Ghost Trio*, the first of the *Shades* teleplays: "Good evening," Beckett's teleplay begins. "Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [*Pause.*] It will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens" (1984: 248). The voiceovers of both *Ghost Trio* and *The Outer Limits* emphasize technical features of broadcast media. Their illusory control over the medium proves disconcerting, since they purposefully reinforce the screen's machinic properties. This only made the ensuing stories – themselves provocatively spectral; the famous *Twilight Zone* – that much more haunting: placed on a threshold of indeterminate ontological aspirations, and with its machine having already reminded audiences of their compromised and constructed epistemological subject.<sup>64</sup>

Beckett's teleplays for the BBC and the SDR built on his radio work and the broad cultural acceptance of new media following the Second World War. Each medium inspired Beckett to examine different technological possibilities. While the spectrality of radio is common knowledge, for instance, in its case a voice's "ghostly immateriality [...] is not generally seen as cause for alarm" (Tawada 187). For Beckett, however, technologies and ghosts do not redeem a distressed human identity, nor do they promise closure. He shares the pessimism of those post-1945 writers confronted with immense

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<sup>64</sup> Beckett's preferred actors were more than familiar with gothic and horror cinema. His close friend Jack MacGowran is famous for roles in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, but also performed in Roman Polanski's horror parody *Dance of the Vampires* (1967) and the classic blockbuster *The Exorcist* (1973) which proved his final role. Billie Whitelaw, played the demonic nanny in *The Omen* (1976) immediately prior to working with Beckett on *Footfalls* (1976) and BBC2's *Shades* (1977). These performances similarly interrogate anxiety and desire in televisual media.

destruction. Dan Katz describes Beckett's radio piece "The Capital of the Ruins" (1946) as a postwar statement of "physical and moral desolation" (46). Subsequent plays reaffirm this desolate thought by challenging utopian perceptions of media and, most saliently, the broadcasting community's collective hallucination of an "electronic elsewhere" that the BBC had used as a wartime illusion of redemption and safety (Sconce 144). Instead, Beckett's stories juxtapose human memory against the mediation of narrative technologies to reveal how both are fragmentary, transient, and yet mutually dependent. As the war became a distant memory, however, the popular gothic in television and film diverged from the aesthetic taking shape in Beckett's teleplays by the 1980s. A year after Beckett's perplexing teleplay *Quad*, American audiences witnessed a little girl sucked into the TV's haunted "otherwhere" in Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg's cult classic *Poltergeist* (1982). Like the gothic, Beckett's work reveals technology's controlling influence over modern life and aesthetic production, but where *Poltergeist* challenges new media under the banner of conservative social politics Beckett's reflexive texts do not condemn technological media so much as question its influence over identity through dramatic means (Weiss 12).

While Beckett overhauled the dramatic medium the central questions remains. What of ghost stories? For Beckett, what of haunting? In his early plays Beckett avoided the word "ghost," whether consciously or not, but the word gained traction in titles such as *Ghost Trio* and in the sweep of his late work in all genres.<sup>65</sup> As Fraser points out, the speaker of *A Piece of Monologue* describes his life through a spectral eschatology: "Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond. Beyond that black beyond. Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost... he all but said ghost loved ones" (Beckett 1984: 269). Beyond figures of gothic tradition, ghosts are memory's true currency, reductions of

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<sup>65</sup> Critics repeatedly assert a basic hauntedness in Beckett's work. Ackerley and Gontarski argue that Beckett's writing is "always a haunting echo of memory" (n.p.), for example, while Graley Herren plays on the occult sense of medium to judge that "Beckett exploits the television medium as a private interface between the living and the dead." The teleplays are thus "haunted by ghosts," Herren concludes (4-5). For Katherine Weiss Beckett's radio plays represent "a world of ghosts" (67). Much evidence supports Graham Fraser's assertion that Beckett's writing "seem[s] to invite, yet resist, being taken for Gothic" (772). For more on Beckett's late work and his "gothic minimalism," see Fraser (2000).

human affect given form by his actors' imposed limitations. Drama does not need to invoke the name of the spectre to be haunted.<sup>66</sup> For Knowlson, plays such as *Ghost Trio* and *Footfalls* are ghost stories "of an unusual kind," and while *Footfalls*' seemingly human protagonist May appears to tell a ghost story rather traditionally, the play reveals to its audiences at its end that they have in fact watched "a ghost telling the tale of a ghost" (Knowlson 1986: 196). Memory works its way through medium to speak itself into and out of sight; as it does so, technology recapitulates the self-haunting of human reflection.

Technology's hauntings reflect broadly across Beckett's drama. Director Xerxes Mehta writes that, for him, Beckett's theatre after 1963 is a collection of "ghost-plays, haunting, [...] their spectral quality [lies] at the heart of their power" (135). Spectrality is a technical insistence on strict control over darkness and light and a precise vision of the properties of theatre and television (Mehta 135). This visual interplay can be seen even earlier in plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, with its lonely lit road and stark iconic tree, or in the solitary man before his cassette player in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Such images grant spectrality purchase in the mundane world through repetition, and create a tension of presence of absence that appeals to perceptions of narrative as *visual* objects.<sup>67</sup> In Beckett's lucid vision, this type of ghost story revitalizes the image's spectrality as an apparitional form by installing it on the television screen. Television's visual hauntings belong to a lineage of stage ghosts where the chiaroscuro of light and dark, voice and silence are both threatening and enabling. Billie Whitelaw's costume as May in *Footfalls* (1976) performs the ghostliness of this theatrical tradition. The dress shapes a premonition of the conceptual aesthetic his teleplays would later adopt.

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<sup>66</sup> To Alice Rayner, for example, Eugene Ionesco's play *The Chairs* like many other plays is non-metaphorically *haunted*. No figurative ghosts appear on stage as bodily symbols of a haunted narrative. Characters do not experience supernatural or gothic effects. Instead, the play's logic is for Rayner a gestural form of psychological haunting where characters' acts evince the absent beings around them.

<sup>67</sup> Apparitions, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, have been associated with ghosts since at least 1522: "The apparicion of a very ghost" (*OED*).



**Figure 3: Billie Whitelaw as May in *Footfalls* (1976). Photograph John Haynes.**

Beckett's theatrical bodies themselves take place in an history of spectrality in the theatre. Mehta calls a performer's acting in character "ghosting," and observes that their lines are sibilant chains of aural identifications between actors and adopted identities: "the whispers, rustles, and murmurs ghosting the [performer]" (137). This thesis is similar to that of Bert O. States: actors are "a kind of storyteller whose specialty is that [s/]he is the story he is telling" (23). States' ontogenetic "is" signifies ghosts at work. Actors have become part of a technological apparatus. This feeling was deeply felt by Beckett's actors. As a "Beckett actor," Sam McCready says, "I am the medium through which the character speaks." McCready goes on to say that his mantra is a line taken from Yeats' *At The Hawk's Well*, "I call to the eye of the mind" (175).<sup>68</sup> The mind's eye is a powerful metaphor for the imagination in philosophy and science (Warner 2006: 122-128; 135-137). In Beckett's plays, McCready claims to be "the medium, calling to the imagination of the audience, images, feelings, thoughts, and sensations"; instead of acting, he prefers

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<sup>68</sup> Winnie in *Happy Days* speaks the same line. Although Beckett denies Yeats' influence in writing the line, he did mysteriously comment that "all is reminiscence from womb to tomb" (qtd. in Knowlson 1983: 16). Beckett's response speaks less of a defensive stance towards a famous precedent and more of the importance of memory and originality (Olney 341). James Olney argues that in a work like the late *Stirrings Still* one can read back an entire history of images and figures, phantoms and ghosts drawn from across Beckett's body of work. This form of autobiography implies that reading imitates memory and that it can "lays out the text of our lives for continual rereading, backward and forward, forward and backward" (Olney 343).

to say that he “induc[es], through the words, a state of reverie or dream” (229). The method recalls a *séance* in the style of Maeterlinck’s “temple of dreams” theatre.<sup>69</sup>

§ BECKETT AND WHITELAW – COLLABORATIVE *FOOTFALLS* §

While television’s images may be haunting, drama is drawn from the actions of human bodies. What, then, of Beckett’s actors, with whom he worked so closely? Television screens flattened the physical and perceptual singularity of his actors so that they became part of the medium, but behind this machine Beckett’s deeply thoughtful directing and influential personal relationships can be discerned. While time-consuming, his involvement greatly affected performances. For Billie Whitelaw, the principal actor of *Shades* and *Footfalls*, Beckett’s direction was so important that she refused to act in his plays without his participation (Whitelaw 141). And yet “the last thing” the actor was interested in was Beckett’s “work or its ‘meaning,’” she proclaims (137). Beckett’s presence underwrote her intellectual participation in the work and licensed her bodily engagement with its affective economy. Whitelaw proclaimed herself the Galatea to Beckett’s Pygmalion, “as if he were a sculptor and I a piece of clay,” she says (144).

I might be a piece of marble that he needed to chip away at. [...] I didn’t object to him doing this. [...] I could feel the ‘shape’ taking on a life of its own. [...] Working with Beckett on *Footfalls*, I began to feel like an extension of his hands. Within the context of this required precision, I enjoyed a feeling of freedom. (144-45)

Whitelaw was no statue; instead, she was more than able to negotiate Beckett’s directions and shape a depersonalized median state for herself inside the work of art. Without reducing herself to clay or marble, materials common to metaphors of directed artistry,

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<sup>69</sup> In this, Beckett’s directions to his actors conceivably draw from the Symbolist drama of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century as much as the plays involve themselves in the photographic commerce of ghost photography. All genres dramatize a set of techniques associated with spectrality’s play of presence and absence. Artist groups such as Nabis as well as dramatists such as Maurice Maeterlinck collaborated for effects drawing on by-then technically discredited modes of spiritualist photography. Drama revitalized techniques of superposition, somnambulism, and gauzy dematerialization; in return, these reinvested audiences in the intimacies of drama’s illusion of storytelling.

she acted on the threshold between play and personal relationship using gestures as tools to craft sequences of images and light. Unlike the mad Ovidian sculptor who attempts to grant a statue freedom and life for his own pleasure, Whitelaw's negotiated artistic "freedom" is not the gift of life. Her freedom of human plasticity responds to stage directions and culminates in a self-willed constraint that blurs aesthetic and affective scaffoldings. The resultantly sparse image matches the austerity of Beckett's black and white palette; it enacts a becoming-spectral of affective signs and bodily reality. Inverting the plot of *The Twilight Zone's* episode "The After Hours" (1960), where inhuman statues become ghostly salespeople, Whitelaw became a ghost on the screen and set a pattern where the ghostly aesthetic of Beckett's plays becomes a machine where freedom is at once radically open and tightly constrained. "Make it ghostly," Whitelaw remembers Beckett saying to her in preparation for *Footfalls* performances: "Slow. Quick. Ghostly. Make it ghostly" (146). The result prefigures the effect television editing would craft for her. Whitelaw remembers feeling "more and more like a 'thing' of the spirit, something that was vaporizing as we went along" (146). She was not wrong. From 1975 to 1977 Whitelaw's body gradually disappeared in Beckett's work. Initially present on the *Footfalls* stage, she was reduced to assorted human ephemera in the *Shades* trio: a flickering image, an acousmatic voice, a mouth floating a black and white screen. The implications of the transformation are disturbingly graceful and provoke contemplation.

In 1975, Beckett wrote parts for Whitelaw in *Ghost Trio* and *Footfalls* as one of only two characters in each. Her continuity links the plays, as does her conviction that Beckett wrote *Footfalls* (and its "spectre" of a character) solely for her (Whitelaw 142). Many images of spectrality adopt a blurry nebulousness of apparitions of haze and light. In contrast, *Footfalls* portrayed Whitelaw in a stark chiaroscuro of white and black with her body pale on an abyssal darkness. The costume (fig. 3) presciently anticipates the digital editing that would later fashion human bodies and cloth into the images of technological media. In addition to *Footfalls's* ghostly costuming, Beckett asked Whitelaw to produce "a voice from beyond the grave" that she would keep for *Ghost Trio* (Whitelaw 143). In the later play her voice seemingly directs the male figure and, juxtaposed against

the camera's panning and cutting, suggests itself as a commanding if absent director. In other words, voice and technology create an authorial echo of Beckett in Whitelaw's acousmatic voice. She speaks not from beyond the grave but from within the television set. The resonant image of the body and its affects turns ghostly in shape, voice, and intent; it is drawn from death, and it gestures to the disappearance of human forms in technical media that *Shades* demonstrated. First broadcast on 17 April 1977, *Shades* is a trio of teleplays written and adapted for the TV screen at the behest of BBC2. Three plays compose the arc of *Shades* is: *Ghost Trio*, *...but the clouds...*, and a filmed version of *Not I*. They were originally released through the "Lively Arts" series, somewhat ironically given their content. Since Billie Whitelaw appears in all three teleplays as well as in *Footfalls*, the play immediately preceding *Shades*, her presence provides a stable point of comparison. The male roles in *Shades* are also closely related, and Beckett confided to another director that "[t]hough not expressly stated [...] the man in '...but the clouds...' is the same as in *Ghost Trio*, in another (later) situation" (qtd. in Herren 89). Before *Shades* came *Footfalls*.

Preparing for the role of May, Whitelaw asked, "Am I dead?" Beckett replied "let's just say *you're not quite there*" (143, emphasis original). This reply prompts a range of metaphoric explanations. For Whitelaw, her character "existed in that ghostly spiritual half-way house between the living and the living," but she also wondered if the phrase suggests a "passage or transfiguration" where the "body gets the message that it's dead" (143). Whitelaw directed herself to act in ghostly fashion by adopting Beckett's rejection of deictic potential as her guide. Not *quite* there strikes a compromise between the states of *there* and the Steinian "there is no there *there*." The phrase became a compass for Whitelaw. In her rehearsal memories even her costume, "a faint tangle of pale grey tatters," is described as "not quite there" (143). Lighting too gains a haunting dimension as "a dream, something ghostly, mystical, *not quite there*" (143). Walking an unearthly stage and dressed in shreds of grey lace patterned with tears and holes, Whitelaw's May – entirely a "spectral figure" (Knowlson 1996: 544) – balanced assurance and absence.

Thus attired, May speaks of memory and of waiting. She seeks what she calls the "semblance" of an image, something "[f]aint, though by no means invisible, in a certain

light” (*Footfalls* 242). She performs a restless search for truth’s illumination as she dreams of her mother’s physical passage through the world. May’s footfalls act out what her mother will not be seen to do; they are a restless gesture that passes from the world into darkness – and from the physical descent of the foot to the audible register of remembered signification. May tells her story in the third person just as Whitelaw, acting, tells a tale of another who is also herself. The play’s narrative conflict takes shape around a remembered conversation between “Amy” (as May anagrammatically calls herself), her mother, and a mysterious someone who is heard to “say Amen” (Beckett 1984: 243). The short play ends in a diminution of light as May abruptly vanishes.<sup>70</sup> Characters such as Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, and Krapp, and for that matter Synge’s Martin and Mary Doul in *The Well of the Saints* (1905), which was so inspirational to Beckett, all remain onstage past the conclusion of their plays. Unlike this long tradition, Whitelaw’s May disappears at the play’s end. Actors’ bodies, the undeniable facts of the stage, remained important to the aesthetic, but Whitelaw’s disappearance troubles the question of whether they would continue to be so, and whether the genre itself was the happiest for Beckett. At the time, Whitelaw remembers the playwright musing “whether the theatre is the right place for [him] any more,” though in her opinion *Footfalls* “may have been the most important work [the two] ever did together” (145). Her slow disappearance cues the spectral turn that grounds their collaborative work. While the distinctive lighting and costumes of *Footfalls* was taken up by the teleplays, audiences changed along with the medium.<sup>71</sup> Despite such differences, some central preoccupations remain: a search for the

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<sup>70</sup> In the *Beckett on Film* production directed by Walter Asmis, actor Susan Fitzgerald assumes a stonelike, statuesque pose with arms asymmetrically crossed; she is a belated Galatea to an absent Beckett. In this version May’s body slowly fades away, her face and body passing through shades of blue and grey to dissolve into black. Yet the *Beckett on Film* version loses the power of the 1976 version by leaving May on stage as the light dims, however, implying identity’s residual, abiding strength – something absent to Billie Whitelaw’s characterization of the role.

<sup>71</sup> *Footfalls* opened at the Royal Court in London, 20 May 1976 to a small audience celebrating Beckett’s seventieth birthday, while *Ghost Trio* was broadcast on 17 April 1977 as the first of three plays publicly televised on BBC2, just as the non-commercial network was putting together a populist “Play of the Week” series (1977-1979): levered out of the elite theatre, teleplays gained a much more broad audience. Only five percent of viewers in the BBC’s sample population watched the play, however, and of this sample one in three thought *Shades* “dense and boring” (Bignell 179). Bignell points out that “viewers clearly did not regard the play as entertaining television, nor even intriguing as experimental drama” but rather as the misplaced work of a theatrical dramatist (180). This is of a piece with Beckett’s influence over television in general. His work from the 1960s to the early 1990s was “frankly disastrous in terms of audience ratings, competitive audience share, or retention of the audience across an evening’s broadcast” and the RTE’s *Beckett on Film*



silence behind language and an interrogation of time's relation to human memory. Whitelaw's May *lived* on the stage of *Footfalls*. In *Ghost Trio* she lingers as a voice alone.

§ THE SHADES TRILOGY: *GHOST TRIO, ...BUT THE CLOUDS...*, *NOT I* §

For all the dynamism of Billie Whitelaw's voice, *Ghost Trio* was initially described as a passage of static objects. Michael Billington praised "the concentrated beauty of the images" in this play that he described as "a mesmeric piece of painting for TV" (qtd. in Knowlson 1986: 201-202). Thus construed, *Ghost Trio* is consistent with Beckett's other work. The teleplay's images seem of a piece with *Play*'s heads atop urns, *Not I*'s floating mouth, *Rockaby*'s skull, and *Footfalls*' fading body. Each vision supports itself strangely, even uncannily, and produces for its audiences "spectral [or] wraithlike" properties from such unearthly grounds" (Mehta 135). All of the plays' starkest visions are draped in a "blackness that [,] if held long enough, will destroy time, place, and community (Mehta 135). Ghosts edge thresholds of sight and sound; they are a disappearing reminder of loss and death. Whitelaw's voice in *Ghost Trio* ("V") fades from prominence to Billington's ear since it works as a shadowy second director enwrapped in the plot and, as such, it echoes Beckett's identity as TV director, a role submerged in the play's narrative memory – V is literally out of sight, her body reduced to an acousmatic voice, defined as a voice whose body is totally unlocatable. Often acting as a director or guide, this type of voiceover provides interpretations for audiences "like the 'objective' commentator's voice or the 'subjective' narrator's voice" (Dolar 65). Often, an acousmatic voice will project an illusory originating body for spectators while subtly refusing the grounds by which that body would become ontogenetic; thus in an acousmatic scene, Michel Chion observes, "the idea of the cause seizes us and haunts us" (201). Whitelaw's affective acousmatic voice, "V," clearly lacks a body. Absent such an obviously personified figure, its very

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series, broadcast in Ireland in 2001, had audience numbering in a mere fraction of the soap operas running at the same time (Bignell 183-84). The BBC and SDR broadcast Beckett's work in a noncommercial context, which indicates that potential viewing comparisons must consider the networks' aims and intents.

name an abstract of “Voice,” “V” escapes the crucible of meaning to haunt the site of production in the very same way Whitelaw disavowed interpretations of Beckett’s plays while continuing to take part in their creation. Almost a memorial of her body, the performance of Whitelaw’s voice – technologically abstracted – organizes interpretations of the play’s narrative structure, albeit as removed as only a ghost might be.

In *Ghost Trio*, as in *Footfalls*, what at first looks like the story of a ghost is actually one where a ghost tells of other ghosts. It is, in other words, a play where memory works itself out, not machinelike but precisely *as a machine*. Small details give the machinic repetition away. For example, the relationship between V and the male figure onscreen (“F”) is influenced by the small child who appears in the teleplay’s third movement, a version of the boy (or boys) of *Waiting for Godot* and the wraithlike boy spotted by *Endgame*’s Clov. James Knowlson draws a parallel between these iterative children with messages of failure on the one hand and Godot and V as “characters” whose disembodied identities are perplexingly unknown on the other. “[J]ust as men waited in vain for Godot over a quarter of a century earlier,” so too F sits in *Ghost Trio*, Knowlson argues, “haunted by Beethoven’s ghostly theme, for a woman visitor who never comes, who may be death or may equally well be nothingness [...] she is known only as the one for whom he waits and who does not come” (1986: 204). Tracing an imagined figure for V in plot and body alike, Knowlson plays the critical explicator for an assumed Beckettian aesthetic of failure and fetishizes the character as a *femme fatale* whose hiddenness speaks to masculine desires for revelation and possession; in V, then, romance and death cohere as one for the prospective suitor waiting for love (this is what “F,” the male figure in *Ghost Trio*, is, if V is the woman of fate). Yet Whitelaw’s voice suggests many (dis)guises and this interpretation is not the only one possible.

If we abandon the proposed romantic narrative, V can also be heard as an audible director whose voice centralizes narrative action to reflexively expose media perceptions in a machine that works in memories. Along this line of interpretation, V’s voice could be more precisely called *the voice of haunting*, a ghost *in* the machine but more acutely *of* it. Through her the play takes shape around its absence of a narrative centre, and it is *telling*

that the story catches on Whitelaw's voice only to disappear into the cuts, creaks, and tatters of music scavenged from the Largo of Beethoven's *Ghost Trio*. In theatre's lace and rags, Whitelaw once acted the ghost. As a recollected failure of the onscreen image her voice wears a haunting melody. (The next play in the *Shades* trio will in fact try to reassemble her face.) The textured similarities between lace and song are emphasized by *Ghost Trio*'s many cuts and scattered melodic *crescendos* and *decrescendos* in its third and final movement. These sonic patterns resemble the delicate shapes of looped and twisted lace or the way a ghost appears and disappears from sight. The play's gradual transformation of a woman's commanding voice into haunting music suggests memory's dissolving hold over its subjects, symbolized by the male figure F. In this way music, voice, image, and technology form an artistic skein with the power to remind audiences that V is only conjured into existence to countenance the acts of a male dreamer – an audience's belief in a voice's narrative body alone forestalls the ghost's haunting – and yet this conjuring has a degree memory's machinic control over the perceptual body. V's very indeterminacy proves spellbinding. “[W]hatever she calls for, the camera immediately delivers,” Herren observes; “she is the law” (74). Faintly echoing a horror film or the *Twilight Zone*, Whitelaw's voice demonstrates televisual media's fundamental control over the body's ocular efforts to perceive environmental objects (Gibson 295). Despite any self-effacing statements on behalf of Whitelaw's own extratextual pronouncements, her acousmatic voice usurps the absent director to assert the joint authority of media and message alike. Traced through a process that must be described as depersonalizing – her body disappearing into an archive of artworks – Whitelaw's acting trajectory and her voice's role in *Ghost Trio* as V becomes clear: the melody was the *ghost trio* all along. *The ghost is the teleplay itself*. V forces audiences to “remember” what once stood behind the music of *Ghost Trio*, the body of the performer. Yet this absent interlocutor remains entirely outside the narrative's ambit and audience's vision alike. Encircling its narrative movements, Whitelaw becomes Beckett's ghost and her absence the story of his teleplay. For two plays that look so different, *Ghost Trio* and Conor McPherson's *The Weir* take up similar hauntological premises: both yearn for a narrative centre around which to shape an exposition on relationships. The play's ghosts take shape around this absence. In

haunting counterpoint to *Ghost Trio* the voice of Billie Whitelaw glides only to disappear into the cuts, creaks, and tatters of music scavenged from the Largo of Beethoven's *Ghost Trio*. The question of love and relationship, "F"'s obsessional discourse... all are a machine to call V into being, no more.



Exchanging music for a textually rounded field of associations, *Ghost Trio* is followed by *...but the clouds...* While cameras in the former play foreground F (the male figure), the latter play superimposes transparent shots of faces over the screen's narrative images and thus recalls the wistful naiveté of ghost photography (Weiss 117). The play's male figure ("M") possesses some solidity granted by an echoing male voice ("V"). Meanwhile, brief visions of the other character ("W," supplied by Billie Whitelaw) are described as "a woman's face *reduced as far as possible* to eyes and mouth" (1984: 257). This reduction predicts the later focus on Whitelaw's mouth in the concluding play *Not I*. "[R]educed as far as possible to eyes and mouth": this stage direction can become an interpretative guide. Removing human potentiality from W's face divests her features from the usual signage of human faciality and, as Weiss argues, Whitelaw's face cannot be interpreted as "anything other than [...] a ghost" (117). W haunts a field made up of surfaces and images with the complications of a particular linguistic heritage. The teleplay adopts a meditative sequence of dissolving transitions cued by William Butler Yeats's elegiac poetry and, in particular, the poet's late work "The Tower" (1928) from which the play takes its title. As haunting as were the cuts and commanding voice of the previous play, *...but the clouds...* faces the depersonalization of televisual media directly.

What kind of ghost story does *...but the clouds...* tell? The teleplay can be described as a series of phantasms emerging from the mind's eye dramatically narrate a dissolution of something mysterious – a process that could be called memory. Like in *Ghost Trio*, *The Weir*, and *By the Bog of Cats...*, there is a strong element of disappointed love and broken relationships at the heart of the play's implied narrative, and yet, a shadow-play in search of an image, the play produces possibilities without conclusions.

The audience sees a crouching figure in the dark that, paradoxically, V calls his “little sanctum [...] where *none could see me*” (1984: 260). Vision ironically penetrates the disclaimers of language to render the play’s aesthetic shape an unresolved paradox. We can see the man yet we cannot see his surroundings. Stage directions describe a “man sitting on invisible stool bowed over invisible table” (1984: 259). If V is M’s voice, as many critics assume, then it seems also likely that M is *Ghost Trio*’s silent F[igure] now granted the illusion of a voice that, although separated from its body, describes its embodied invisibility. Yet the televisual image’s tendency to dissolve and reveal W’s ghostly face threatens stable interpretative relationships, and in the end voice and image are only associated through apposition. In a similar fashion the narrative relationship between figure and voice, the product of an audience’s imagination over time, collapses when it is juxtaposed against a phantasmal exposition of technological media.

The play of narrative and images against the screen’s dark background bears comparison with the different influences of late eighteenth-century phantasmagorias and Yeats’ dreamlike play *At the Hawk’s Well* (1917).<sup>72</sup> A phantasmagoria works by rapidly alternating sequences of ghostly images through a light shuttering across changing frames, much as ...*but the clouds*... layers multiple hauntings and visions of possibilities. Just as memory overlays media, ghosts tell of ghosts. This superimposition calls up the first lines from Yeats’ play:

I call to the eye of the mind  
 A well choked up and dry  
 [...]  
 And I call to the mind’s eye  
 Pallor of an ivory face. (175)

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<sup>72</sup> See Herren for parallels between *At the Hawk’s Well* and...*but the clouds*... (113-120). Significantly, Yeats’ play was written under the influence of his encounters with Ezra Pound and Nō theatre – itself haunted through and throughout – and that this dramatically intense vision of the congress between living and dead built on Yeats’ earlier Irish Revivalism in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was invigorated by a dramatically globalist cultural exchange, all without sacrificing the revolutionary politics of the previous work (Roche 2015: 48-9; cf. Heaney 1989: 68-9).

The chiasmic exchange of eye and mind recalls the optic relevancy of the word's anatomical sense as well as the rhetorical device of allusion that *insists* on re-envisioning the site of vision itself. As in *Ghost Trio*, the medium is cast back on its own failing mechanical resources but progresses as haunting images yoked together by parallelism – a dry well, an ivory face – glide across the brain's place of memory, the eye of the mind, itself necessarily incomplete. Inviting its viewers into an allegory of their own brains through text, image, and rhetoric, Beckett's play figures the mind's eye as an "I" crouched in a dark sanctum where it muses over "cases" wherein a woman's face appears. Each cuts off almost the minute it begins. Obsessive reflection signals a restless imagination pursuing a memory of love; it simultaneously performs a self-conscious, spectral, and dramatic (re)vision of the processes of the human brain.

V: Let us now distinguish three cases. One: she appeared and –

*Dissolve to W. 2 seconds.*

*Dissolve to M. 2 seconds.*

V. In the same breath was gone. 2 seconds. Two: she appeared and –

*Dissolve to W. 5 seconds.*

V. Lingered. 5 seconds. With those unseeing eyes I so begged when alive to look at me. 5 seconds.

*Dissolve to M. 2 seconds.*

V. Three: she appeared and –

*Dissolve to W. 5 seconds.*

V. After a moment – (CSP 260-61)

At this point W's lips, barely visible as archival relics of Whitelaw's body, mouth words that V will echo shortly afterward in the teleplay's conclusion: "...clouds...but the clouds... of the sky." V repeats them and both W and V join to speak the play's title (1984: 261). Their gestural parallelism is importance since *...but the clouds...* tells its story through moments of coincidence and juxtaposition that merge camera shots and voiceovers. The medium consequently refuses to conclusively associate voices with images. The image of the man, M, and the audible voice, V, are not the same. Neither is

the woman's face, W, and the ghostly reflection of her life. This ghostly machine stages memory and defers all signs of human identity. Yet the play's aesthetic shape coheres in the psychosomatic sounds of the eponymous phrase, where the unity in which W mouths and V speaks the final phrase masks a treacherous similitude between them.

All of the three cases of V's attempt at memory fail. His fourth case, "by far the commonest" (1984: 261), is offered only as a final resort. "I begged in vain," V says,

deep down into the dead of night, until I wearied, and ceased, and busied myself with something else, more ... rewarding [...] until the time came, with break of day, to issue forth again, void my little sanctum, shed robe and skull, resume my hat and greatcoat, and issue forth again. (1984: 261-62)

The fourth case tells of nothing other than the act of turning away from memory's exclusive hold and back toward a future-oriented vision of lived experience. The day banishes ghosts, memory, and the images conjured by each from the haunted house of V's creation: the skull of the mind. The fourth case of remembrance thus anticipates the conclusion of artistry and memory in everyday life. W's abstracted and poetic gestures align her with intertextual and transmedial figures, yet one's own immediate perceptual environment must take precedent over the machine-like repetition of memory production. The minimization given this "fourth case" reflects the strong influence of the textual background that undergirds its examinations of memory and relationships. For its title and final phrase *...but the clouds...* looks to Yeats' "The Tower." Here, the aged poet contemplates his art and conjures a host of ghosts around himself. The last lines are the most important. Like V, they gather memories close.

The death of friends, or death  
Of every brilliant eye  
That made a catch in the breath--  
seem but the clouds of the sky  
When the horizon fades;

Or a bird's sleepy cry  
 Among the deepening shades. (78)<sup>73</sup>

For Yeats, the existence of friends and the living spark of an eye seem fragile, delicate, even spectral. *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds...* witness death in acts of remembrance predicated on ephemerality. In Beckett's play, having been "spoken" by both male and female characters, Yeats' lines accrue dramatic influence beyond their source: for another artist's work this reduction would minimize human interest, but for Beckett the opposite occurs and the ghosts spoken by drama – memory's machine – meet, collide, and disappear into the prosaic return to everyday life.



As *...but the clouds...* gives way to *Not I*, the third of the *Shades* trilogy for the BBC, the *Footfalls*' early "ghostliness and mystery" reveals a dramatic aesthetic stitched together wholly by ghosts (Knowlson 1996: 548).<sup>74</sup> Yet this final teleplay curiously deforms Beckett's body of work. While he usually abhorred adapting works between media, for a time Beckett seems to have preferred the teleplay version of *Not I* to its stage original.

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<sup>73</sup> In the original English version for *Shades* the quotation from Yeats was exceedingly subtle and thus easily missed by many. Seeking to rectify this Beckett extended the quotation of Yeats' poem to its final fifteen lines for the German SDR's production of *...nur noch Gewölk...* and requested the change also be made to future telecasts by the BBC. As Herren notes, no published version of the play follows suit (121).

<sup>74</sup> The ending strategies and gendered implications mark a theme across the three teleplays, as Graley Herren points out by reading Whitelaw's characters as iterations of a feminine muse. Herren argues for a kind of musical diminution in which each play exposes the short comings of media. *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds...* mark "the transition from one dubious strategy for invoking the muse (via Beethoven's music) to another dubious strategy (via Yeats' literature)" (Herren 89). From the "fourth case" of the latter play emerges *Not I*; as a conclusion, it releases into language the gendered object of recollection which each previous play strains to produce. Removing the male figure, his sanctum, and the facial contours of W's face, *Not I* gives Billie Whitelaw "the final word – a dazzling pianissimo movement to contrast the largo movement of *Ghost Trio* and the legato of *...but the clouds...*" (Herren 89). The implied musical pattern softens from largo and legato to pianissimo as Whitelaw's voice becomes a haunting melody which recalls the Romantic tradition of male authors taking inspiration from partially present female muses, just as Whitelaw credited Beckett as her Pygmalion. Is this association of the malleable feminine body and the authoritative masculine author entirely just? Beckett and Whitelaw's collaboration depends on the plays' use of gendered elements themselves undermined by the artistic media. Whitelaw allowed that she rarely knew "who's conducting who" (Gussow 86), and Knowlson observes that their work seemed indissolubly collaborative from *Not I* afterward (1996: 551). Associating *Not I* with a *softened* ending not entirely apt. Perhaps there is a middle way. *Not I* presents a voice and body apparently unified and yet, as Whitelaw's anatomy becomes pivotal, the play bristles with the terror of death and, as Herren points out, a "frantic logorrhea [that] shatters all tranquility" (99). Thus *Not I* depends on Billie Whitelaw's active adaptation of Beckett's script, an influence he licensed and admired, and in turn frames Whitelaw's relationship with the play's script as a way to express her fear of death. Diminution is punctured by the scream before death.



Differences between the two are small but important: during the stage play, a small red mouth floats on an utterly dark stage with only one other figure is present, a mostly still and dark Auditor. The television adaptation trains a camera on the mouth alone and drops the Auditor entirely; as a result, Mouth is thrust to the fore and rendered a strikingly austere black and white that harkens back to her *Footfalls* costume. The vision alone is enough to call up the thought of ghosts.

The television adaptation records Whitelaw's performance of *Not I* during its second English run. The play proved devastating from the start. In its English premiere on 16 January 1973, Whitelaw experienced terror and paralysis during performances (131) and the play's American actor, Jessica Tandy, also described her experience as one of a dreadful panic (qtd. in Knowlson 1996: 524). Tandy used a teleprompter for the lines. Not so Whitelaw, who made the traumatic decision to memorize a script that she remembers as a thing that "touched terrors within me that I have never come to terms with" (131). As if that was not enough, the play's grueling technical requirements tortured its actors' bodies as well, bringing them to a daily familiarity with pain (132). From the very beginning, however, Whitelaw had discerned in Mouth's "outpourings of a crazed mind" a kindred spirit (118). The play's rehearsals started only six months after a near-death episode for her young son Matthew, who had contracted meningitis, and whose safety Whitelaw obsessed over. That fear joined with the influence of *Not I* to result in an intense performance on behalf of an actor for whom the script, direction, and themes resonated deeply. Tristram Powell filmed one of Whitelaw's last performances during her second run in *Not I*, in 1975. To avoid breaking the take at the customary ninth minute, Powell had to use a supersized reel of film. The ensuing record, displaced from its time and captured by experimental technology, concludes *Shades*.

*Not I* can be difficult to describe. Whatever narrative one makes of it, the most salient technical feature of the teleplay remains Whitelaw's mouth. The actor observes that her televised mouth looked "strangely sexual and glutinous [...] slimy and weird, like a crazed, oversexed jellyfish" (132). The teleplay profited from the grotesque abstraction of a body-part abstracted from its body and shaped a devastating intensity by focusing on

the organ of speech in its pure act of linguistic expression. In their shared viewing of TV-*Not I*, Beckett made his first and only comment on Whitelaw's acting to her. In the dark room, he whispered one word: "Miraculous" (132). A miracle involves magic. To her credit, Whitelaw believed that while acting "you allow the words to breathe through your body, [and] if you become a conduit, something magical may happen" (120). Her statement sincerely expresses the rhythmic internalization of memorized language in the actor's body where, reversing the usual human appropriation of language, an actor might give herself up to the forces of language, technology, and media interpretation so as to intercede while maintaining a measure of agency. Galatea might shape her own contours with words as tools. In this way Whitelaw's spirited acting produces its precise inverse – a ghostly Mouth's mutterings that refuse meaning and speak pure fear – and yet simultaneously reaffirms the fact of the human body even in its machinic and ghostly form. The medium asserts the return of affect and identity. *Not I* shapes Mouth's fearful *cri de coeur* to lend strength to that element of Beckett's mirror-like teleplays which reflects on death in a kind of *memento mori*. Spectrality combines the medium's concretization of, first, a figural presence implying death and, second, the medium's transformation of the living's speech and intentions into an unearthly and machinic pattern of signs and images – a kind of prophylactic death that preempts biology. Like in the two previous teleplays, a memory or what might with some violence be called love, but Mouth quickly dismisses the possibility. "[S]o no love ... spared that," she says, and repeats the phrase often throughout the short play; "no love such as normally vented on the ... speechless infant [...] no love of any kind ... at any subsequent stage" (216). Dispatching love is only part of Mouth's confrontation with the fear of death.

Whitelaw's act of confronting death in *Not I* speaks to a complex and even overdetermined fear, one not just vanishing and demurring ("not I...") but also green with shame and perhaps guilty of hastening the passage from life. In the look of death, there is a little of dying already as the future haunts the present. Some ghosts greedily bear witness to life's destruction. *Not I*'s relentless Mouth finds memory's words and images greatly disturbing. "[T]he words ... the brain ... flickering away like mad" Mouth says,

“nothing there ... on somewhere else ... try somewhere else ... all the time something begging ... something in her begging ... begging it all to stop” (1984: 222). The desperation *for* death’s end is torn out of Mouth much like a child’s sudden birth begins their journey toward death. Mouth reimagines the face of death as a parade of ghostly affects keyed to moments of memory that play across her mind with almost irresistible fervour. Thus it is that while the most haunting event in Beckett’s late plays is Billie Whitelaw’s pacing May in *Footfalls*, a woman waiting restlessly outside her dying mother’s room made dramatic as a memory of an image in motion – television *avant la lettre*, a memory of ghosts – his teleplays produced the torturous spectacle of *Not I* wherein the shape of memory is explored from “womb to tomb” (Knowlson 1983: 16). Mouth’s televisual appearance evokes a vagina, entry to the womb, but it also implies the presence of a tomb. The close rhyme’s mnemonic equivocation is a blunt reminder that death follows birth; risking aesthetic fatalism, Beckett’s phrase recognizes biological inevitability, and makes the condition of living into a dilemma akin to that of Derrida’s reading of Hamlet (and the Biblical story of Job before him).<sup>75</sup>

For Whitelaw, whose affect was so crucial to the moment of the play’s performance, *Not I* mediated death differently. In it, the historical archive bears witness in the form of a machine memory that produces phantasmagoric ghosts. In contrast, Whitelaw’s mouth testifies to the play’s demands that drew her away from her child, Matthew, vulnerable to illness. The organ of speech, captured for the screen, ironically speaks without words of her feelings of betrayal. Indeed, confirming her fears, Matthew fell sick during rehearsals for *Not I* in 1972. Mouth’s speech to death reads as an admission of risk for Whitelaw’s work made her unable to care for Matthew. Beckett wrote in his later *A Piece of Monologue* (1980) that “Birth was the death of him” (1984: 265). For Whitelaw, acting in Beckett’s plays was nearly the death of her son. The significance of the word “birth” shuttles forwards and backwards between Whitelaw’s

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<sup>75</sup> Hamlet is “out of joint” from birth; his tragedy is created and “attested by birth itself when it dooms someone to be the man of right and law only by becoming an inheritor, redressor of wrongs” (Derrida 2006: 25).

child and her ability to shape verbal and artistic creation. Both offer entry to the world; both promise pain and death. Billie Whitelaw's disappearance into plays gained traction on the stage but also demonstrates the haunting division between screens and bodies.

§ TELEVISION SANS IMAGES – MEMORY SANS MACHINES – DEATH SANS FEAR §

Marvin Carlson observes that “[a]ll theatre [...] is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition” (11), but the shapes of ghosts change as they adapt theatrical technologies. Samuel Beckett's teleplays tell ghost stories of a modern kind by reflecting on contemporary technologies of recognition. At the same time, his stories tell of age-old fears and desires. His actors are ghosts who, in becoming one of the mediums of memory, speak of themselves and their own creations. For all intents and purposes, theatre can tell how ghosts *are* the media in which memory is expressed, and thus it explains how the ghost stories it tells are also stories told by ghosts, whether in an actor's gestures and voice or in the effect of a camera's gaze that leaves a residue of images for the screen. Samuel Beckett's plays drew from technological modernity's gothic undertones a shape in which the deeply human emotions and fears surrounding death and identity gained purchase. In short, Beckett wove threads of literature and history into modernity (Casanova 2006: 13). He did so by harnessing new and unexpected technologies into the services of memory and the logic of ghosts.<sup>76</sup> Edgar Wind reminds us that “a vision without instrument is an equivocal ghost” (83). For Beckett, vision returns the voice, long the instrument of expression, to its proper realm as the figure in which media reflect on themselves. His experiments with technological modernity carve new ways to tell ghost stories from the old dramatic tradition of stage ghosts; they contribute to the media possibilities visible in modern technologies of globalization and culture (Boxall 148). Their phantasmagoria of forms and figures of near-humanity proclaim the haunting failures of memory in a theatrical language shaped by transforming media. Beckett's

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<sup>76</sup> Casanova's argument touches on mine though without attending to ghosts in the same way. For her, Beckett's work in radio plays experiment with modern ways to present dialogue and, with his use of music and television, exemplify “Beckett's wish to transform literature and have it attain a formal modernity that it had lacked and still did” (2006: 82).

“literature of the unword” gained a full repository of televisual shape, sound, colour, and spectrality. The argument can be easily summarized thus: theatre is a machine that tells ghost stories through the shapes of ghosts.

As the plays considered above suggest, spectrality appears at moments in which drama poses a question of its relationship with death. Moments before she cuts her daughter Josie’s throat, Marina Carr’s Hester Swane tells her not-yet-terrified daughter that she will “take ya with me, I won’t have ya as I was, waitin’ a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don’t” (339). Hester’s wounded death-dealing merely hastens what for many others is a seemingly passive act of waiting for the end – or for something encapsulated by the end. Melancholic refusals of absence unsurprisingly conjure up ghosts. Such is the approach of Beckett’s men and women who seek to call others into being through abstract technologies of words and memory. They include also McPherson’s Valerie and Jack, a lonely mother and an old bachelor waiting for those who will never arrive. Sizwe Banzi too faces a mortifying choice that leads to a certain “death.” The wound of absence riddles each of these characters much the way that sunlight dapples the ground under a tree – or as haunting memories fester in the mind. The ending of *Shades* takes up Mouth’s long, fearful *cri de coeur*, but it could perhaps be spoken by many of these characters. The cry descends from an old tradition of shame and fear. In Homer, for example, Odysseus recalls to his companions how

the dead came surging round me,  
 hordes of them, thousands raising unearthly cries,  
 and blanching terror gripped me – panicked now  
 that Queen Persephone might send up from Death  
 some monstrous head, some Gorgon’s staring face!  
 I rushed back to my ship (ll. 23-28).

Fearing the face of death, a skull’s visage, and his own transformation into a stone sculpture by way of the female Gorgon, Odysseus flees, having not Perseus’ mirror to reflect the fear of death back on her already-dead face. It is important to note that where

Fagles translates “panicked,” Lattimore renders “green fear” (633), thus emphasizing fear’s sickly pallor and shame. Beckett’s work recalls Odysseus’ story. The Gorgon’s face is uncannily like Billie Whitelaw’s ghostly camouflage in patterns of shade and shadow. Beckett’s teleplays are that mirror Odysseus lacked. They offer audiences a mechanical reflection of death – a *memento mori* – through which to confront death. The medium-turned-mirror of self-reflection trains one eye to survival and the other to ghosts.

Such drama is driven by spectrality. It adopts the technical nature of the uncanny that has its direct figure in the ghost and, in this, a ghost is “the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the spectre in literature” (Cixous 1976: 543). Who knows why Odysseus feared the Gorgon’s stare. Perhaps he feared that her look foretold death, as indeed it did. More dangerously, perhaps Odysseus was nearly-petrified by his desire for his own death that he saw reflected in those haunting eyes. Contemporary tellings suggest that it is finally the oceanic voices of a host of matriarchal ghosts seeking the blood Odysseus has brought them that turns him to distress and fear, and not the by-now-tired look of the Medusa. For Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, in “Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women,” these ghosts tell of the nature of artifice, its shadowy properties and gendered history, as much as they speak in spectral absence of the women themselves figured.

A hiss like thunder, all their voices  
 Broke on him; he fled  
 For the long ship, the evening sea,  
 Persephone’s poplars  
 And her dark willow trees. (35)

As Herbert Blau observed of Beckett’s work, so too does the story of Odysseus stink of mortality (83). In the look of death, there is a little of dying already; in the transformative potential of a medium there is already a machine. In a search for life something ghostly and unsettling lingers. Such ghosts can be ameliorated only because of their relative thinness, but when allowed to flourish fear and ghosts can become a thundering of voices or a piercing gaze. Beckett’s boldness in confronting Medusa is that he foregoes the

polished shield of Perseus and chooses instead to see the death embedded in writing and artistic creation in its true, inevitable nature: as a function of the machine in which humans dedicate their sense of “self-expression” but that instead consumes them to leave only trace, memory, or ghost. Yet art suggests another response to what Homer called the living’s “green fear” and “blanching terror” in the face of death: precisely the “fourth case” of ...*but the clouds...*, in fact. The only thing to be done is mourn, move on, and take up the burden of the living once again. Drama proves more than alert to the task. Another sound made by living is the *keen*, a lament traceable in English from Irish roots that, when analyzed as a linguistic form of intensity and political community imagining, entails a recognition of ghosts in language and mourning. Little surprise.

## 2.7

### Haunting Oceans, Mourning Languages: J.M. Synge and Derek Walcott

[T]here is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning.

Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (1993)

In his old age, Samuel Beckett once told James Knowlson that J.M. Synge’s plays “had influenced his own theatre most of all” (1996: 71). He was not the only writer to feel Synge’s influence and, in a famous interview with Edward Hirsh, Derek Walcott also declared his respect for the Irish playwright. The St. Lucian playwright stressed the influence of one play in particular on his own of a half-century later, *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954).<sup>77</sup> On reading Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904), Walcott told Hirsh:

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<sup>77</sup> Walcott is not the first to reimagine *Riders to the Sea*. For overtly political reasons, in 1937 Bertolt Brecht wrote *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* [*Senora Carrar’s Rifles*] as an adaptation set in an Andalusian fisherman’s cottage in April 1937. *Die Gewehre’s* English translation, produced by London’s Unity Theatre, toured to raise support and funds for the Spanish conflict (Jones 1994: 24). Athol Fugard’s *Klaas and the Devil* (1956) also adapts *Riders to the Sea*, this time in a South African context. Synge’s later *Playboy of the Western World* was similarly taken up by Mustapha Matura in *Playboy of the West Indies* as an example of what C.L. Innes judges “almost a line-by-line translation [of *Playboy*] into a West Indian patois, with the same storyline of a supposed parricide lionized by the deprived (and slightly deprived) patrons of a small Trinidadian village rum shop” (128). Nor does the chain of influence end here. *The Sea at Dauphin* stands comparison with a later play by Slade Hopkinson, *The Onliest Fisherman* (1967) in which, significantly, “the lure of the sea betrays all other aspects of human life” (Omotoso 104).

I realized what he had attempted to do with the language of the Irish. He had taken a fishing-port kind of language and gotten beauty out of it, a beat, something lyrical. Now that was inspiring, and the obvious model for *The Sea at Dauphin*. (Hirsh 288)

Along with their linguistic similarities, the two one-act plays share a significant formal structure, a “beat”: the lyrical rhythm of mourning work performed by a small family or community responding to loss. In *Riders to the Sea*, an Irish family made up of Maurya and her two daughters contends with the drowning of two of the family’s sons, Michael and Bartley. In *The Sea at Dauphin*, fishermen Afa and Augustin face the suicide of Hounakin, Augustin’s relative, as well as the past deaths of a number of fellow fishermen at sea and, in particular, Afa’s friend Bolo. Spectral emanations of loss disturb both plays; both impoverished groups of mourners are haunted by memories of those lost at sea. The lyric power of their language reflects a melancholic fascination with the dead. Both writers’ relation to dominant English discourses in language and culture redoubles the intensity that mourning brings to language. Walcott, a Saint Lucian writer, and Synge, an Irish writer, illustrate the paradigmatic power of minoritarian writers making intensive and even politically revolutionary use of mourning language. This chapter explores methods of linguistic intensification to examine how the plays achieve similar effects in their respective literary traditions. It investigates how they create “beauty” – a beat – in what Walcott deemed “a fishing-port kind of language” by turning on the figure of the ghost, not a Gothic figure made of bed sheets but the living memory of a person lost to the sea. Synge and Walcott thus illustrate a case study in the role of ghosts as a form of technological abstraction in the intensification of language situated in a global context.

#### § SHORT SKETCH FOR MINORITARIAN THEATRE §

Synge’s and Walcott’s languages are deeply influenced by each writer’s minoritarian position on the global stage: distant from England yet using English, they write from a pressurized position of geographical smallness chafing against hegemonic power, and they take advantage of the enormous linguistic charge thus generated. The closeness of



this position and its considerable effect on dramatic expression serves as a point from which to compare their work. Paul Breslin argues that the “surge” of language is common to both plays, “the sense of releasing lyrical possibilities in the speech of people whose lives might seem, to an unsympathetic observer, as hard and barren as the rocks of Aran or Dauphin themselves” (87). Minoritarian writing demonstrates language’s ability to release marginalized perspectives on consciousness. Languages used in a normative way by dominant political multiplicities can be reshaped from their geographical or cultural peripheries. Writers who form minorities within a language used by a clearly defined majority of speakers, such as Irish, Caribbean, or South African Anglophones enmeshed in English imperial discourses, can effect drastic change as they disrupt and restructure language. If dominant English is a kind of imperial mainland, such writers trace its heterogeneous and changing shore. Along this border are the regional dialects, creoles, and creative admixtures that constitute the contact zone between English and other languages, and from which new expressive potentials are released.<sup>78</sup>

The peripheral or “fishing-port” position of writers such as Synge and Walcott creates opportunities for linguistic revivification, if ones fraught with challenge. In this

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<sup>78</sup> By now W.B. Yeats’ old observation that Synge was “by nature unfitted to think a political thought” (1961: 319) has been roundly dismissed. The current argument seeks again to prove Synge’s work political, if in an unexpected way, for Yeats’ contention has crept back into critical language (see, for instance, an illustrative comparison of Walcott’s *Sea at Dauphin* and *Riders to the Sea* in Breslin, 87). Yeats is more helpful when in “The Reform of the Theatre” he argues “we must make speech even more important than gesture upon the stage” (ctd. in Benson 36). Prioritizing language in this way – by creating a written language that would orthographically represent dialect – politicized Irish theatre and turned it from the comedic pantomimes of the nineteenth century. Beckett’s later plays such as *Act Without Words I & II* (1956 / 1956) slightly reform the Irish theatre of gestures, yet he found speech a more convincing realm for drama.

Politics descend from a history of gestural interpretation, which is to say from a monological approach to language. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who offer the examples of Kafka, an Ashkenazi Jew writing in German, as well as Joyce and Beckett, Irishmen writing in English, argue that such minoritarian uses of language have the revolutionary power to challenge and estrange the dominant use of that language, thus opening it to new forms of enunciated experience. Writing in broad strokes, they argue that minoritarian writers might create “another possible community [...] another consciousness and another sensibility” (1986: 17-18). This is possible in the language arts since, as Deleuze and Guattari argue elsewhere, there is

no language in itself, nor any universality of language, but a discourse of dialects, patois, slangs, special languages. There exists no ideal ‘competent’ speaker-hearer of language, any more than there exists a homogenous linguistic community. [...] There is no mother tongue, but a seizure of power by a dominant tongue within a political multiplicity. (2003: 7)

In this light the minoritarian use of language demonstrated here by an Anglo-Irish writer and an Anglophone St Lucian writer can be judged a political disruption—a vibrant break, a sudden shout—of an imperial seizure of power, seizing power only to calcify language; it is a disruption that refashions social consciousness, literary tradition, and, implicitly, political landscapes.

regard Synge's dramatic influence is famous. Pascale Casanova observes that the Irish playwright popularized "a new, free, modern idiom, impertinent in its rejection of the usages of a written language that was fixed, dead, rigidified" (2004: 310). Montserratian poet and scholar E.A. Markham notes that West Indian writers similarly modify English with distinctive stresses and imagery (138); the ensuing language, in Kamau Brathwaite's judgement, possesses the power of "a howl or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave" (1984: 13).<sup>79</sup> In particular, as M. NourbeSe Philip draws attention to and as Lindon Barrett discusses in *Blackness and Value*, for black North Americans "the shout continued to form the principle context in which black creativity occurred" (Stuckey 95, cf. Barrett 62-65; Philip 196). Minoritarian changes to dominant languages effectively intensify language. They reject calcified meanings, expose dead metaphors and, on the whole, stretch normative expectations about linguistic possibilities. Intensity, a property of difference, individuates language according to the principle of dynamic reversibility that dictates that where pressure exists, so too does a potential for great change. As language is intensified and individuated it becomes open to radical alteration. In this regard, the stance of the minoritarian writer torn between linguistic heritages is only with difficulty distinguished from the creative if solipsistic generation of an avant-garde idiolect.<sup>80</sup>

Like other literary traditions across the reaches of a post-imperial landscape, Irish and Saint Lucian linguistic spaces situate writers in a complex relationship with normative English, whether it is spoken next to Irish Gaelic, as in Ireland, or the French and English creoles of Saint Lucia. Each is far from the received pronunciation of metropolitan London. Yet they similarly contest and creatively use the English language. In Africa, Chinua Achebe famously advocated a language "able to carry the weight of my

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<sup>79</sup> There is also an historical angle to the relationship between Irish and the Anglophone Caribbean. So many Irish were transported to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century that they formed the second largest English-speaking group there. Linguist Loreto Todd extrapolates from this to wonder if Irish English has been "in a position to influence Caribbean English from the earliest days of English colonization," as Caribbean linguists "have drawn attention to rhythmic and structural similarities between Irish and Caribbean speech" (111-12). Markham comments that, given Ireland's "complex relationship to English," Irish English literary models were easier for writers from the West Indies to adopt, "without the political self-consciousness that would arise if those models were English" (139).

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Bogue (2004: 69) and Lloyd (1987: 19-26).

African experience [...] a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (1965: 30). Divorced from its imperial prospects, a “new English” oscillates between a desire for global intelligibility and the local expression of minoritarian cultures. Only in this always contested fashion is English “a world language for poets, or at least a semiglobal conduit through which poets encounter, advance, and redirect cross-cultural flows of tropes and words, ideas and images” (Ramazani 2011: 20). Marjorie Perloff argues that this is one of Beckett’s lessons too, that “official English – what we would now call the dominant discourse – can only be dismantled if language is ‘efficiently misused’” (1996: 121). Minoritarian writers, including those from Ireland and the Caribbean, inhabit this conduit as they negotiate different linguistic cultures and reshape language for their own uses.

Although written under very different circumstances, Synge’s and Walcott’s plays reveal similar transformations in their literary cultures. Both playwrights’ dramatic work emerged from the margins of dominant culture and, especially in their early days, was performed by small theatrical movements that coped with limited resources. These plays also challenged conservative assumptions about aesthetic validity. First performed by the Irish National Theatre Society, *Riders to the Sea* confused and repelled its first Dublin audiences. “There are some things which are lifelike and yet quite unfit for presentation on the stage,” an early review commented: “*Riders to the Sea* is one of them” (“Irish National Theatre Society” 1904). A half century later, in 1953, *The Sea at Dauphin* was initially read by the University College of the West Indies Drama society. The next year Errol Hill produced it with the New Company in Trinidad.<sup>81</sup> Revealingly, one of the first

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Breslin observes that the play has substantially changed in its published form, in part to facilitate new global Anglophone audiences who lack the requisite understanding of linguistic nuance. Its St Lucian creole was sometimes difficult for even other islanders to understand. Between the play’s printing in *Tamarack Review* in 1960 and in the FGS collection *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* in 1970, Walcott normalized many moments of patois: in the first lines, for example, “‘ventraide, eh?’ has been changed to ‘Wind hard, eh?’ and the question ‘Ko Debel?’ becomes ‘Where Debel?’; [meanwhile] other patois phrases (‘kai veni,’ ‘Troprhum pas bon’) have simply been dropped” (Breslin 85-86). Breiner further observes that

Walcott has removed specific phrases in the French-based creole of his island language which would present the most immediate stumbling block for his Anglophone readers (as it presumably had for his Jamaican viewers). What he has not changed at all is the syntax of the passage, which remains creole. [...] West Indian readers will recognize the creole speech behind the printed words; other Anglophone readers may hear it only as

reviews of Walcott's play is titled "Not the Stuff for a West Indian Theatre." St. Lucian priest Charles Jesse, another reviewer, objected to the 1954 performances with complaints similar to those lodged against *Riders to the Sea*: "all that is true of life is not fit for human eyes and ears" (King 112). Although as natural as colloquial language, these plays were considered offensively unfit as art perhaps especially because of their genre; in drama, as in poetry, "performance is an open wound of accentual difference [...] not the accent of stress but accents of distressed language, words scarred by their social origins and aspirations" (Bernstein 146). Such disruptions are often normalized. *Riders to the Sea* became an Abbey staple frequently paired with Synge's later *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Similarly, *The Sea at Dauphin* settled into the role of minor classic and won the Best West Indian Play award at Jamaica's 1956 Adult Drama Festival.

Despite the challenges to the dramatic companies that staged them, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Sea at Dauphin* proved to be formative in their respective literary movements. Synge's participation in the Abbey Theatre is widely recognized as crucial to the rebirth of Irish drama in the twentieth century. Already in 1905 Synge's reputation was well established. Hogan and Kilroy observe that, for then-contemporary audiences, "it was Synge, rather than Lady Gregory or [William] Boyle or Padraic Colum, who seemed to typify in the minds of Dubliners the Abbey Theatre" (1976: 55). Such typicality also occasioned conservative disdain. Writers at the nationalist journal *An Claidheamh Soluis* ("The Sword of Light"), for instance, saw the unsettled and even spectral nature of Synge's plays indicative of their author's failings. "While the Anglo-Irish dramatic movement has now been in existence for ten years," *An Claidheamh*'s writers observed, its "net result has been [...] the generation of a sort of Evil Spirit in the shape of Mr J.M.

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picturesque or quaint, but at least their engagement with the play will not be impeded." (33)  
 In Anglophone St Lucia the local language was French Creole, "the language of the poor and the rural," and Walcott's family "grew up with two languages, English and French Creole, but these included another 'language,' the creolized-accented English spoke in St Lucia. French Creole would remain important to Derek's imagination" (King 2000: 31).

Synge” (7).<sup>82</sup> Outside Ireland, assessments by drama critics such as Arthur Walkley spoke positively of Synge’s innovations in dramatic speech. Walkley admirably characterized the language of Synge’s plays as one “spoken with watchful care and slightly timorous hesitation [...]. These Irish people sing our language – and always in a minor key.” Quoting John Milton’s “Il Penseroso,” Walkley complimentarily deems the play’s language “most musical, most melancholy” (146). Not only was Synge perceived as one of the foremost dramatists of the revolutionary Abbey Theatre, admirers and detractors both sensed that his work bore the unsettling imprint of melancholic grief.

Walcott’s contribution to Caribbean theatre is similarly influential. Speaking broadly, but in no uncertain terms, Kole Omotoso argues that Walcott’s early plays “redeem Caribbean drama and theatre” in the 1950s (62). For Christopher Innes, “at least until the 1980s, Walcott was the sole Caribbean dramatist of any stature, while his Trinidad Theatre Workshop (TTW) remained the only company with extensive expertise” (76). Like the Abbey Theatre, the TTW broke new ground for emergent theatrical companies and linguistic expression. In particular, *The Sea at Dauphin* is an early example of hybridization of French creole in Anglophone theatre. Part of a resurgence of interest in folk culture (King 111, Emery 194), Walcott drew from marginalized local culture and Saint Lucian colloquialisms while adopting a few English (or Anglo-Irish) dramatic conventions in his early plays. Characters from fishing communities such as Dauphin “speak for themselves and express their communal predicament and vibrancy more or less in their own terms,” Edward Baugh writes; they use “a language derived from their native creole, with its homegrown poetic imagery and phrasing, its own earthy and proverbial authority and eloquence” (68). After Walcott, creole became an accepted or at least precedented mode of dramatic expression.

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<sup>82</sup> Writing after Yeats’ play *Countess Cathleen*, Padraic Pearse used *An Claidheamh Soluis* to write against the very idea of the Irish Literary Theatre which he called “dangerous [...]. If we once admit the Irish literature in English idea, then the language movement is a mistake. [...] Let us strange it at its birth” (157).

Synge's play also draws on folk tradition as a marginal discourse with the potential to challenge dominant discourses and normative expectations. And yet Synge's peasantry, inspired by the Inishmaan islanders, proved too weird, too intensely grotesque for urban nationalists. Pithily, Yeats observed in 1919 of urban Irish audiences that "Synge they have at least hated" (1962: 254). The reason for this hatred was clear: the uncanny element to Synge's drama of the everyday went against the visions charted by nationalist mythography. Daniel Corkery, revivalist author of *The Hidden Ireland*, argued that the Irish peasantry stands unchanging, and almost outside of time. To him, Synge perverts folk culture as if the playwright had decided to invert Shakespeare's famous injunction to "Hold the mirror up to nature." Instead, Corkery wryly suggests, Synge's plays "Hold the mirror, not up to nature, but up to nature's freaks!" (314). Corkery thoroughly rejects the intensity of Synge's presentation of Irish folk culture on the stage, deeming it abnormal and destabilizing.<sup>83</sup> What Corkery saw as freakish, however, reflects affective intensities in the mourning language of Synge's play.

#### § TO MOURN BY THE SEA §

The theme of mourning holds consistent across Synge's and Walcott's plays. It effectively redoubles their minoritarian linguistic intensities. Confronting the irruption of loss into a marginal community, both plays stretch language to the limit of its expressive capacity. At moments of pure grief language becomes a wordless *keening* or, in the word's Irish origins, *caoinim* or *caoineadh*: a cry of lament. Writing about his time spent on the Inishmaan islands, Synge found in the islanders' grieving a pained sound in which "the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant [...] in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they [mourners] shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all

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<sup>83</sup> In fairness to Corkery, his position was one taken up against those nineteenth-century liberals such as Jeremy Bentham who privileged reason and the newspaper over the supernatural and the oral, a near precise inversion of values held by dramatists such as Synge and Yeats. Praising the ironically magical powers of the rational newspaper (in this case *Harper's*), Bentham wrote that "before this talisman, not only devils but ghosts, vampires, witches, and all their kindred tribes are driven out of the land, never to return again, for the touch of holy water is not as intolerable to them as the bare smell of printer's ink" (1839: 400). It is difficult to say what Bentham would have made of *The Onion*.

doomed” (1962: 75).<sup>84</sup> Synge recognized that language’s confrontation with loss occupies a powerful threshold. By staging the moment of loss, a play gains a high coefficient of intensity, for as grief reveals itself in the mourning actor, language reaches – it stretches – towards what it cannot provide: access to the lost object of desire. At this threshold mourners seek to keep the dead from oblivion; through language, the living are haunted by the absent presence of the dead. Like all mourning work, however, this language risks melancholic obsession, a danger it avoids only by dissolving memory’s obsessions into phantasmal images. Although staged, language’s power holds true. Precisely this mournful use of language brings these plays to an intensity that contributes to their minoritarian disruption of normative English, granting them dramatic power as they rapidly – in one act – stage the dissolution of obsession and hold close the ghosts of loss.

Significantly, the dead of both plays are fishermen who have been lost to the sea. This topographical gesture aligns the works with a tradition of island writing that foregrounds the ocean as “a vital component of island identity” (DeLoughrey 803). Maurya, the primary character of *Riders to the Sea*, knows that the sea is a realm more closely associated with spectral unsettlement than with spiritual consolation. She rejects any interference by the community’s young priest, saying that “It’s little the like of him knows of the sea” (21). Maurya is perhaps echoing folk belief that, as Declan Kiberd points out, considered a priest’s intrusion into the fishing world unlucky (164). More trenchantly, she understands the sea’s power to swallow loss and forestall consolation. While the sea takes in and hides the bodies of the dead, it leaves their vanishing place unmarked and unremarkable. There are, in Robert Pogue Harrison’s words, “no gravestones on the sea. [...] It closes over rather than keeps the place of its dead” (12). Such inscrutability disturbs the ability of mourners to remember the dead. As Derrida observes, “[n]othing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt:

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<sup>84</sup> In his time on the Aran Islands Synge attempted to capture what he saw as the intensity of the *caoine*, an excess of grief that explodes the univocal origin of utterance into the expression of a people. His characteristically dramatic description more broadly contends that the “grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island [...] who feel[s] their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and sea” (1962: 75).

one *has to know* who is buried where” (2006: 9). This knowledge is exactly what proves impossible for the dead “lost” at sea. Like some vast and unreadable archive, the sea engenders melancholy in its irrefutable evidence to historical absence.<sup>85</sup> “Where are your monuments,” Derek Walcott asks in “The Sea is History” – only to answer “The sea / has locked them up.” Facing this oceanic emblem of oblivion, both plays examine how shore dwellers inhabit a threshold that mediates topography and perception, the ocean and the mainland: between the living, who are present, and the lost, who are drowned.

Afa, the main character of *The Sea at Dauphin*, offers two hypotheses for interpreting the sea while he mourns his friends: “Some say this sea is dead fisherman laughing. Some say is noise of all the fisherwoman crying. Sea in Dauphin never quiet. Always noise, noise” (57). Laughing and crying are both too much for figurative representations that simply cannot stretch to accommodate their affective intensity. As a result, affect overturns conventional linguistic operations. These expressions of disquieted grief establish a bond between the ungrounded place of the dead and the living who, haunted by those lost at sea, cry out without consolation at its edges. Kept by such grief are the ghosts who occupy living thresholds of loss. Harrison reminds us that mourners who grieve those lost at sea “suffer a special form of anguish. [...] Their grief is unceasing in that it lies at an enormous, untraversable remove from [the dead’s] remains” (12). This distance is temporal as much as physical, a psychological yearning refuted by implacable material absences and compounds the usual feeling of time at sea, which changes from that on land; “sea time,” poet Alastair Reid explains, “is as close to a blank present as one can come” (39). A gulf of time and space can be crossed by a ghost, the medial figure of time disjointed. Oceanic grief suggests that it is “almost as if the intimacy of human time at the heart of natural time depends on keeping one’s dead close by, within an earthly realm of presence” (Harrison 12). Intimacy may well be the watchword of the ghost, the

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<sup>85</sup> The unreadable archive offered by the ocean materially instantiates the archival tendency Boulter discerns in Murakami’s prose where “the archive – be it human, a (psycho-)geographical location, an architectural structure – is always a spectral site, a ghostly zone where history is preserved in a fluctuating, fluid, yet *inevitably returning* form” (2011: 16). Thus an ocean’s waves sometimes return objects from its depths to shore, but only in a transformed state.



secret-sharer whose haunting power is at times unwelcome and unchosen. A ghost's aseptic message bears an urgency current to only to human time, every second stolen from a certain death; it carves the shape and sound of its secret from inhuman oblivion in the sea's timeless archive much as fishermen dredge their livelihoods from the sea's living riches. Yet as the mute figures of Synge's play show, ghosts have exactly nothing to say and no secret to reveal.

The ocean's influence suggests why neither play entirely allows the efficacy of traditional mechanisms for coping with loss. Walcott's embittered fisherman Afa suggests consolation is a false hope. "If compassion you want talk to the sea," he says, "ask it where Bolo bones, and Rafael, and friends I did have before you even born" (53). Absence with no promise of amelioration has usurped consolation's place. Standard syntax has been similarly disrupted. Ghosts – phantoms of language – figure these alterations, just as they resist consolatory gestures. The plays' ghosts dwell by the sea, the disappearing point of loss. "There does be a power of young men floating round in the sea," Maurya reminds us (23). Thus, as Maria McGarrity writes, "the deep ocean functions as a depository, an entity that takes, preserves, and yields matter up to the poet in altered form" (98).<sup>86</sup> Ghosts are kept hidden in language through the names spoken by the living, even when the proof of death – the corpse – is sometimes visible, as in Synge's play. The word's spoken half-life is a dramatic invocation but not quite a definitive presence. Susan Cole argues that themes of mourning are one of tragic drama's oldest markers. She defines the genre, in fact, as a "performance of ambivalence on behalf of an absent presence" (1). For Cole, as for my argument at present, tragedy's ghosts are "a concession to the fact of death but not to the prospect of annihilation" (11). The fishermen are lost to the sea, but not lost entirely. Once they are given over to the place of loss, they cannot be found to be dead. In this ambivalent state they can be neither wholly forgotten nor entirely remembered. Their names remain to haunt the living.

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<sup>86</sup> In this the sea works in parallel to mourning itself, at least in Judith Butler's terms: "One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation [...] the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (23).

The most powerful speeches of either play are those in which spectral absence riddles the fabric of language. When Maurya and Afa burst into eloquent recitations of those they have lost they reach linguistic peaks characterized by repetition, catachresis and a catching rhythm. Maurya's speech in *Riders to the Sea* deserves full quotation:

I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. ... There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on one plank, and in by the door. [There is a noise, as if a cry "*by the seashore*"] There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it—it was a dry day, Nora—and leaving a track to the door. (21)

The door opens at this point and women enter, uncannily re-enacting the events in Maurya's remembrance speech as if, to remember Billie Whitelaw's interactions with Beckett's scripts, the actor takes up the authority of the director or playwright and, through ghostly powers, having seen through time, foretells what will happen next (Roche 2015: 59). Entranced by memories of the men she has named, Maurya asks, "half in a dream," "Is it Patch, or Michael, or what is it at all" (21). At a threshold where time and place lose their shape, the names of the dead merge with images of the living to gain ghostly substance. The ocean's water uncannily enters the home, as does its prophecy of loss. Caught in spectral repetition and interrupted only by the cry of breaking language, Maurya does not distinguish among certain dead of the past (Patch), the present disappearing before her eyes (Michael), and the future's uncertainty. With her is the

audience, caught in her incantatory vision. Maurya fractures time. At this threshold time is accretionary and no longer linear, built up of presences and absences: a refuge where *sens* (sense and meaning) disappears into a linguistic intensity where “surface effects [...] haunt the bodies of words like fogs or auras emanating from their superficialities,” as Bogue writes elsewhere (2003: 163). Rather characteristically, ghosts begin to “appear in a time to which they do not belong” (Rudd 173). It is difficult not to see in Maurya a figural echo of Yeats and Gregory’s Cathleen ní Houlihan – for Roche “it is impossible entirely to extirpate the symbolic resonance of such a figure” (2015: 36) – but her political intercession returns the vision to its microscopic level of immediate loss even as it makes one of the grandest gestures possible: the refusal of time and the decreation of perceptual space. Thus Maurya’s lament for her sons grounds the formerly nationalist discourse of political mourning in a firmly economic and psychological vision of everyday reality.

In *The Sea at Dauphin* Afa gives a structurally analogous performance that, like Maurya’s visional oratory, recites the names of the dead in a speech characterized by disjointed time and syntax. In contrast, however, Afa’s words gains dramatic power by being stretched over a grimace and a threat. Clearly angry, and undeterred by his shipmate Augustin’s pleas for calm, Afa delves into the gruesome fate of the drowned. “[E]very night it getting whiter,” Afa says, describing the sea’s increasing uncanniness,

Since Bolo drown. Everybody say Boileau would never drown. And Habal, Habal drowning there last year. And in September is not Annelles, Gacia brother they find two mile behind Dennery, one afternoon a boy catching crab, walking, see him on sand, when all the *maitre* boat looking for him by Trou Pamphile, his body swell, and the boy turn this thing with his foot and when he finish it was Annelles, drown like what, like Raphael, and Boileau. Ay, Augustin behind! (58)

From the memory of lost friends to the swollen corpse that “was” and “is not Annelles,” Afa’s speech propels clipped clauses toward an explosive yet ominously predictable revelation of death in a language unravelled of its formal bonds. Shortly after, in the same tone, Afa will ask another character “[w]here is Habal, Raphael, Annelles, Boileau? Sun

breaking, papa, talk fast” (62). Unlike Maurya’s trance, Afa’s speech is characterized by anger and interrogation, but he too sees a vision. Thus the warning of an imagined spatial threat: “behind!” Constant to both is a telling repetition of names and an absence of words that would make the syntax grammatically normative; constant, then, is an intensity of minoritarian language that comprehends loss and challenges representation.<sup>87</sup>

Maurya and Afa’s speeches interrupt conventional stories of living through loss. Their mournful invocations draw on the inaccessible and melancholic archive of the ocean. The haunted logic of naming loss holds open a linguistic threshold across which ghosts pass, and it colludes with the minoritarian position of formal estrangement to endow these plays with linguistic intensity. The effect, abstracted, is audible as a sound, a keening lament or an angry shout, in which the actors destabilize dominant uses of language through strangeness and a forbidding intimacy with the dead. Language reaches toward the aseptic ocean for a sound resembling “dead fisherman laughing [...] fisherwomen crying [...] noise, noise.” And, of course, *Riders to the Sea* goes so far as to perform the *caoine*, a cry of sorrow for the dead Eavan Boland describes as “an art of the dispossessed [...] part a fresh-spoken grief and part an age-old formula” (2011: 53-54). The lament was so disconcerting to Synge’s actors that they were uncomfortable witnessing and performing it – little surprise given that the visceral influence of laughter and sobbing make up an “innate repertoire” of prosodic intensities rarely harnessed for everyday speech (Rotman 96), but also indicating how exotic such conscious adoption of a Western Irish tradition was to the urban actors charged to perform it convincingly.

#### § HAUNTED BY INTENSITY §

What kind of ghost stories are these plays of mourning work? The “ghosts” that haunt *The Sea at Dauphin* and *Riders to the Sea* are neither Synge’s púca-like grey horse nor

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<sup>87</sup> The plays’ gestures echo differences between Maurya’s trancelike state and Afa’s volatility. Thus the gestures of *Riders to the Sea* express grief or agitation but not anger” while those of *The Sea at Dauphin* “become increasingly charged with barely restrained violence” (Breslin 87). This difference can be traced to the different genders of the plays’ characters which influence changes in theatrical stagings (Synge’s domestic interior, Walcott’s working outdoors) and cast ensemble (the majority of Synge’s characters are women, Walcott’s are men).

Walcott's absent fishermen per se. The spectres told of by these plays take shapes unfamiliar to the Irish Gothic and foreign to the folkloric duppies and bugaboos described by earlier colonial writers in the West Indies such as Edward Long and Matthew Gregory Lewis.<sup>88</sup> In Synge's and Walcott's works, ghosts are haunting reminders of loss embodied by the proper names kept current in the plays' circulating, changing, even keening language. Rather than settling for conventional gothic tropes, these plays keep open the haunted space of a proper name after its owner's disappearance, and in this way they include the absent or lost in their communities through a political language of dispossession and inheritance. For Derrida any politics requires an "organization of the time and space of mourning" and, more, "an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost [...] an open hospitality to the guest as *ghost*, whom one holds, just as he holds us, hostage" (1993: 61-62). Reframed as a question of the theatre, the work of politics implies a double responsibility towards tragedy and towards the ghost carried inside the gesture of the name. Theatre creates and reinforces transhistorical political communities in which tragedies exemplarize forms of identity with the capacity to address loss.<sup>89</sup>

In this context mourning work redoubles its own unsettling power to transform grief into a formative social discourse through the present absence of linguistic signs and signifiers. Grief's language might "make and unmake the world" (Ramazani 2011: 85). Elaine Scarry argues that loss and language are intimately linked and heavy with pain:

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<sup>88</sup> On the general subject of the Irish Gothic see W.J. McCormack's seminal "Irish Gothic and After (1820–1945)" (1991) and *Dissolute Characters* (1993). For colonial West Indian writers, see Long 416, *passim*, and Lewis 98. Lewis is notable for his novel *The Monk* (1796) and his play *The Castle Spectre* (1797). The gothic here is more akin to Walcott's "West Indian Gothic" in "Another Life" (1973).

<sup>89</sup> As Jane Plasow observes, "a people without some sense of communal identity become fundamentally disempowered and negated at a profound level of their personal sense of being. [...] [T]heatre not only examines the resultant sense of loss [...] but also attempts to take part in the healing process of asserting culture and identity. (1-2) Ngugi wa Thiong'o deems this the power to defy the "culture bomb" of dominant and imperial culture which otherwise threatens to "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, and ultimately in themselves" (6). Hence the stark fact that for the minoritarian community "culture is not a mere superstructure; all too often [...] the physical survival of minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture" (JanMohamed and Lloyd 6). Constructing and changing the discourses and possibilities that shape individuals without normative forms of cultural representation, language is crucial to survival and under this pressure, might change drastically, quickly, and unpredictably. It is in this way that Synge's and Walcott's drama stage political questions in relationship to local and individual instances of material and cultural poverty.

To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been [...] present at the birth of language itself. (6)

Staging this moment when language is stretched almost beyond recognition, cast into grief, and left to dwell beside the reticent oceanic deeps, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Sea at Dauphin* dramatize the threshold where language dies to be reborn. Dramatic events shape the use and history of an English language extended beyond its usual subject matter, context and even syntax. The imperial English language does not “die” in these haunted anti-colonial plays; rather, it is staged at an intensified threshold of acculturation. However insubstantial, these ghosts remain, linguistic equivalents to memorials such as Jason deCaires Taylor’s underwater sculpture *Vicissitudes* (2006) – a circle of shackled figures holding hands and facing outwards – off the coast of Moilinere Bay, Grenada. The plays’ names, like the sculpture’s figures, host the ghosts of the lost, whether intending to do so or not.<sup>90</sup> Synge’s and Walcott’s plays stage the moment when the memory of loss is committed to language through mourning. They demonstrate one type of linguistic change: the intense expression of grief by a minoritarian writer.

Terms such as “birth” and “death” are limited, however, especially when applied to the fluctuating collection of systems called language. As Daniel Heller-Roazen laconically observes, “[e]ven those scholars willing to attribute exact dates to the death of languages hesitate to make pronouncements on their birth, although in principle, if one can mark with certainty the moment at which a tongue ends, it should be possible to identify the point at which one begins. The problem is that noticeable events in the time

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<sup>90</sup> Both Taylor and America’s Black Holocaust Museum argue that *Vicissitudes* does not concern the Middle Passage. “I was just making sculptures of different kids holding hands,” Taylor says (92). Cf. America’s Black Holocaust Museum, “*Vicissitudes*: NOT Sculptural Homage to Victims of the Middle Passage” (2012). Despite such disavowals, the Middle Passage haunts this sculpture-turned-monument. Its images are simply too strongly associated with the place and the bodies of African slaves murdered during the Atlantic crossing.

of languages are rare; and where they can be perceived, they seem less of the order of death than of metamorphosis” (2005: 67). Considering Heller-Roazen’s cautions, there is surely something important to note in the periodic repetition of a play’s performance, its repeating insistence on imbricating language in the gestures of bodies in space through multiple stagings across time. We can perhaps see the untimely birth and death of language as non-iterative *textual* events – taken out of time, but performed again and again. “What some would liken to a moment of death, in many cases, seems not an event at all but a threshold” (Heller-Roazen 2005: 68). At this threshold of intensities between life and death, and in extension of the gesturing figures emanating from the full and empty sea, language takes on the semblance of a phantasm, a spectral flicker between past and future. It is precisely a spectro-poetics that linguist Claude Hagège evocatively describes in *On the Death and Life of Languages* as the melancholic work of writing:

In the guise of death, for which the silence of the tomb may be the most compelling symbol in human graveyards, something still murmurs and roams about in the graveyards of language, something that could be called life. That is what must be revived. (ix)

Only by refusing the static binary of life and death can metaphysical obfuscations be recognized as such with the eventual aim of recognizing the roles of transformation, translation, intensity and change. Only at that point will we be able to address the real significance of apocalyptic linguistic reports such as the following:

Nothing can be done to reverse or arrest the continuing reduction of distinct languages spoken in the world, although the rate of reduction could be slowed. There were perhaps originally four to five thousand separate languages; by the year 2100, there will be many fewer—perhaps only a few hundred. (Dixon 234)

Yet languages *can* be resuscitated. Hagège quotes Isaac Singer’s comments on receiving the Nobel Prize in literature. Asked why he chose to write in Yiddish, a dying language, Singer replied “I like ghost stories. And I also believe in resurrection. What will all those Jews have to read when they come back to life, if I don’t write in Yiddish?” (qtd. in

Hagège 2009: 330). Janson argues more practically that while a language no longer in use “may represent a great loss of knowledge, skills, and culture,” people will continue to use language – a different language – and thus “‘language shift’ is a more appropriate term” than birth or death to describe the presence of linguistic absence (207). Performances of drama offer iterative events at which this shift can be observed in frozen action.

Elaine Scarry’s identification of pain’s linguistic threshold helps to describe mourners who, feeling themselves haunted, break into cries and laments. The funerary lament traditionally divides the *eikon* from the phantasm, the body from the ghost and, ultimately, the living from the dead (Harrison 147). The lament abandons the already absent corpse to instead address images of loss that are neither recognizable human beings (bodies washed out to sea do not always return) nor a perfect representation (an *eikon*; memory’s ideal form), but rather an erratic and flickering apparition: the image as phantasm, its haunting power the sign of memory’s investment. In mourning, the lament separates obligations from desires. Registering loss, it inaugurates a separation of names and corpses. Death is a singular end and yet it repeats, so that with each death “the whole world is lost, and yet with each we are called to reckon our losses” (Brault and Naas 15). Through this reckoning among desire, names and corpses – all of which survive the loss of a person and so continue to gesture towards something more that they cannot contain: a life – ghosts emerge to shadow the living. What is not certain, however, is whether the grieving lament will remake the world so as to exclude and forget the spectral figures who take shape in the imaginings of language, or if another accommodation is possible, another form of community and another configuration of consciousness in which ghosts might find a home.<sup>91</sup> The lament, in other words, does not properly distinguish between

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<sup>91</sup> While minoritarian writing may change language and influence consciousness, for Brault and Naas languages used for mourning perform a similar function: “we find ourselves at a loss, no longer ourselves, *as if* the singular shock of what we must bear had *altered the very medium in which it was to be registered*” (5) The disconcerting shock of loss returns language to its aleatory point of pure intensity, (once again) Afa’s cries and laughter. As Derrida writes, even if speech seems impossible while mourning, “so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (1989: xvi). While Derrida, Brault and Naas are concerned with the im/possibilities of speech, I am here concerned with the *as if* they offer: *as if* language changes under pressure, *as if* language on the haunted threshold of loss becomes intense, stretched beyond capacity . . . almost. Such a theoretical provocation returns to the question of grief at the moment of articulation and raises the question of the communities in which this language circulates.



mourning and melancholia.<sup>92</sup> In this ambiguity it is anticipated by the ocean for, however disturbing its refusal to surrender up the bodies of the dead, the seductive appeal of the oceanic calm offered by visions of the sea's eternally returning waves and its deep symbolic resonance with concepts of the silent actions below thought – with the unconscious, in short. Laments meet and accept the ambiguity of this symbol.

*Riders to the Sea* and *The Sea at Dauphin* provoke linguistic and political renewal by engendering twin blossomings of cultural activity. However, neither play allows its characters any consolatory recompense. They find only the resolve to continue. “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me,” Maurya exhales at the play’s end (23). Afa speaks some of his last lines pensively looking out on the water. “Last year Annelles, and Bolo, and this year Hounakin,” he says. “And one day, tomorrow, you Gacia, and me” (76). Grief neither festers nor heals, and if mourning has become “modern” and no longer normatively Freudian, as in Jahan Ramazani’s analysis, it is also not unresolvedly melancholic (1994: 4). The plays transform melancholic loss into creative potential. To adapt Walter Benjamin, the phantasms of the work of art translate “an appreciation of the transience of things” into a “concern to rescue them for eternity” (2007: 223). From its dramatic crucible, minoritarian language emerges new but empty-handed, fresh from its mourning watch beside the haunted ocean. Like the characters who speak it, language expresses only its own survival in the face of a spectral *memento mori*. And yet, in performing the work of art, language changes and readies a new expressive potential for Irish and Caribbean speakers. In contrapuntal relationship to this chronology, the manufactured time of grief and elegy brings spectators together. Ramazani argues that elegies have the potential to create “transnational cultural spaces of mourning, spilling grief across boundaries of race, ethnicity and nation.” Literature’s grief constructs “structures of feeling that represent alternatives to modern nationalist efforts to bind mourning within an imagined community of compatriots” (2011: 85). Walcott’s

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<sup>92</sup> See Freud’s “On Mourning and Melancholia.” Contrary to Freud’s separation, however, scholars still admit some confusion over the distinction between mourning and melancholy. As Michael Ann Holly writes in *The Melancholy Art*, “despite Freud, it is difficult to tell them apart” (3).

adaptation of Synge's language subtly binds a network of connections between minoritarian cultures through theatres of mourning and stories about ghosts.

What do the tragedies of Walcott and Synge achieve? They are, to be sure, short and even somewhat isolated plays, trial pieces in the early phase of each playwright's career. Nonetheless, they exemplify how to derive artistic influence from fragility: the power of the minoritarian writer and the power of the voice in the face of death. These plays construct compelling and intimate dramatic homes for their audiences and ghosts alike: this is their danger and their opportunity. In Anne Carson's words,

watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you – may cleanse you of your darkness. Do you want to go down to the pits of yourself all alone? Not much. What if an actor could do it for you? Isn't that why they're called actors? They act for you. You sacrifice them to action. And this sacrifice is a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life. (2008: 7)

Mourning with ghosts by carrying their names, drama's intimacy is shared among the audience, the actor, and the felt presence of the lost. "Paradoxical as it may sound," Susan Cole reminds us, "a representation of loss in theatre, *itself* a transient-as-life mode, is already an enactment of some kind of triumph over loss" (166). Once described, loss is accepted. Yet this is enough, for the act politically reorganizes the space of absence without hastily supplanting it with meaning – its story traces the shape of a ghost without needing to divulge the paltry matter of any *secret* a ghost might expose. A direct appeal to reconnect symbols with material objects, or to insist on the precise connection between actors, bodies, and narrative, will be the inevitable movement of ideological interpretation. The unreadable ghost resists facile use. In the ambivalent but intensified space theatre offers such ghosts, language transforms and stretches to shape new social and individual consciousnesses and identities. The tragic ghost story speaks *to* the audience from the stage but also, using a familiar shape, tries in some way to open a space *for* them to speak. Deleuze and Guattari argue that a minoritarian writer's task is to reshape the language given to them: "to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the

oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality” (1986: 27). Such is the work of mourning language in a minoritarian context, the redoubled intensities of which are staged by the haunted early plays of John Millington Synge and Derek Walcott. These plays do not only provide their respective audiences in Ireland and the Caribbean with a way of comprehending loss and absence. They also model patterns of intensity and change for writers across the Anglophone world and reveal in their distinct minoritarian languages the universal human experience of life’s ultimate rhythm: the ghost’s beat. Among other things, this is a twentieth-century model of the globalgothic.

### 3 Witness to Ghosts

#### 3.1

#### Field Survey: Transnational Poetics and the Globalgothic

[F]orm exists for us only as long as it is difficult to perceive, as long as we sense the resistance of the material, as long as we waver as to whether what we read is prose or poetry.

Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years* (1997)

[H]ermeneutics and poetics, different and distinct as they are, have a way of becoming entangled, as indeed they have since Aristotle and before. One can look upon the history of literary theory as the continued attempt to disentangle the knot and to record the reasons for failing to do so.

Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (1986)

Telling a ghost story and listening to a ghost speak are two very different things. One narrates a sequence of events. The other acts by witnessing, offering precisely the ability to testify to permanence and making possibility the phrase “I see.” To witness a poem enlivens the ghosts of language with rhythm and intensity. But it also displaces the reading subject from the contextual illusion of linguistic solidity. While not entirely rigid, the most severe difference between drama and poetry turns on the rejection of story. Drama *tells* ghost stories to audiences, for whom acting creates a clear but not ineffective or untrue illusion facilitated by various adopted technologies. The hermeneutic recourse to narrative overdetermines storytelling’s hauntological possibilities. When audiences or readers suspect a ghost story is in the offing, they manipulate folds of assumed meaning

to testify to a particular narrative that might *make sense* of the matter.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, to witness a ghost in poetry means that a reader's attention might be drawn to some form of inhuman alterity in order to hear that ghost "speak." Derrida calls the challenge "almost impossible" (2006: 11). If there is a witness, it is through the ear or eye, for poetry's ghosts are figures who *speak* the poem just as they are withdrawn from reality: *abstracted* is to be *abstrahere*, etymologically "drawn away." The lines that carry such a drawing as a verb and a noun gesture back to that which writing technologies abstracts. Such a witness relies on the "lyric I" as a textual feature open to haunting. Unlike the language of narrative, the features of poetry call subjectivity and linguistic materiality into question as they form textual confluences of history, personal identity, and cultural traditions.

This idea – to see ghosts in an *epideictic* form not strictly *mimetic* – requires the theoretical clarification provided by an examination of the basic properties of poetic discourse. Traditional criticism credits lyric poetry with the creation of a detached and "seductively suspended world," often with an emphasis on the adverb (Nicholls 177). Some see poetry as useless or, worse, not to be trusted. Plato's argument in the *Republic* suggests as much and cites distressingly gothic figures among poetry's seductions.<sup>94</sup> For Elaine Scarry, poetry's allegiance to the verbal arts implies that it is both imaginative and decreative. Like a daydream, words call into the imagination things previously unseen; they are counterfactual. Such are the makings of language, precisely its *poetics* or *poiesis*. Yet the verbal arts are counterfactual as well: they replace the structures of imagined creation – "its faintness, two-dimensionality, fleetingness, and dependence on volitional

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<sup>93</sup> Nowhere is this clearer than in the interpretations of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* or similar ghost stories which depend on an abstracted aesthetic and chronological distance between teller and tale. Such acts refuse ghosts as intransitive figures only to insist that what has been abstracted be violently returned to the site of its disappearance, an act often accomplished by inventing new versions of what has gone in place of what might be called the original. Rarely do ghost stories *as stories* permit the ghost to be heard. This unlistening act is exactly why oppositions between prose and poetry break down under examination. With enough narrative violence any form becomes a ghost story.

<sup>94</sup> Socrates asks poets "not to be angry" if poetry was censored of certain passages, "not because they are not poetical or pleasant to hear for most people, but the more poetical they are, the less the boys and the men who hear them should be free, fearing slavery rather than death." Moreover, "the terrifying, fearful names connected with them" must also be dismissed: Cocytus, the river of wailing; Styx, the river of hatred, "those below," "corpses," and all the other similar things of this type that make those who hear them shudder" (387b-c). As Ramona Naddaff summarizes, this objection to poetry and the later objection in book 10 both operate from Socrates' distrust of the human "'desire to desire,' to be the subject of desire, and not of reason" (97). In other words, poetry undermines moderation and rationality.

labour” – with the given features of the perceivable world, reality’s demonstrable clarity, solidity, and duration (Scarry 1999: 38). Counterfactual acts create alternatives to normative reality; counterfactual acts resist fiction’s illusory stability and purchase on perceptual ecosystems.<sup>95</sup> The first makes what is an impasse passable, or an insensate surface sensate (Scarry 1992: 342). The second, in agonistic counterpart, *decreates the made imagination* to produce challenges and impossibilities so that the full relevance, value, and style of creation can be ascertained. A decreative poetics radically imagines and examines what *potential* entails in its abstract state. It is a form of technological investigation into the properties of ghosts.

A poet’s interaction with their literary tradition, perceived contexts, and the power of *remembrance* invests the form with a potential for resistance readers can witness as a ghostly form of representational failure. The analysis of this is called *spectropoetics*, as I will proceed to argue. The importance of spectropoetics is redoubled in traditions of writing where poets struggle to square language against events of the past and present. The exact meaning of remembrance is important. As Agamben writes, remembrance “restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was” (1999: 267). Poetry calls up ghosts *as a form of remembrance*. The following sections of this study ask how to listen to and how to see ghosts in poetry. Both are acts of witnessing. Intensely personal but invariably public, poetry is “expressive” but immediately posthumous. Its lyric subjects are ghostly. Its authors too distant for words. Poetry’s relational, shifting “lyric I” offers witness to ghosts. When language takes up its haunting mantle under poetry’s guide, readers assume the burden of perception.

#### § POETRY AND GLOBALGOTHIC CRITICISM §

It is worth revisiting what a globalgothic framework for poetic analysis entails. Studying lyric poetry in particular under a global or transnational frame may seem risible. W. H.

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<sup>95</sup> While Daniel Dohrn offers two instances of counterfactual acts through grammatical operations – a subjective clause and a rewriting of fiction – Scarry’s definition of the term more precisely seeks counterfactual agency in the properties of translucent verbal creations as models of imagination and perception. Cf. Dohrn 46.

Auden famously observed that poetry is “the most provincial of arts” and thus thought that, in its messy provincialism, poetry resists globalizing homogeny. “[I]n poetry, at least,” the transatlantic poet wrote with some relief, “there cannot be an ‘International Style’” (1968: 32). Much criticism tacitly agrees, whether because of elitist parochialism or for more pragmatic reasons. Bakhtin’s strategic reading of poetry as monological, centripetal, and hermetic (all the better to show off the preferred “dialogic” novel form) demonstrates the pernicious consequences of accepting Romantic views of poetic voice (272-273).<sup>96</sup> Criticism often privileges local aspects of poetry at the expense of an integrationist view, citing the lyric’s concise, subtle, self-reflexive, and affective appeal to readers against prose fiction’s “interdiscursive and intercultural porosity” (Ramazani 2011: 3). Descending under the weight of such arguments, lyric poetry becomes a forbidding object accessible only to the insider or the elitist.

I am of a different mind to Bakhtin and Auden, however, and instead take as a guide statements such as that of Irish poet John Montague, who writes that the “real position for a poet is to be a global-regionalist [...] born into allegiances to particular areas or places and people, which he [or she] loves, sometimes against his [or her] will.” And yet, as Montague continues, poets also “belong to an increasingly accessible world... So the position is actually local and international” (qtd. in O’Driscoll 84). Following such steps, many critics take up poetry looking for shared ground for analysis and critique. Whether for transnational or globalgothic means, the always contested language of English in contemporary poetry points toward possible comparative perspectives. Very often a poet’s *translingual* status proves of interest to critics. Steven Kellman notes that translingualism at once implicates and extricates a writer from any culture’s worldview within the porous borders of the Anglophone world (62). A globalist critical lens reflects the world-crossing lives of the poets it seeks to discuss; it follows the poems as they travel

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<sup>96</sup> Bakhtin’s criticisms recall Georg Lukács’ remarks: “only in lyric poetry is the subject, the vehicle of such experiences, transformed into the sole carrier of meaning, the only reality” (63). “In its experience of nature,” Lukács goes on, “the subject, which alone is real, dissolves the whole outside world in mood, and itself becomes mood by virtue of the inexorable identity of essence between the contemplative subject and its object” (65). Both understandings of lyric poetry have reductive and oddly totalizing assumptions about what poetry’s possible accomplishments.

with their writers.<sup>97</sup> Many poets work against nationalist discourses to create alternative literary cultures that, in turn, merge artistic movements with transnational networks (von Hallberg 186). These travelling compositional spaces craft a “globalization from below” that resists hegemonic forces as it supports networks of creative or adaptive writers. This effort should be distinguished from others such as global regionalism or “glocalizaion,” but also from the commercial globalism of corporate culture and hegemonic English (Goodby 2000: 282). Poetry’s own forms of making provide language the tools to address complex and haunting topics in ways that are globally relevant. This suggestion has everything to do with the way struggles against language within the formal ambit of poetry affords the gothic entry. This chapter examines the topics that shape general movements in different poetic *oeuvre*: gender in Eavan Boland’s poetry, race in Breyten Breytenbach’s, technological possibilities in Samuel Beckett’s writing, and ekphrastic ethics in the poems of David Dabydeen and of M. NourbeSe Philip. Choosing which authors to discuss admixes scholastic felicity, spectropoetic evidence, and choice within the many global discourses of gender, politics, race, ecology, and class. All these bodies of works are crossed through with questions of tradition, language, subjectivity, and ghostliness. Each poet moves in a literary tradition fractured and works with a darkened and haunting sense of the world. To put it bluntly, these poets address questions including 1) how a woman can “speak” in masculinist traditions; 2) how authors can write in racist society; 3) how a subject can “speak” at all; and, lastly, 4) how an event can

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<sup>97</sup> Eavan Boland lived in London for much of her childhood and only later returned to Ireland. She now lives in California and teaches in America while splitting her time with Dublin. Breyten Breytenbach is equally if not more nomadic, travelling between Europe, Africa, and the United States and counting residences in Senegal, Cape Town, New York and Paris while teaching at New York University, the University of Cape Town, and the Gorée Institute in Dakar. Despite her intense privacy, Anne Michaels resides in Toronto, a self-proclaimed international meeting place where, as she writes in *Fugitive Pieces*, “almost everyone has come from elsewhere” (89). Born in Tobago, NourbeSe Philip has lived in Toronto and London, Ontario, while also extensively travelling through West Africa. David Dabydeen, born in Guyana, has spent much of his later life in London, England and has served as the Guyanese ambassador to China since 2010. This brief survey does not serve to describe the strong transhistoric literary traditions familiar to Samuel Beckett, who translated the tumultuous heritage of an Irish Protestant writer while working alongside James Joyce in Paris during the late 1920s (a city that, as Pascale Casanova compellingly argues, was at the time a world city of letters unequalled by any other before it), to say nothing of Beckett’s later trans-Atlanticism.

Only one of the poets discussed here writes solely in English: Anne Michaels. Others use multiple languages: Afrikaans, English and French for Breytenbach; French and English for Beckett; English and translations from Latin for Boland; the grounds between British English and local Caribbean *patois* for Dabydeen; and a mixture of predominantly English work as well as a familiarity with West African languages (and formal legal diction) for Philip.

be “spoken of” after the fact. To introduce these questions, I will first offer a triangulated description of poetics through select *ars poeticas* of Anne Michaels and Adrienne Rich.

I say “global” remembering poetry’s constitutive *universality* and Spivak’s invocation of a planetary consciousness embedded in universality and only dangerously construed as a globe for heuristic geometries. Global is a constructed and dangerous word that “allows us to think that we can aim to control it [the planet]” (Spivak 2003: 72).<sup>98</sup> When paired with the term *gothic* as a critical description, the word *global* gestures toward the necessary investigation into spectropoetic relationships among universalist forces such as birth, death, memory, and humanity, taking into account their specific cultural constructions. A gothic edge to criticism reorients a specific lyric poetics around the subject and object of the ghost, which in turn offers resistance to forces of control and observation. The lyric “performs the material ground of language” (Blasing 28); it is this ground into which human intentions enter and become abstract and untraceable, much like the body enters the grave to be marked only by a gravestone. If a poem is anything at all, it is a listening place for ghosts and a machine for naming the dead. De Man names its purpose as the “art of memory that remembers death, the art of history as *Erinnerung*” (1986: 69). The story of Simonides at the banquet illustrates that the spectropoetic task of

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<sup>98</sup> The universal, which since Plato’s time has distinguished poetry from history and prose, should not be confused with the general, which merely addresses a large number of readers and bears no formal association to either poetry or prose. A general topic often invokes features that anticipated readers could share. Universality addresses a *necessary* feature for readers (von Hallberg 189ff). This explains its ill repute for identity politics in which essentialism in constructed authorial identities provides a likely site for critical or pseudo-philosophical error. Critics of such ideological persuasion therefore prefer generalist ethical paradigms and imperatives.

Concepts of universality gain traction through the inevitable abstraction of human traces into the written form of language. Lyric poetry carries the difference of this trace. Thus J.M. Coetzee and George Steiner call Paul Celan’s work at once “immediate and universal” (Coetzee 1991) but also “so cryptic, so private in its universality as to be almost indecipherable” (Steiner 1989: 95). Celan’s reconstructed lyric humanity underlines Coetzee’s and Steiner’s claims, demonstrating that neither difficulty nor legibility is a mark of the universal. Lyric musicality has no sure claim on truth, and it “undoes as often as it reinforces thematic sense” (von Hallberg 190). So much for identification’s self-consistency and the bugbear of identity politics; so much, too, for Alexander Pope’s precept in “An Essay on Criticism” that “[t]he sound must seem an echo to the sense” (22). The disappearance and resurrection of human voices contributes greatly to the universalist or global shape of spectropoetics which is itself distinguishable from spectral themes. A given theme is not *necessary* to the globalgothic poem in the same way as is the triangular relationship between the work, its author, and language, of which a theme is only a rebus.



poetry is as old as the need for poets to recite the names of the dead, even and especially in a climate of social hostility and economic uncertainty.<sup>99</sup>

The radical social responsibility of listening to ghosts bridges cultural divisions. Even the very word *tradition* engenders the haunted discourse of *Nachleben*. In *Molloy*, Beckett describes the afterlife of culture as a form of survival along two lines: “the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead” (2009: 27). A phrase or a stanza girds language with machinic carriage; a ghostly voice sings the dead’s sonata. The entire apparatus enacts a complex relationship with memory and remembrance. While writing in their own very distinct traditions, the poets discussed here reveal how spectrality irradiates how a constructed poetry might invoke voices – as if overheard, or lyric. Poetry offers sound and light where none exists; it invents memory from desire or lack. A complex and suspicious use of language makes poetry the ideal ground for seeing lines of spectral filiation and hauntings, just as its form presents to poets a transformative approach to memory and remembrance. Memory becomes doubly suspect when harnessed by movements of power such as nationalist identities, political statements, and literary traditions. As a result, some poets pit their poetry against visible – or invisible – forms of power and desire. While culturally diverse, these poets share a distanced and ironic perspective on language. A confluence of formal, authorial, and thematic features opens onto a globalgothic critical apparatus with the ambition to identify spectropoetics in multiple origins, using contextual history and close reading as tools for its critical lens.

The bodies of work under examination illustrate ways in which ghosts can speak as Simonides-like agents of survival in the form of choral praise or critique. They act as

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<sup>99</sup> As Cicero tells the story: “Once Simonides was dining at Krannon in Thessaly in Thessaly at the house of the rich and noble Skopas. He had composed a song in honour of this man and in it he put a lot of typical ornamental material concerning Kastor and Polydeukes. Whereat Skopas ungenerously declared that he would pay Simonides only half the fee they had agreed on for the song: the other half he should get from the gods whom he had praised to that extent. Just then Simonides received a message that two young men were asking for him at the front door on a matter of urgent business. He got up and went out but found no one there. Meanwhile the roof of the room in which Skopas was dining collapsed, killing him and his friends. Now when the kinsfolk of these people wished to bury them, they found it impossible to recognize the remains. But Simonides, it is said, by remembering the exact place where each man had sat at the table, was able to identify them all for burial. *From this he discovered that it is order that mainly contributes to memory its light. ... I am grateful to Simonides of Keos who thus invented (so they say) the art of memory*” (Cicero, *De oratore* 2.86, my emphasis; qtd. and cf. Carson 1999: 39-44).

*epideictic* addresses to and from the dead, but also as contributors to a poetry of blame that extends so far as to count the poets who raise such ghosts among the damned. To see linguistic subjects as ghosts does not solve the vexing problem of interpretation, however. Although often counted as prose, Beckett's *Nohow On* demonstrates that some texts refuse interpretative closure and are amenable to approaches that allow them space to flourish and breathe. Before the readings, I examine crucial terms such as "voice," "medium," and "rhythm." A better collection of dead metaphors would be hard to find. (Perhaps "subject," "language," and "machine"?) Like a snapshot of identity held for a moment, but "mistaken" for a lifetime and technically absent – Barthes' winter garden – a poem speaks *of* and *to* a textual world of the dead. Poetry constitutes "the ghost life that lives itself / beside us" and "the shadow of what happened and what didn't happen" (Michaels 2013, n.p.). Without searching for a message – or its potential reception – poetic discourse can produce an ongoing critique of exactly this search (de Man 1986: 62). It is worth mentioning that this discourse has its own politics accepted within Plato's republic. This, at least, is Blanchot's point, for Plato does not so much chase out poets as he censors the "allegorical exegesis, which sets the poet's words aside to make way for truths and messages" (1993: 319). Without speaking *over* the ghosts of poetry through the assumption of interpretable authorial identities and secrets, it is possible – perhaps – to witness the textual passage of something else. As Anne Michaels' *Correspondences* suggests, books are "not our memory of the dead, / but what the dead / remember."

### 3.2 Major Argument: Voice, Medium, Rhythm, and the Poetry of Dead Metaphors

Symbol, *n.* Something that is supposed to typify or stand for something else. Many symbols are mere "survivals" – things which having no longer any utility continue to exist because we have inherited the tendency to make them; as funereal urns carved on memorial monuments. They were once real urns holding the ashes of the dead. We cannot stop making them, but we can give them a name that conceals our helplessness.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911)

Although they occur in titles, themes, metaphors, and criticism, the words "ghost" and "haunted" do not often appear in indices. Hauntings rarely occupy fixed positions; even more rarely do they occupy their own discursive fields. Instead, as reminders of the

yearning emptiness and the lost commonality of language and its signifiers, ghosts cross boundaries and infiltrate hermetic systems through strange or uncanny means. For Eavan Boland (using words that recall T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent"), ghosts are linguistic apparitions that make monolingual isolation impossible through filiation:

No poet, however young or disaffected, writes alone. It is a connected act. The words on the page, through they may appear free and improvised, are on hire. They are owned by a complicated and interwoven past of language, history, happenstance. (1995: 103)

Hauntings invoke the inhumanity of self-possessed language that might be appropriated in multiple ways; equally importantly, they expose the imaginative strength and limitations of cultural transmission – the idea of a *tradition* in its broadest sense – that in turn depends on the materiality of its media. For Agamben the interplay between cultural traditions and their points and forms of expression resembles a gothic tapestry, where culture is both its forms of transmission and *Nachleben*, and where artists, writers, readers, publishers, consumers, and educators are all nodes of transmission (1993: 112). As a technical term, *Nachleben* denotes not an afterlife “in the sense of *another* life beyond this own, or of another world beyond our own,” but rather the “continued life in this world”; thus it is often translated as *survival* (de la Durantaye 71). In other words, *Nachleben* is rife with ghosts. One of its great theoreticians, art historian Aby Warburg, described his work of *Kulturwissenschaft* as “a ghost story for truly adult people” [*eine Gespenstergeschichte für ganz Erwachsene*] (qtd. Agamben 1999: 95). This theory of aesthetics implies that “images from our cultural past are not dead, gone, or extinguished; they are at most dormant and remain infused or ‘charged’ with the energies that cultures have invested in them” (de la Durantaye 71). Phantasms remain just beyond an assumed circle of consciousness; evading semantic snares with the force and precision of insect collectors, historical images are drawn toward but do not enter into media. Instead, phantasms trace subjectivity, by which I mean to recall Gramsci's statement that a subject is “a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). As Said observed, parsing Gramsci's passage,

a writer's work must necessarily "compile an inventory of [these] traces" (1994: 25). The process of doing so re-energizes dormant images in writing and harnesses the dynamic potential of inhuman processes. While ghosts of stories can be defined as an absence encircled by presence, in poetry ghosts can be theoretically reframed as *evidence of potential outside its ostensible existence*. Nothing less. Nothing more.

§ A GHOST TRAIN, INCLUDING TRADITION'S POSTHUMOUS CARRIAGE §

All of which prompts the question: how do linguistic media carry ghosts? To address ruptures in tradition and breaks in language, poets work between aesthetic regimes to offer a vexingly spectral subjectivity and make use of the common perception of ghosts as unsettled and immaterial reminders of the past. As if indissoluble from the trauma they emerge from, ghosts gesture toward the melancholy search for justice and resolution. They are agents of potential, lost or foreseen – it is at times difficult to discern the difference. Loss does not always cause melancholy; it can be opportunity too, and broken traditions are not always fractured through neglect. The recognition of loss can be an awakening, and only when challenged can the traditions that constitute the past be reconceived "with a weight and an influence [they] never had before" (Agamben 1970: 107-8). From these supports, poets form bodies of lyric poetry that announce the intentions of a "lyric I." A poem's "voice" announces its own ability to speak through a qualified subject that will never exist beyond the words that form it: creation *ex lingua*, similar to *ex nihilo* in that both language and ghosts are abstractions only, never exactly what one wishes.<sup>100</sup> By crafting a voice from *Nachleben* the poem employs ghosts as the symbol of voices internal to the poem but also as the structural logic of traditions. What brings all these figures together is the fundamentally posthumous lyric voice that stitches together cultural ligatures between peoples dead and as yet unborn (Harrison 15, ix).

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<sup>100</sup> See for instance Stéphane Mallarmé's glorious account of an effervescent and ghostly world of poetic creation: "To create is to conceive an object in its fleeting moment, in its absence. To do this, we simply compare its facets and dwell lightly, negligently upon their multiplicity. We conjure up a scene of lovely, evanescent, intersecting forms" (42).

To say that the poetic voice is posthumous is no new assertion. Language has long been understood to counterfeit life in a combined effort on behalf of its shapers, the thing shaped, and the resulting form: buried deep is the sense of a counterfeit as not just imitative or false, but also *contrafactio*, counterfactual and thus set in opposition or contrast to that counterfeited (Stoler 8). The posthumous poetic voice especially adopts *prosopopoeia*. Poetry is thus envisioned as a poet's effort to speak *of* the dead and even *as* the dead. Less technically but no less accurately, the poem's "voice" must be revealed as no voice at all but, instead, a readerly reinvestment in a vanished writer's words through the reader's embodied imagination. Linguistic interactions with the dead are dangerous. Colin Davis argues that "by succumbing to the fiction that the dead may speak, we give voice to the haunting within ourselves which ensures that we also are deprived of our own voice" (2007: 114). Lyric poetry especially already renders the idea of "our own voice" moot, for in its use of tradition it recognizes that we speak in a language made by others and for others. What is "ours?" The reader's body: vocal chords, imagination, and rhythmic intention. Freedom is the ability to do what one can with what constraints and subjectivity encircle you. Thus it is that the lyric's long history with the lyre and song is a long apology for poetry's *lack* of "music" as such and a reiterating replacement of the lyre's song for a lyric rhythm of words and vocal chords: a posthumous song by any means. By the end of the nineteenth century "song" was already "a dead metaphor for lyric of many different formal hues" (Thain 158). Robert von Hallberg points out that even the image of Horace with his lyre is a myth. For Hallberg, the lyric's musicality is better recognized as an effect generated by rhythmic relations and difference: "one idiom alternates with another, and by that shift the music is known" (154). Ezra Pound's definition of *melopoeia* in *ABC of Reading* (1934) pursues similar lines, but, like Hallberg's statement, raises questions.<sup>101</sup> Does the lyric *possess* its music? Do those who write lyrics even possess a voice of their own?

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<sup>101</sup> "[Y]ou still charge words with meaning mainly in three ways," Pound writes: "phanopoeia, melopoeia, [and] logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you use groups of words to do this" (37).

Rather than study the alluring echo of demonic or ghostly possessions, I would like to examine how *prosopopoeia* works by attributing “face” or personality to an object, and which thus shapes a mask whereupon meaning gains purchase. It is, as Paul de Man wrote, both the “master trope of poetic discourse” and “the very figure of the reader and of reading” (1986: 48, 45). Sixteenth-century rhetorician George Puttenham recognized *prosopopoeia*’s effective duplication but argues that its rhetorical effect a “counterfeit in personation” contrasts with *prosopographia* or “the counterfeit countenance.” The latter conveys “the visage, speech and countenance of any person absent or dead” (275): an image differs from a voice in their originals and in their poetic counterfeits. Along with these two figures, Puttenham listed others that share in poetic duplicity. These could be added to a spectropoetic catalogue: the apostrophe, or “turn-tale”; *hypotyposis*, or “counterfeit representation”; *chronographica*, or “counterfeit time”; *topographia*, or “counterfeit place”; and, not least, the host of figures of similitude such as *homeosis* or “resemblance”; *icon* or “resemblance by imagery”; *parabole* or “resemblance mystical”; and *paradigma*, “resemblance by example” (275-279). Puttenham’s list shows an aggregate suspicion of graphic or written figures, but is less suspicious toward rhetorical figures of similitude, for these are lesser claims. Paul de Man’s “master trope” should include reference to these figures whose counterfeit status has been long understood as poetic devices whose written forms cohere around an assemblage of figural filiations.

Traditions of the lyric that reach back toward the troubadours involve a deep recourse to *prosopopoeia* and its family of tropes. The creators of the oldest Romance verse literature in a lyric tradition extending from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries in Western Europe, these poets called themselves troubadours “according to the most accepted etymology, ‘finders’ or ‘inventors,’” as Daniel Heller-Roazen points out; they were “named after the Old Occitan verb *trobar*, ‘to find’” (2013: 45-6). The troubadours’ poetic legacy established stylistic features common to modern lyric: “verse structure, measured by a regular number of syllables, with rhymes; grammar, characterized by a discourse in the voice of a first person singular; and topics, involving a being who speaks and sings to evoke the joy and pain of his amorous passion” (Heller-Roazen 2013: 46).

Most importantly, however, as *finders* the troubadours recognized that the lyric is a searching attempt to engage with and evoke history, “to produce resplendent forms [...] and] to reach into darkness” (von Hallberg 18). The withdrawal of linguistic abstraction inspires a poet’s reach to find forms within it. A magician’s trick transforms history’s absences by “discovering” them through invention: the disappearing act of the voice that “finds” itself transformed into a prosopopoeiac discourse. What does poetry find? That the technological withdrawal of poetry as a force of abstraction produces a ghostly terrain of counterfeit humanity. If poetry could be seen as a landscape, it is one shaped of human forms and affects, but deeply inhuman, and thus ghostly.

Roland Barthes calls writing “the destruction of every voice, every origin,” a “neuter,” “composite,” and an “obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (1989: 49). In their minimalist but dramatic contexts, poems are haunted by the “ghosts of characters, summoned up by various incantations of allusion” (Hollander 1988: 199). Such ghosts metaphorize a “voice” saved somehow from historical or technological destruction. The troubadours’ found a lyric voice in destruction and ruin and invented music through linguistic production. Spectropoetics is made from a counterfeit sound inscribed in writing and derived from language, a song made meaningful by figures cut from the cloth of a semantically empty if socially circuitous *grapheme*. Words do not disappear when left by the wandering and intentional writer. They remain on the page, waiting. This medium is made musical and lyric by the rhythms imputed to it, yet even this is spectral, a revenant of the body in an oblique machine built from inhuman words.

#### § A HAUNTING RHYTHM – THE GHOST’S BEAT §

Rhythm is an enabling gesture by which readers ground poetry in living discourse. It sets the beat to which the ghosts of *Nachleben* flicker and destabilizes the witness for whom the ghosts of poetry seem to speak. In this way, though incorporeal, the reality of ghosts takes a certain shape Jacques Derrida called “hauntology” – and that Mark Strand calls, quite simply, poetics. “[T]he reality of the poem,” Strand says, “is a very ghostly one”

(np). Poetry organizes itself around rhythm as an unreal perceptual fetish, a pillar of assumed inheritance whose lineage, however, is anything but clear. This means that when intentions are read into a poem's topography they join what English poet Walter de la Mare called the "elusive and protean phantom entities" of theories of metrical scansion (27). As Ted Hughes writes, the "very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past" (20). Neither rhythm nor meter obtain in an object observed to "have" rhythmic properties, though its tempo might be measurable. Poetry possesses neither music nor voice. Instead, these are created by readers who efface their own efforts in deference to texts perceived as haunted with the authority of an absent poet. The gesture is understandable; it guises a reader's devotional attention. Rhythm is attributed to an object by the living impulse Nicolas Abraham called "rhythmic consciousness" (1995: 21, 25). The beat of a train along tracks, for instance, is not rhythmic in itself; instead, as soon as a passenger notes it, he or she invests its mechanic progression with rhythm. To "find" rhythm intensifies and narrows one's perception. The moment of rhythmic consciousness seems to have created another world as if from nothing but perceptual acuity and focus – this is why Pound writes that rhythm "is a form cut into time" (1951: 202). The perceiver of rhythm gives up categorical lines for a decreative poetics that makes of the body a space for reinventing reality. "[F]rom the moment my body embraced the cadencing of the wheels," Abraham writes, "surrounding objects appeared to lose their solidity and [...] took on the flavour of an almost dreamlike unreality. [...] To abandon oneself to a rhythm is momentarily to cease positing the existence of the surrounding world" (1995: 21). Finding rhythm – reading poetry – contracts the majority of one's consciousness in resurrecting the sounds embedded in the phenomena or matrix of poetry on the page.<sup>102</sup>

Like other rhythms, poetry *rhymes* itself across time in the eyes and minds of its readers who bring it to life, in the same way a structured line will almost compulsively

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<sup>102</sup> Taking Abraham further into poetry, we are getting somewhere – even as we remain wholly within language as the conveyance of rhythm in bodies. Metaphor is limited. "Within the confines of a system of transportation – or of language as a system of communication," Paul de Man writes, "one can transfer from one vehicle to another, but one cannot transfer from being like a vehicle to being like a temple, or a ground" (1984: 251-52). A poem's imposed rhythm may carry meaning, but it does not house that meaning in a body as the human frame would.



return in and across the stanzas (literally *rooms*) built in a poem itself; haunting occurs *in* the machine of poetic language in order to *operate* it: a quiet whispering of words as if to themselves. A poem takes place through a concatenation of form and breath. Its duration can “only be that of its rhythm, of its melody, of its successive significations” (Abraham 1995: 58). Rhyme itself is drawn from Latin and Greek *rithmus* or *rhythmos* and is aligned with those other ineluctable and inhuman returns we observe as *human* beings:

Solar pulses, the ebb and flow of tides, those circadian rhythms that affect our sleeping and waking as heliotropic beings are only some of the rhythms to which we are subjected. Rhythm indeed may be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of human life, for the embryonic heart begins to beat eighteen to twenty-one days after conception; at that point there is no blood to pump, no function for the heart to serve, but if the beat stops, the embryo dies. (Stewart 2002: 31-32)

The rhythmic line of a poem and its other repeating devices (alliteration, assonance, anaphora, rhyme) are small gears in the operations of this linguistic and cultural machine that shapes poetry and that seems to offer human affects traversal through the structured force of *repetition*. For example, anaphora shapes momentary patterns between discrete word-concepts by sheer force of linguistic association and thus unifies disparity (Hollander 1988: 10). Alliteration and assonance, the poetic figures closest to rhyme, structure the sonic illusion of material word-shapes to craft patterns of associations left for readers, whose work it becomes to rhythmically fashion the force of signs and traces, an act that depends on that reader’s idiosyncratic dialect, understanding of metrical traditions, chosen intonation, and imaginative faculties. Metrical traditions are themselves ongoing contracts between speakers and listeners that are imperfectly translated into the exchange of writers and readers. Metrical conventions seem to inhere within language in particular historical traditions – the influence of blank verse in English, for example – but to mistake meter for a natural constituent of language puts a cart before its horse. Meter describes artifice and accounts for rhythm. Although it may seem to conform to natural language, “it is not” (von Hallberg 180). To argue otherwise

enshrines a particular intonation of English as the form of a thing more accurately understood as irrevocably diverse and historically derived.<sup>103</sup>

The great attraction of charismatic poetry readings is not, in fact, intrinsic to the genius of the poetry recited but stems from the wonder of a reader's magician-like invocation of rhythm and resurrection, a *phantasmagoria* in all but name. For this reason, the lyric "I" is at once the fantasy of lyric subjectivity constructed in language but also the inhuman subjectivity of linguistic construction. Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that poetic rhythm – "a mentally audible movement of sounds that will not reduce to discursive meanings or formal effects" (55) – makes audible an "intending 'I'" whose existence is "not prior to its words, and [whose] words have nothing to do with 'self-expression'" (31). The "lyric I" is a poem's gambit with the reader, "a rhythmic pulse 'between' music and figure; it is neither music nor figure and *without it* there is neither music nor figure" (Blasing 86). A pulse thus positioned is neither human nor inhuman, neither living nor dead. It haunts the space between where one becomes the other, the human's interaction with the page. A person reading a poem creates a situation that we could call "the witness, the ghost, and the machine." The human body is the central threshold across which currents pass as turning tropes of "subjectification and desubjectification" that constitute "the living being's becoming speaking and the logos' becoming living" (Agamben 2002 135). Poetry's etymological lineage and humanist history of intentional interpretations

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<sup>103</sup> For a globalgothic critic, it is not enough to see writers in fixed categories of national affiliation to understand their choice of forms and tradition. It was once true that standard meters such as an iambic pentameter or dactylic hexameter would inform readers a poem's "metrical contract" guaranteed a certain contextual reading's availability. (Hollander 1975: 195; cf. Finch 16). However, the free verse of contemporary transnational poetry signals a different kind of formal operation. Contemporary poetics are further influenced by modernist or postcolonial fractures in notions of literary tradition and many writers use the language of hauntings to describe the new state of affairs. As T.S. Eliot argued, "the ghost of some simple metre lurks behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse" (1975: 34-35).

Metrical notation is an admirable but still mechanical formality that attributes rhythmic qualities to poetry. Yet rhythms emerge from the interplay of traditional pronunciations and the idiosyncrasies of readers and poets. Contemporary world poetics owes much to a modernist heritage in which pronunciation became unstable and a vessel for play, meaning, and interpretation; in turn, the modernists contended with the marked inheritance of performance in poetry, which they dealt with by rejecting sentimentality or intimacy while reading. That in turn created a deaccented (and thus readily transnational) voice. Even then, however, as Charles Bernstein detects in T.S. Eliot's poetry readings the "deaccentuated, not to say impersonal" poetic voice is still "haunted by the often sudden intrusion of accented voices" (147). Similarly, Pound (as famous for his silences as for any proper speech) fairly beats the sense in his readings of "Sestina: Altaforte" for example, while others such as Yeats distorted the rhythms of a poem by exaggerating the metrical music of "Lake Isle of Innisfree" early in the century for a famous BBC recording.

are technologically overdetermined by language's multiple encounters with the printing press and mass media. Like any exchange between the living and the dead, machinic transformation is endemic to the use of language. A poem raises this exchange to a brief and therefore *revealing* intensity, to paraphrase W.B. Yeats in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936).<sup>104</sup> The rhythmic pulse between music and figure crosses the influence of the poem's intending reader and the material traces left on the page: it is the phantasm's passage, the ghost of the poetic threshold.

The space carved by living rhythm for spectres enables lyric poetry's medium; in this manner, the "lyric I" is subject to a confluence of traditions and traces. This rhythmic space of crossings and investments is "the essence and raison d'être of poetry," Annie Finch suggests: "the mysterious [or rather spectral] connections between speech patterns, the body's memory of rhythm, and the individual and cultural unconscious" (12). A dream of vocal expression facilitates the rhythmic intention as if to run a single line from life to mortality: it is in the services of a dream that a lyric poem *seems*, and only seems, to "sing." Various nostalgic attachments emerge from the dream of oral song. Thus, for example, Hollander argues that "all poetry was originally oral." He expands his thought:

Poetic form as we know it is an abstraction from, or residue of, musical form, from which it came to be divorced when writing replaced memory as a way of preserving poetic utterance in narrative, prayer, spell, and the like. The ghost of oral poetry never vanishes, even though the conventions and patterns of writing reach out across time and silence all actual voices. (2001: 4)

The abstraction of a singing voice becomes the fact of a "voice" that exposes its inhuman and mechanical (but textually persistent) trace. Midway through Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* a seemingly prophetic statement offers a meditation on death, time, and the

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<sup>104</sup> Yeats saw the mechanical influence of intensities as a nonpolitical feature where "the poetry of belief" supercedes the personality of individual authors, removing their human affects but also – when shared – supporting a community "that has created their intensity, their resemblance." Aligning spectrality with love, as Boland will years later, Yeats diagnoses that "the contemplation of suffering has compelled them to seek beyond the flux something unchanging, inviolate, that country where no ghost haunts, no beloved lures because it has neither past nor future" (xxxviii).

accidents of lives transgressing into the domain of “art.” “[T]he poem,” one of her characters says, “is only your voice speaking” (154). This vision of poetry interprets aesthetic “expression” as the extension of, or intensity within, language, itself *a priori* a space in which the dead speak through the living in a lexicon itself both a legacy and a cultural inheritance. The idea that literature “speaks to us” remains “a humanist truism,” Garrett Stewart argues. And yet, Stewart concedes, “if literature cannot be fairly said to speak to us, perhaps it speaks through us” (37).<sup>105</sup> To “speak” or “express” itself, a medium must seem to possess agency. The vivacity of gothic tropes that surround the “lyric I” do the job with vigour. It is at this point that poetry returns itself to the point of departure and the familiar shape of the poem on the page: I have been describing the shape of “the not unfamiliar, specular [...] conception of a ‘poetry of poetry,’ the self-referential text that thematizes its own invention, prefigures its own reception, and achieves, as aesthetic cognition and pleasure, the recovery from the most extreme of alienations, from the the terror of encrypted death” (de Man 1986: 69). A mind might figure its operations as those of a grave; in turn the grave may produce the sign of a lost voice.<sup>106</sup> Poetry undoes the operations of the sign standing in for the voice of the dead before the reader while also showing them its playful, changing faces.

#### § THE VOICE OF TRANSGENERATIONAL HAUNTING – INCORPORATING LOSS §

The temptation of attributed voice engenders another critical concept associated with the question of traditions: *transgenerational haunting*. This gothic term strongly echoes *Nachleben*. As Jodey Castricano defines it, a transgenerational haunting through gothic language is a “manifestation of the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another” (16). Castricano cites psychoanalytic concepts drawn from Nicolas Abraham

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<sup>105</sup> Deconstruction “resurrect[ed] the dead metaphor of such a notion in order to lay its ghost for good. Literature has no voice. It is text, not talk” (Stewart 37). This dream heuristically underwrites logocentrism with videocentrism.

<sup>106</sup> *Sema*: the Greek word for “sign” is also the word for “grave,” as Harrison points out, but with a very special role, for “the grave marker was not just one sign among others. It was a sign that signified the source of signification itself, since it stood for what it stood in – the ground of burial as such. In its pointing to itself, or to its own mark in the ground, the *sema* effectively opened up the place of the ‘here’” (20). A absence with a monument: the sign, like the grave, encapsulates and safeguards absence for those who come after on behalf of those who once were.

and Maria Torok, theorists for whom the idea of haunting recalls European folklore but also works as a technical term in an ensemble of ideas derived from psychoanalytic practice including, most importantly, cryptonymy.<sup>107</sup> Transgenerational haunting traces crucial similarities between poets who feel themselves beholden to a host of forebears, yet also responsible for future descendants in any given poetic tradition, yet it does not fully address the searching and creative quality in poets' engagements with tradition, history, and events. In the hands of readers, poems explore all the present has left of the past: history's wreckage. Searching for access to darkness or a cure for trauma, poetry orients itself around visions of the past and spaces in which words resonate. Some explorations dream of meaning. Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" illustrates the aim of such an exploratory poetics and recalls the troubadour's poetics of *finding*:

I came to explore the wreck.  
 The words are purposes.  
 The words are maps.  
 I came to see the damage that was done  
 and the treasures that prevail  
 [...]
 the thing I came for:  
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
 the thing itself and not the myth (54)

The damage done by time (like that of words) is irreparable. Any "thing itself" can only be spectral, if not wholly fictional and *also* – if not a myth – totally dreamlike. The ambiguous ghost voice straddles these lines. *The Waves*' naïf-like definition of poetry as

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<sup>107</sup> Buried under all of which is a psychoanalytic framework exemplified by the following observation by Freud and Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria*: "We must presume that the physical trauma – or more precisely, the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body, which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (6). This incorporative model can be dislocated from the language of psychoanalysis and reintegrating within a more broad philosophical model descending from Aristotle, thus dislodging the centrality of an enclosed uncanny – the unconscious – from questions of language: as Blanchot points out, psychoanalysis "designates the unconscious whose mode of expression is the symbol, not only as it is bound to language, but as language itself" (1993: 319).

“only your voice speaking” adroitly triggers a linguistic spectro-poetics that grounds the dreamlike clarity and purposefulness of Rich’s poem, since its ghostly voice operates as the key to the lyric subject searching the deep wreckage mapped by words. One of Rich’s earlier poems compares the “map of the future” with “the instructions on your palm” (47), thus aligning ghosts of voice and hand through the bridge of haptic interfaces that writing technologies take for human expression. The subject offered by poetry facilitates a textual memory of orality searching for thought’s materiality through layered traces of cultural heritage. Rich appropriated from Ibsen the title of her famous essay, “When We Dead Awaken,” in which she wrote that the work of literature is to provide “a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us” (167). Yet the “thing itself” is wrecked and irremediably lost. Its *myth*, the myth of the essence, serves as both a heritage and a pretext of poetic thought and the refused object of spectro-poetic analysis.

For poets such as Boland and Rich, the question of loss is often entangled in patriarchy and women’s history; for Breytenbach, Dabydeen, and Philip, it is related to racial prejudice and political violence. All poets are concerned with language. All see the fissures that run the lengths and depths of an assumed subjectivity that once sustained traditions of the “lyric I” but which is now shredded and tattered by oppression. Such poets, Terrence des Pres argues (writing about Rich and Breytenbach), are “wild with the burden of injustice” (210). Even wildness does not obscure their precision in language, and their poetry treads lines of spectral and haunting legacies. No wonder discussions of their poetry flirt with a gothic register, for the gothic exemplifies “a fascination with the problem of language” as a matter of course (Williams 67). Language collides with the lived experience of these poets to make of historical torment an artistic endeavour that transforms memory and the heart’s concerns into the expression of a voice. But the effort comes at a cost. The expressive turn animates a network of dead metaphors masquerading as meaningful arabesques on white pages: a media paradox frequently analyzed by philosophers and rhetoricians. The very changeability of tropes and metaphors institutes a line of thinking that bears the “possibility [...] that words might

turn to names and names to unreadable inscriptions [... a] spooky slide from Aristotle to Nietzsche,” as Cynthia Chase points out while reading de Man and Derrida (27). The materiality of language haunts discussions of metaphor and language just as poetry’s shape in words invokes the recognition of language’s inhumanity.

That one voice could speak another, intentionally or not, is fantasy, but one of which these poets partake that can be traced back through a philosophical tradition extending to Aristotle’s *De Anima* that established the transformative power of voice to modify the soul of the past. For the Grecian philosopher, voice dramatizes consciousness and identity; “above all,” Marina Warner comments, for Aristotle a voice serves as “the physical, outer expression of the inner being” (2006: 78). “Voice is the sound produced by a creature possessing a soul,” and although “not every sound made by a living creature is a voice [...] but that which even causes the impact, must have a soul, and use some imagination; for *the voice is a sound which means something*” (trans. Hett; II.viii; 420b: 6, 30-5). Following this, one could suppose that an equation between sound and sense allows a poem to echo that voice while obscuring the difference between *phone* and *dialektos*. Repeatedly invested with a perceived rhythm, the soulful voice is incorporated as the creative work of linguistic users along generational lines to incessantly reinvigorate poetry in the rhythm of speaking voices and to resurrect linguistic forms in new fashions.

Writers as different as Aristotle and Nicolas Abraham offer compelling arguments for the physicality of *phantasmata*. In *De Memoria*, Aristotle describes how *aisthēsis* – or experience, as he uses the term – “is in some sense bodily, and recollection is the search for a *phantasma* [*phantasmatos* or image] in such a sphere” (453a14-16). On this basis, Gerard Watson argues that, for Aristotle, language systematically shares experience by translating experience from the body in which it dwells out and into the commons of language (31). John Sisko, closely examining *De Memoria* 1 450b1-11, calls attention to Aristotle’s conviction that *phantasmata* are *tupoi*, literally marks inscribed in the body and “carved in the matter of the heart” (167). Can desire or fear have material shape? Can images made of experience become physical inscriptions? Poetry’s claims do not always go so far, but ideas of *phantasmata* lend metaphorical substance to such thoughts. *De*

*Memoria* demonstrates that Aristotle was at least tempted to think that phantasms shuttling between experience, desires, and recollection find material actuality within the body. A similar insistence on the material incorporation of experience that lends mourning such a visceral quality in poetry. Take Anne Michaels' funeral poem "Anna." The poem describes mourning's completion with melancholic ambivalence by twisting the two Freudian categories into an oddly touching image that phantomatically incorporates affect and memory; through the gothic desperation of refusing death, it lavishly commemorates a girl's death by drowning. Strong stresses recall unheard sounds the girl made underwater, as if words could incorporate the voice of a dead person organically into the poem's linguistic fabric. Tracing the limit of the poem's spectral possibilities counterbalances the mourner's loss against the heaviness of guilt.

Our last morning together we sat with Anna's family in dark rooms.  
 We watched her mother put a sweater in the coffin.  
 These are endings that bind,  
 love still alive, squirming in the rind of the heart. (1997: 17)

Inverting gothic tropes where the living are buried alive in a transformed metaphor of personal grief, Michaels' poem redirects desire away from an "other" and inward inside of her speaker's imagined body: toward "the rind of the heart." Matching word to deed, the poem harmonizes love's induction to the heart through assonance and syllabic stresses on long-I sounds – "bind," "alive," "rind" – just as if the poem were taking in the aspirated vowels of reader and lyric subject alike. Introspective and reflexive, the poem mirrors the work it describes without insisting on the corporeality of introjection. It suggests an image – the heart's rind in a living human watching a burial and queasily squirming with love for the dead – in lieu of formal mourning. The poem's free verse tempo holds the line's internal rhyme in tight economy and quiets the harsh *parabole* of the imagined event. Love – the lyric's subject *par excellence* – is bound to a rhythmic memory just as aspiration stresses an "I" hidden in the poem's reader-oriented and pluralized voice.



The material shape of language extends another possibility. The drive to internalize phantasms motivates Abraham and Torok's theory of the crypt that lurks "in the heart of the Ego as a special kind of Unconscious," they claim (80).<sup>108</sup> It is an construct of identity that transforms Aristotle's *tupoi*-carved heart into the modern idea of head-space. Rand optimistically believes that deciphering crypts "permits us to pinpoint areas of silence in works of literature as well as in the oeuvre of a human life [...] making the tongue-tied speak (whether it is a human life or a work of art)" (lxvi). Whether material or metaphysical, cryptonymy assumes that speakers possess the language they speak inside them *in the very absence of a known secret*: the crypt is a secret silence kept by the unconscious, carved in the very same way in which what is carved can be seen only because the substance has been taken away. Abraham and Torok distinguish between ego and language and also between humanity and the symbolic work of art (1985: 4). For them, an ego is the sum of a person's introjections, the un-inventoried traces of history, culture, and experience that constitute consciousness. *Pace* Rand, it is difficult to see how material artistry could either incorporate or introject experience in the same fashion. The crypt is the secret of a symbol's incorporated silence that transforms its lexical existence into the heart of the ego, the unconscious, but a crypt is also material. The Wolf Man "flaunt[s] his crypt on his nose like some rebus" while also managing to "keep it on the inside, along with his magic word" (75). Language, similarly, flits between interiority and exteriority. But if this phantasm takes the semblance of a crypt, its secret (that it has nothing to say) can only be interpreted as reticent silence.

Claims to decipher secrets that would make legible what Rand calls the "telltale medium" of language (lxix) should be carefully resisted. "All this process really accomplishes," Derrida observes, "is to convert one system of symbols for another, which in turn becomes accountable for its secret" (1986: xxxix): the secret of the crypt. Under this guise the "secret" is the aseptic nature of writing's materiality (that Derrida and Abraham call anasemic), a secret everywhere on display and that returns in the end to

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<sup>108</sup> I bear in mind Derrida's advice: "the theory of the 'ghost' is not exactly the theory of the 'crypt'" (1985: 59).

Benjamin's *reine Sprache*, pure speech, the language between translations. Abraham and Torok clearly indicate that they are engaged in translation. Amid the lexical contiguity of word-meanings they operate cryptonymy by replacing a given word with the synonym of its alloeme (19), a form of cross-translation working by the proximity of words in multilingual dictionaries that displaces the meaning-laden aspect of words into the aseptic materiality of an inhuman linguistic assemblage, of which the dictionary is an indexical archive. The *possession* of language is an *appropriation* of language by cryptic means. The subject remains a discursive creation of language *in* language; incorporation and introjection seem uneasy failures of material references. We are as haunted as ever, and left with mysteries. What is a ghost? "[T]he ghost is more precisely the effect of another's crypt in my unconscious," Derrida writes (1985: 59). A subject is "the haunt of a host of ghosts" (Derrida 1985: xxiii). Language possesses its users in a trope that (as gothic literature knows) reacquaints the metaphysics of ownership with the uncanniness of absence. Language is a gothic function of the structure of experience itself, appropriated and in turn possessing the subjects who speak it. From this possession come haunting phantasms. They shadow words and trouble speech, literature, and thought. In the end, both crypt and *phantasmata* are components of a pattern wherein "the recurrent image of the subject's presence to itself as a spatial enclosure, room, tomb, or crypt [...] draws its verisimilitude from its own 'mise en abyme' in the shape of the body as the *container* of the voice (or soul, heart, breath, consciousness, spirit, etc.) that it exhales" (de Man 1984: 256). By no means without purchase in poetics, linguistic moves that would exchange a crypt for a ghost is – for de Man at least – the "inside / outside pattern of exchange that founds the metaphor of the lyrical voice as subject" (1984: 256).

Aristotle's idea of *phantasmata* as marks of experience inscribed above the heart may strike modern readers as mystical, just as the violent interpretation of cryptonymy may seem far fetched when pitched outside psychoanalytic circles. But the textual "voice" that "speaks" for its linguistic subject will never surrender its uncanny edge. Even if metaphorically dead, each articulation offers a compelling understanding of des Pres' description of the power of language: "[w]hat happens in the world happens over in the

heart, not in an exact equivalent way [...] but as suffering transformed by imagination; pain is pain [...] and can be called the ground (and cost) of alertness to life” (215). Imagination transforms phantasmatic processes to resurrect memory, and in poetry it actively explores the unknown and the unavailable “in ways that impart an evanescent presence” (Bernstein 143). To describe the workings of this practice entails an excursion into the place in which it occurs: a medium. Media are so-called “not only because they bear messages between writers and readers, or because they communicate an artist’s ideas, but because they negotiate our socially mediated experience of physical objects” (Dworkin 2013: 31). Messengers are currents of social experience and material shape.

#### § MEDIUM, MEDIA, MEMORY, ANNE MICHAELS §

*What is a medium?* As histories of Spiritualism and technology suggest, the term’s many uses destabilize poetry’s claim to be (un)mediated human expression, even and especially in prosopoeiac rhetoric.<sup>109</sup> As a medium, poetry has very little to do with *expression*, despite its frequent associations as a translucent conduit of memory and subjectivity. To replace these terms with others such as “lyric expression,” “lyric memory,” or “lyric subjectivity” only begins to distinguish the non-expressive or non-confessional work of poetry from its oft-preferred semblance, the one enacted by poet-confessors who incessantly speak, even “express” themselves and their unique subjectivity in poetry’s

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<sup>109</sup> Mediums are riddled with light, electricity, ghosts, or performance. Critics claim that the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century project of spiritualism challenged essentialist identities and fragmented subjectivity along “lines of sexual, generational, and racial or ethnic *difference*” (Waters 427), but this claim must be counterposed against clear authorial manipulations of Spiritualist “ghosts.” For the media that capitalized on them, ghosts were “super-phenomenological” entities “outside the normal human ways of sensation” (Parikka 63), but, for cynics, such ghosts could always be exposed as tricks of the medium and performative acts of human design. Perception supplements the many pieces of supernumerated identities: ghosts, electricity, lyric selves, and more. A medium’s identity is fragmented just as lyric poetry incorporates polyphony under the banner of a supposedly singular “I.” Calling up a diverse crowd of ghosts to speak through oneself, a medium seemed to break the show of named singularity like T.S. Eliot did in *The Waste Land*, a poem whose eliminated working title tells the story of its subject’s simultaneous unity and fragmentation: “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” Thus spiritualism exposed “the paucity of an analysis based on the often unacknowledged notion of the unified subject [...] [and] revealed the inconsistency, heterogeneity, and precariousness of human identity” (Owen 226). While the difference between electromagnetic inventions, spiritualist practices, and poetry are considerable – Nicholas Abraham, of all people, reminds us that “the work of art does not act like a physical force or an electric charge” in the rhythmic patterns and intentionality which determines its semantic field (1987: 69) – the associative communication patterned across a haunting and seemingly broken sequence of voices is nevertheless common to each discourse. From this commonality spreads a discourse of hauntological media and interpretations thereof, extended across a world connected by technologies of recognition and abstraction.

language. The assumption enacts its own kind of damage, hypocrisy, because “the more sincere a literal expression of self [...] or a telling of one’s own story, the more conventionalized and the more copied from a tattered paradigm it will be,” as John Hollander writes (1988: 4). Terms like the “lyric I” separate an imagined sound of poetry from assumptions of truthful expression but not from judgement. For this reason, a medium can only be judged along lines of *fidelity*, “the idea of being *true to* something having general power over other meanings” (Hollander 1988: 5) and not to the proposition of truth as a totality. To return to the *prosopopoeia* that counterfeits personhood in poetry, then, is to observe that such terms and judgements expose rhetoric without the rhetorician’s hand.

Metaphor and the imagination ground critical projects interested in distancing the voice’s *euphonic* sound of truth from the media that grant “truth” voice and form. This is particularly clear in Anne Michaels’ poetry when it treats memory as a medium (especially when one recalls Cromwell Varley [1828-1883]).<sup>110</sup> Michaels’ *Miner’s Pond* (1991) suggests that an epistemological shift akin to the invention of the radio must be made in order to understand memory as a not-quite metaphor; the memory archived by poetry is a governing agent that judges, compares, and renders notions of fidelity.

Memory is cumulative selection.

It’s an undersea cable connecting one continent  
to another,  
electric in the black brine of distance. (1997: 59)

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<sup>110</sup> An electrical engineer and Spiritualist investigator, Varley invented the electric telegraph and the transatlantic telegraph cable; equally to the point, his holistic belief in Spiritualism shaped his investigations of immaterial universal forces. As Varley informed the London Dialectical Society in 1872,

An iron wire is to an electrician simply a hole bored through a solid rock of air so that the electricity may pass freely. Glass is opaque to electricity, but transparent to magnetism [...] we may infer that everything is solid in respect to something, and that nothing is solid in respect to all things, and therefore thought, which is power, may be in some sort solid. (172)

Technological innovations in radio and electricity substantiated a belief in ghosts insofar as the two share a transformative medium that, electronic or embodied, allows each enterprise to take its “control” from electrical currents or spirits’ voices.

Left unsaid are the ghosts who populate memory and who will in Michaels' later *Skin Divers* (1999) wind their way inwards into a human construction of lived history. "Only ghosts earn a place" in historical memory due to love's dedication and the softer places of material humanity ("Fountanelles" 1999: 62). As the book's title suggests, a concatenation of historical memory and spectral incorporation make up the capaciously porous human skin. Knowing that human bodies are made mostly of water (75% at birth), Michaels' poetry suggests that, like the ocean, the body is itself a repository of history as well as memory, and that these are both concerned with remembering the names and places of the dead. A body houses the memory palace much like Simonides' "inner writing," Michaels explains (1999: 56).<sup>111</sup> Michaels' poems drown memory in the oceanic human body so as to raise the dead in a poetics of haunted recollection.<sup>112</sup>

Years earlier Michaels wrote that "[m]emory, like love, gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation; in a culture, through ritual, tradition, stories, art" (1994: 15). The medium is *always* the message in the sense that the simple grammatical work of "is," understood by formal poetics as a metaphor, becomes for Michaels a deceptively simple way to bridge cultural traditions and assert the reciprocal haunting of one thing by another ("Memory is cumulative selection. / It's an undersea cable..."): bodies haunted by oceans, memories haunted by electricity, histories haunted by ghosts; all "biological laws exerting their powers / not merely on protein molecules but / on steel and electric currents..." (Michaels 1999: 57, quoting Heisenberg 213). Warner Heisenberg himself asked whether "the word 'intention' reflect[s] the existence merely of these formative powers or of these biological laws in the human consciousness" (213). The unstated

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<sup>111</sup> After Simonides, "inner writing" was most prominently taken up by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the oldest surviving Latin text on rhetoric. Whether as *formae*, *notae*, or *simulacra*, the concepts of memory are installed within a person's body, "[f]or the places are very much like wax tables or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script, and the oral delivery like reading" (294-295; cf. Krell 54-56).

<sup>112</sup> Like Michaels' poetic project, but in a different element, her prose grounds memory in language, as if she is intent to substantiate Walter Benjamin's suggestion that "Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred" (1986: 25). "It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world," *Fugitive Pieces* tells us, "just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old" (53). The dead's haunting influence aligns itself alongside scientific media of material and historical investigation, but where a medium channels the dead, Michaels' poems hear the rock breathe.

ground for comparison creates an empty figure, neither a metaphor nor a simile but a third figure: an operative ghost working through traditional poetic schemas rather like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle organizes particle positions and momentum. Michaels is not the only poet to find in Heisenbergian physics an apt explanation for poetic phantasms. For Hollander a poem's embodied "nexus of presence and memory [...] requires both synchronic and diachronic discussion," and in this way a poem "is like a wave particle 'of light'" (1988: 113). The ghost stands with the reader in a middle ground of poetic operations between concepts that suggest poetry to be either transparent expression or reflections of empty material shapes; in other words, the two coexist between textual fixity and readerly mobility. Poetry is "like a part-transparent, part-clouded, part-reflecting glass, variously stained and coloured" (Hollander 1988: 13). Michaels improves on Hollander's "part-this, part-that" model to show the simplicity with which any unstated figuration reveals its necessary and avowed falsity in veridical discourse. Her verse argues for the powers of the ghostly work of memory and language.

Craig Dworkin has suggested in his introduction to the *Ubuweb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* that a "non-expressive poetry" is one where "the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replaced by the direct presentations of language itself, with 'spontaneous overflow' supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process [... one] in which the self-regard of the poet's ego were turned back onto the self-reflexive language of the poem itself."<sup>113</sup> In a poetics already functioning through contradiction, spectropoetics re-enacts the eternal paradox of text: "while the physical opacity of a text prevents communication from ever being perfect, meaning is always being communicated by that very materiality" (Dworkin 2003: 75). Meaning and materiality exist in an opposition conjoined by poetic language. In these remarks I am

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<sup>113</sup> Although experimental poems *per se* are not my focus, a non-expressive poetics could occur from the fractal work of media relationships and explorations of the lyric subject. Experimental poems cites are inimical to ghosts, as is the opposing idea of a perfect language that merges sign and signified, meaning and material. Such ideals depend "on the absolute transparency of the medium: not just the 'disappearance of the word' into a 'blank page,' but ultimately of even that page itself" (Dworkin 2003: 72). It is difficult to overstate the importance of the printed page that is, as Walter Ong writes, a "time obviating and otherwise radically decontextualising mechanism" (38). Ghosts flicker between the figures of poetry neither forbiddingly experimental and radically formalist nor idealistically humanist.

guided by the way Michaels finds the ghosts of medial poetry in a position between the extremes of experimental formalism on the one hand and utopian humanism on the other. Her poem “What the Light Teaches” (1991) formulates a spectro-poetics read as materialist philosophy of humanist language:

Language is how ghosts enter the world.  
 They twist into awkward positions  
 to squeeze through the black spaces.  
 The dead read backwards,  
 as in a mirror. They gather  
 in the white field and look up,  
 waiting for someone  
 to write their names. (113)

Resisting the siren call to obscurity of the blank page’s interminable, blizzard-like whiteness – its protean nothingness – Michaels’ stanza finds the shape of ghosts in the arabesques and flat strikes of material text, the “black spaces” of lines and curves that make up language on the printed page. She hallucinates ghosts as they “look up” from words, a mirror version of the readers who to define these words “look up” a word’s meaning in the dictionary (perhaps cryptonymically). The act takes place in a feedback loop – as Matei Calinescu argues, rereading is both *composition* and *haunting*; part of an “essential circularity of the time of reading” (xi) – where the word-as-ghost haunts writers faced with the proleptic loss of voice as it disappears into text, from which it can only re-emerge as a performative effect in the exact place of the prosopopoeiac turn. This creates its own ghostly echoes. Charles Bernstein writes that the “implied or possible performance becomes a ghost of the textual composition, even if the transcriptive pull is averted, just as a reader can’t help but hear an overlay of a previously sampled voice of the poet, a ghostly presence steaming up out of the visual script” (145-146). The closer a poetry reading comes to vocal performance through public readings, ritual storytelling, or the formally dramatic spoken-word poetry, the more the poem becomes a dramatically *told* ghost story; in other cases, the human voice hollows and gives itself over to the ghost

voice of the text. In a rare interview Michaels explains that “[y]ou spend your time when you’re writing erasing yourself” (Crown 12); no confessional expression, this, but a keen ghost in language escaping from her texts in order to permit them a space to exist unimpeded by authorial overdetermination. As Foucault writes, “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face” (1972: 17). Bernstein’s “ghostly presence steaming up out of the visual script” is, for Michaels, a spectral language sinuously pressed against the curving ligatures of time and space that permits her own departure from the machine of a poem. Is this what the light teaches: that shadows and ghosts exist?

Ekphrastic spectres linger along perceptual slips and traces of light. They are ambient features of common linguistic currency. J.J. Gibson notes that although ambient light illuminates the environment for perception, it is also itself totally unseeable. Human eyes may perceive facts about the body, such as the discomfort caused by looking directly into the sun, but the sun’s light itself is not captured as we gaze upon it. Precisely the opposite. Looking at the sun is blinding. “[T]he only way we see illumination [...] is by way of that which is illuminated” (Gibson 55). When attended to, light teaches us that forms are products of the mind and responses to illumination in which the crucial element, the thing itself, lies beyond our ocular systems. Michaels explores light and ghosts through an exploration of ekphrastic promise in “The Day of Jack Chambers” (1986). In this rhapsody about painting, Michaels grounds the figures that imagination derives from light in the medium of poetry:

You explained visual time,  
 how there’s no weight without shadow.  
 Nothing falls, every figure has a ghostly buoyancy.  
 You explained how Chambers grounded things with his light,  
 leaving the ghost inside.

I understood this by thinking “language” instead of “light,”  
 how everything suspended stays temporal. I understood it as a grammar of  
 beauty



with its apex of loss,  
disheveled burning trees half leafless. (13-14)

If Chambers' painting left the ghost inside things by necessity, according to Gibsonian logic, so do ghosts remain and flourish within Michaels' "grammar of beauty"; their absent shape evident in a temporally suspended "apex of loss." Language is how ghosts "look up"; in its poetry they enter the world, but it does not show or expose them.<sup>114</sup> A lens flare does not show light. It betrays the threshold where light short-circuits sight. Analogously, a ghost betrays linguistic media's inability to transmit full representations *just as* it distinguishes its own effect; it figures a present absence. A flare looks like light but reveals ocular failure. Similarly, though ghosts suggest meaning, they merely reflect the fact of absence in an ekphrastic construction that suspends time out of joint.<sup>115</sup>

#### § THE SPECTROPOETICS OF APPARITIONAL TEXTS §

For many poets, feelings of cultural alienation are at the nexus of national and linguistic collectivity and influence their choice of form in poetry. Haunting often issues from feelings of exile, whether partial, psychological, or absolute and involuntary. Separation inscribes difference in a "voiced" but machinic form – the poem – and unites the work of writers from avant garde or minoritarian traditions with that of writers estranged from conventional discourse. This abstraction from normalized linguistic discourse provides words a point of departure from the appropriations of human meaning and allows them to take on the appearance of ghosts. "[T]he poem," Maurice Blanchot writes, "is not made with ideas, or with words; it is the point from which words begin to become their appearance" (1989: 223). Spectropoetics endlessly return to this self-appearance of words

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<sup>114</sup> Mahmoud Darwish's famous "To Describe an Almond Blossom" describes poetry's act of spectral transformations in very similar terms: "What is its name?", his poem asks, "What is the name of this thing in the poetics of nothing? / I must break out of gravity and words, / in order to feel their lightness when they turn / into whispering ghosts, and I make them as they make me / a white translucence" (20). This *ars poetica* recognizes that lightness evidences a transformation into something not-quite machine, not-quite human, not-quite visible, making ghosts – as one of the tropes of a "poetics of nothing" – a redoubled and intangibly present figure.

<sup>115</sup> What happens when one presses against the site of ocular reception? Not ghosts but *phosphenes*, the light and colours produced by rubbing one's eyes – a kind of effervescent analogue to typographic and visual wordplay. Phosphenes are structurally similar to ghosts, however, they result from an opening caused by releasing pressure.

in the abstract technology of the poem; a spectral poem proclaims its inhumanity while still opening a threshold across which the dead and the unborn might “speak.”

This constitution of spectropoetics in the apparition of speech from words shares in an approach to languages that bridges poetic *milieu*: language itself travels, calls to its own traditions, and asserts an authority. As Ciarán Carson says in conversation, a philosophy shared by those he calls “true poets [... is] that they are subservient to the language rather than in command of it” (2009: 18). Language has a “life” of its own. Resurrecting a dead metaphor, Michaels speculates that her poems might “speak to” each other (Crown 12). Using similar language, Breyten Breytenbach suggests that words “talk to one another whether you want it or not; they tell stories” (2009: 83). A look at Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” suggests that from a philological point of view words talk across lines of culture and in echoes of many different historical times, and the *cryptonymists* make full use of this uncanny circulation. Carson acknowledges how he is “constantly surprised by how accurately people from other countries perceive [his] work: [...] There seems to be some kind of global poetic common denominator involved” (2009: 18-19).<sup>116</sup> Other poets locate the uncanny agency of words in traditions extending beyond their reckoning. “Could we be chiming with rhymes and sounds coming from way beyond?” Breytenbach asks. “Do the ancestors, going back all the way to dust, speak through us?” (2009: 133). Added to this diachronic view is the tradition of synchronic word transformations that I.A. Richards called “the interanimation of words.” This kind of transgenerational haunting outside its usual gothic ambit takes place both in and outside of poetry, with the changing corpus of language broadly conceived (1936: 47ff).

In terms of its use value as a theoretical concept, spectropoetics encompasses both the haunting rhythm of poetics – the play of meaning between material signifier and

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<sup>116</sup> Carson’s defamiliarized verse teems with spectres of forms and voices and strikes an exemplary pose in this regard. Influenced by the American long lines of C.K. Williams and Williams Carlos Williams, but also by the traditional Irish folk tunes’ eight-beat musical phrase (Sewell 185-86) and by the Japanese *haiku* (Corcoran 181), Carson’s dynamic flux of poetic forms and Belfast diction opens outward to the indelibly modern texts of his later work which, abandoning free verse, takes up the *unheimlich* global cultures of surveillance and popular media.

immaterial communication – and the oft-reified thematics of doubleness and belatedness. Brought into existence by language, the haunted word gathers itself in the dwelling place of the poem, where words as ghosts wait for the hospitable promise of the name. Without a human face – only assuming the disguise offered by *prosopopoeia* – the ghosts of poetry have, in recent years, been shaped by unaccented voices in an effect of transcultural appropriation of poetic traditions and international speakers. Featuring prominently in a new iteration of a gothic gone global – the globalgothic – spectropoetics combines formalist and thematic approach to what has traditionally been the domain of the gothic, if not always proclaimed as such. Speaking in general terms about the gothic’s propensity to register distress, disturbance, and subversive marginality, John Goodby argues that for poets “lacking a sure tradition, [the gothic’s] generic capacity for fusing disparate stylistic elements [and] operating with hybrid states and forms can usefully convey a sense of simultaneous threat and freedom conferred by isolation and disruptive modernity” (2009: 78). The spectropoetic influence extends to writers such as Breytenbach who turn to French and African models as an antidote to the poison of his homeland’s apartheid culture; it extends even further to writers in the Canadian metropolis, such as Anne Michaels, or those isolated by globalizing cultural frameworks. Modern culture and a greatly increased access to the archives of past and different traditions have changed the work of *poiesis* across the world. Form and theme undergo global inflections just as they do the immediacies of local or regional traditions and themes; all make the further leap to associate the language they use with the spectral, the ghostly – with haunting.

### 3.3 Eavan Boland and the Haunted Chorus

It will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book  
without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against.

Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1931)

Who moves the scribe’s hand so that it will pass into the actuality of writing?  
According to what laws does the transition from the possible to the real take place?

Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency” (1993)

Eavan Boland's poetry houses a dizzying variety of ghosts. In "The Colonists," ghosts keen while weeping. In "Ghost Stories," they are a figure of her alienation in Iowa. In "What Love Intended," they name the lyric voice itself. Her critical and general nonfiction prose host many more. Haunting figures articulate Boland's vexed relationship with inherited literary traditions and, in creative counterpoint, motivate her critical essays on a series of influential writers from Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Mew to Anne Bradstreet and Sylvia Plath. Boland's quarrel with tradition, representation, and poetry is often thought to emerge from her feminist or postcolonial stance.<sup>117</sup> However, judging from the persuasive frequency of these ghosts, it is possible to discern that beneath these challenges to discursive objects of power, significant evidence suggests that Boland's work scrutinizes the dynamic linguistic matrix of presence and absence, privilege and loss. Language is Boland's subject and object; she traces it in speech and changes it in her hands. Following multiple references to ghosts and hauntings in Boland's poetry and prose in what I admit is an eclectic approach, I argue that language is revealed as a haunted medium of crisis *and* intimacy across Boland's concerns with gender, politics, representation, and identity. She transforms cultural inheritance through a *spectropoetics* charged with listening to the echoes of history's absences. Spectropoetics is both the making of ghosts and the ghostly work of making: it occurs through lineages of practices and signs. The haunted lyric voice disappears from its point of enunciation but retains indexical and metrical gestures of the writer's assumed intent and lyric subjectivity. These gestures reshape traditions and desires for what poetry might do. In other words, Boland's work suggests that to listen to ghosts through written poetry is to find a way to become one yourself. In the process poetry's medium – language – also changes.

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<sup>117</sup> "Gradually, the anomaly of my poetic existence was clear to me," Boland writes:

By luck, or its absence, I had been born in a country where and at a time when the word *woman* and the word *poet* inhabited two separate kingdoms of experience and express. I could not, it seemed, live in both. As the author of poems I was an equal partner in Irish poetry. As a woman – about to set out on the life which was the passive object of many of those poems – I had no voice. It had been silenced, ironically enough, by the very powers of language I aspired to and honoured. By the elements of form I had worked hard to learn. [...] I sensed that real form – the sort that made time turn and wander when you read a poem – came from a powerful meeting between a hidden life and a hidden chance in language. If they found each other, then each could come out of hiding. (1995: 114-116)

## § “STAND AND IMAGINE” THE SPECTROPOETIC GAMBIT §

“The Mother Tongue” (1998) illustrates how coincidences of constraint and desire in the controlled linguistic imagination are able to transform *possibility* into a kind of *presence*. “I stand,” Boland writes in the poem’s closing stanzas, “and imagine”

my pure sound, my undivided speech  
 travelling to the edge of this silence.  
 As if to find me. And I listen: I hear  
 what I am safe from. What I have lost. (2011: 257)

An untraceable voice enters the text where its imagined limits of sound meet silence. With a hard caesura, the poem’s haunted apposition between what the voice is “safe from” and what it has “lost” associates the constraints of inherited masculinist tradition with the unrecorded loss of women. More closely, the poem shuttles between the embattled physicality of the speaking if mortal body and the tentative sanctuary of textuality’s immortal frame. In the passage from one to the other, the poem’s voice becomes ghostly in order to interact with remembered traditions and figures. Voice and tradition indelibly and spectrally merge, as do objects and agents of loss. “When abhorred ghosts, so to speak, are back,” Derrida says to Bernard Steigler, “we recall the ghosts of their victims [...] we call them back for the struggle today and, above all, for the future” (2002b: 23). Spectral figures are the common inheritance of Anglophone Irish poetic language and, in Boland’s view, consonant with an idea of “undivided speech.” They echo in the recessive expression as the lyric voice, desiring what has been lost, stretches toward silence. The lines are formally contradictory if readers insist on a certain metaphysical consistency of identity and truth: a voice “listen[s]” in the text; speech promises to “hear.” Similarly, ghosts are present in their absence, and the reader bears witness to the listening voice without seeing a figure or hearing a word. A lyric voice encounters but does not ventriloquize what it feels haunted by; a reader listens for ghosts in the stanza. A poem’s meter keeps time in a hospitable space, here under the gendered sign of “The Mother

Tongue.” The possibility of an “undivided speech” that might conceivably be a *listening* voice may seem contradictory and, therefore, illogical, a contradiction in terms.

Yet contradiction is neither illogical nor a lack of clarity or rigour. Instead, it unsettles conventionality. As Paul de Man points out through a reading of Nietzsche, contradiction *disrupts* tropic truths “by patterns that cannot be assimilated to these themes” (1979: 271). Nietzsche’s passage is pertinent. In a 1887 version quoted by de Man, the German separates the implications of philosophy’s refusal of contradiction:

If, according to Aristotle, *the law of contradiction* is the most certain of all principles, if it is the ultimate ground upon which every demonstrative proof rests, if the principle of every axiom lies in it; then one should consider all the more rigorously what presuppositions already lie at the bottom of it. Either it asserts something about actual entities, as if one already knew this from some other source; namely that opposite attributes *cannot* be ascribed to them. Or the proposition means: opposite attributes *should* not be ascribed to them. In that case, logic would be an imperative *not* to know the true but to posit and arrange a world that *should be true for us*. (qtd. in de Man 1979: 120)

On the one hand, impossibility; on the other, an imperative to ethics: between them is the actual fact of contradiction, which is to say the disruptive influence of possibility or non-possibility within a philosophically settled schema. The contradiction of a listening voice embraces the vanished voices of past speakers through an association with those voices of an assumed future. A poetics of accepted disruptions avoid seductive thematic or narrative certainties such as those that suffuse Boland’s melancholic “Outside History” sequence (1990). These poems experiment with the emotional valences of fixed positions sprung from a repeating line, “we are too late. We are always too late” (2011: 188). A gesture toward trauma’s inherent “belatedness or latency” (Craps 170), the dramatic “always” inflates the mournful line to a melancholic grandiloquence and risks melodramatic readings. Collected in the same volume, “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me” (1990) avoids such seductive collapses with tensile resiliency. Short on

adjectives and adverbs, the poem's volta ripples with motion gained from consonance and assonance, just as if it were spoken by the poet-as-fish Boland describes in a much earlier poem, "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish." Letting its linguistic gestures do the talking, "The Black Lace Fan" strikingly reconstructs memory through surprise:

The past is an empty cafe terrace.  
 An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.  
 ... no way now to know what happened then –  
 none at all – unless, of course, you improvise (2011: 165)<sup>118</sup>

The lyric's suggestion for itself and its reader to improvise recalls the moment in "The Mother Tongue" where the voice "stand[s]" and "imagine[s]." Each poem reflexively employs creative language to extend lyric space between the departed author and the reader who reenacts the voice, all triangulated through an imagined scene. This kind of the reader-directed exhortation possesses something of the Freudian uncanny. To adapt an observation by David Punter, the interpolated you evident here is "an intimate you; it shares with us all manner of secrets" as it asks us to co-creatively imagine within the poem a supplement to an intimate memory signed over to the text and appropriated by the reader. This "intimacy, to revert to Freud, signifies something withheld, something that we hug closely, yet when we inspect it our hair stands on end at the thing that this intimate, this 'familiar', has become while we were, so to speak, not looking" (Punter 198). The lyric shares and does not share its imaginative memories. In place of a speaking subject, it creates a lyric subjectivity whose rich play between secrets and openness works could be called (in memory of Joseph Conrad) a secret sharer: not a secret but the figure of one about to confess. Looking toward the past, Boland dives beneath the obvious signs of a time's clothes or voices – and in literature *figures* are the clothes in which the voice takes form, dressing up to become hidden in textuality – in order to reach the "ghosts of

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<sup>118</sup> Compare Anne Michaels' "Flowers," a poem which describes memory of others as a ghostly kind of "second skin" within the subject in counterpoint to the knowledge of a body. "Second skin" reminds the body of its absences and the subject of what is is not; it situates the place of remembrance as "In the street – café chairs abandoned / on terraces; market stalls emptied / of their solid light" (1997: 83).

the time: gestures [and] events” (Boland 2011: 47). Underneath the sign is its signified, the thing that escapes words. Between the two move silent ghosts. Elsewhere Boland writes that “[e]very step toward an origin is also an advance towards a silence” (1995: 24). This kind of silence is haunted by perceived lines of influence, histories of etymological reading, and textual forms, all of which bear the signature of their makers; a textured field of linguistic creation marks every silence and ghosts are its intercessors.

The inhuman untimeliness of lyric poetry is itself ghostly. Once transcribed to the page, Boland’s poems are transformed into a shape Robert Pogue Harrison describes as “intrinsically posthumous” (15). A lyric extends space across time by transforming it into something unrecognizable; as metered speech, poetry “keeps time.” Keeping time, the “taking place” of the poem is the inherited ground where “the living and the unborn may [...] make themselves at home in their articulate humanity” (Harrison 15). Poetry, when read, reveals the form of *Nachleben* as an “allegiance between the dead and the unborn of which we the living are merely the ligature” (Harrison ix). Boland believes that we *depend* on such allegiances through time to constitute cultural memory. As she writes,

there is a human dimension to time, human voices within it and human griefs ordained by it. Our present will become the past of other men and women. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others, once, depended on us. (1995: 153)

In this web of interdependence, the skein of language – possessed solely by no group of people, but held in trust and in many ways possessing those who speak it – betrays what Jacques Derrida calls the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present” (2006: xix). Gothic tropes and language recognize the disarticulations of time that shape spectral poetics and traditions and themselves cross national boundaries. The lyric “space” is a trifold material, cultural, and linguistic matrix for readers across time.

Boland argues that this spectropoetic and untimely meeting space grounds the ethics of aesthetics. For her, the capacity to suggest “any complicated human suffering” gives poetry its force (1995: 137). Boland’s ethics stabilizes what, lifting a concept from



Giorgio Agamben, we could call the poem's "experiment without truth": the suspended and contradictory event where in the memory of music "the poem sings" (Dillon 322) – this although poetry is itself "a practice of writing" and is thus soundless and dependent on a recollection of human voice that will necessarily "always have a dimension of imagination" (Stewart 69). Experiments without truth "concern not the actual existence or nonexistence of a thing but exclusively its potentiality, [... that] insofar as it can be or not be, is by definition withdrawn from both truth conditions and [...] the principle of contradiction" (Agamben 1999: 261). I am aware that in regarding Boland's poetry as an linguistic experiment under the torsion of blurred definitions of object[ivity] and subject[ivity], I risk jettisoning "truth" and contravening statements the poet has made elsewhere.<sup>119</sup> This misfit between Boland's ethical injunctions and later, more speculative thoughts on love and hospitality is not a problem. Instead, it illustrates the power of a recourse to the prescriptive ethics offered by the law of contradiction. Nor has Boland always felt the constriction of contradictory positions. Indeed, she advocates the need for "two maps" rather than one; two ways of looking at the terrain of the real, each of which organizes its system of representation along different lines (2011: 44). Ethics must be distinguished from the single issue of liberating the imagination from impoverishment. Otherwise, despite any good intentions and powerful argument, the laudatory revisionist charge of Boland's work risks becoming censorship. Accepting contradictions brings us closer to Boland's own understanding of eros, desire, and objectification in poetry. To transform "difficulties into some kind of accessible drama," she writes, desire and possibilities must operate in poetry "as surrealisms, as a series of what-ifs and whether nots" (1995: 216). "Truth" is a provisional matter for election, not an ethical seizure. To linguistic analysis, de Man reminds us that truth is "a trope," "the possibility of stating a proposition" (1984: 239). In the context of poetry, Perloff argues, truths "remain poised as possibilities revealing the difficulties of human choice" (1996a: 186). Aesthetic hospitality houses the dilemma of impossibility; in it, language nakedly functions as manipulation or

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<sup>119</sup> For example, Boland asserts a strict relationship between ethics, images and truth, the violation of which is unethical: "All good poetry depends on an ethical relation between imagination and image. Images are not ornaments; they are truths. [...] Once the image is distorted, the truth is demeaned" (1995: 152).

persuasion. Such poetry could be called a form of honesty, were it not so spectral, so clearly duplicitous in Boland's poetic overlay of multiple maps on linguistic terrain.

While her poetry questions the lyric's coherence and presence, Boland's critical prose tirelessly deconstructs the concept of an authoritative and univocal poetry. In her early attempts at writing poetry, Boland remembers that "at night, when I tried to write, a ghost hand seemed to hold mine. Where could my life, my language fit in? [...] how could I be original, if I couldn't even provide the name for my own life in poetry?" (2011: 8). Poetry, the quintessential mode of expression that demands attention to form and figure, inherits "an ancient world of customs and permissions" (1995: 27). Relative to this inherited world, Boland's marginality made her susceptible to the form's centralizing assumptions and ghostly whispers. Women are traditionally admitted into Irish poetry only through objectified and restricted roles represented by "metaphors and invocations, similes and muses" (1995: 27). From the force and "paradox of those traditions, with their sense of exclusiveness," Boland writes, she "saw the power of language more clearly" (1995: 81). Language revealed its controlling guise of personal pronouns to the young poet. Subject positions are the main complaint of authoritarian ghosts. "Two words haunted Irish poetry when I was young [...] two pivotal words for an Irish poet – and for many other poets – were *I* and *we*" (2011: 57). It is clear that Boland moves from recognition of stereotypes as "the starting point for a radical critique of representation as such" (Craps 166) toward an exploration of the poetic form that nourished those traditions of representation; she addresses the disease and not merely the symptoms. Poetic voice itself becomes the problem – and, perhaps, the cure (Fogarty 9).

Out of this dilemma at the very point of lyric enunciation, Boland saw the potential utility of a haunted voice in that it makes up a subject both *of* and *in* textuality. Ghosts could be both a problem and a solution. First came questions about identity and voice. The long tradition of past poets haunted lyric form, threatening to usurp and subtly transform the intimate linguistic subjectivity of the lyric voice, metrical intention, and pauses in breath and aspiration that leave human traces through sonic textuality. When discouragement struck, Boland felt "a keen temptation to let that ghost hand do the work

for me. I could have watched as it moved fluently across that page, writing out the echoes” (2011: 8). In other words, she could have become a willingly uncreative medium to the suppleness of a ghost’s hand, under whose grasp her poetry would merely channel inherited poetic forms and figures – just as Spiritualists always promised to offer hoping to neutralize their own agency and to become a virtual blank slate. “Somehow,” Boland writes, “I resisted that. All the same, I was aware of a shadow under the surface. Of a voice whispering to me: *Who is writing your poem?*” (Boland 2011: 8). Crossed and disappointed, the ghost hand becomes an interrogatory finger that threatens continued disempowerment. To this whisper – who writes? – I now want to append two more questions, the better to understand how the whispering sound of a ghost indelibly embeds itself in the material object of writing: who speaks in a poem? How does this “speech” occur, that we as readers might “listen”? Through signs of spectrality: spectropoetics.

§ SPECTROPOETIC FEVER – AN ARCHIVE OF A KIND §

At this point it is necessary to turn to poetry to see how Boland answered these questions. The concerns I deem spectropoetic signs – 1) an attention to language as such; 2) a vexed relation to history and literary inheritance; and, 3) a spectral mediation of the poem’s concerns and lyric voice – are clearly staged in “Fever” (1987), a poem that tells how Eavan Boland’s grandmother died from puerperal fever. From its title forward, “Fever” presents a broken anaphoric chain of backwards-looking sentences that echo the poem’s keenly felt belatedness. Fever is “what they tried to shake out of / the crush and dimple of cotton”; it “is what they beat, lashed, hurt like / flesh as if it were a lack of virtue / in a young girl sobbing her heart out”; fever “is what they burned // alive [...] as if it were a witch” (2011: 134). As the lyric “voice” reveals its shape, the poem turns introspective and pushes at the imagined dimensions of its untimely relationship with loss.

My grandmother died in a fever ward,  
 younger than I am and far from  
 the sweet chills of a Louth spring –  
 its sprigged light and its wild flowers –

with five orphan daughters to her name.  
 Names, shadows, visitations, hints  
 and a half-sense of half-lives remain.  
 And nothing else, nothing more unless

I reconstruct the soaked-through midnights;  
 vigils; the histories I never learned  
 to predict the lyric of; and re-construct  
 risk; as if silence could become rage,

as if what we lost is a contagion  
 that breaks out in what cannot be  
 shaken out from words or beaten out  
 from meaning and survives to weaken

what is given, what is certain  
 and burns away everything but this  
 exact moment of delirium when  
 someone cries out someone's name. (2011: 134)

After its torturous first half evokes a cramped space of sickened domesticity, the poem decreatively opens into a reflexive moment where Boland exposes the yearning spectrality of its lyric voice. Despite the poem's attempted apostrophe, nothing remains of history that could be addressed – nothing save “Names, shadows, visitations, hints, / and a half-sense of half-lives.” Still in belated syntax, but now emphatically dislocated from its lost object and therefore inquisitive, Boland annexes history's questions to the domain of prophetic poetry and a language reminiscent of Maurya's speech in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. After apostrophe has failed, only prophecy might access “histories I never learned / to predict the lyric of.” The awkward preposition on which the line ends extends the clause into a half-expected but nameless and anticipated object – *whose histories?* What is witnessed? Boland's grandmother exists in the fugue state of a wordless past outside the time kept by the poem. However haunting and lost, the symptom of her death is all but

irrepressible in knowing about the fever that killed her. In the manner of an unlooked for and untimely rhyme, her figure gains symbiotic power “as if what we lost is a contagion” irradiating the lives of her descendants.<sup>120</sup> Feverish but spectral, the poem articulates its disjointed archive of affect and subjectivity; like the archive of Foucault’s description, it “does not have the weight of tradition” but instead, striking out through a positive response to failure, establishes its threshold on “the discontinuity that separates us from what we can no longer say” (Foucault 1972: 130).<sup>121</sup>

“Fever” storms and rages even when shorn of its promised resurrection to a lost subject. After its narrative inauguration and its following reflective turn, the poem’s final stanzas turn outward to ask what remains of the thirty-one-year-old woman with five daughters and no voice left even to whisper. No trace of facile ventriloquism lingers here, no melancholic desire that might stitch together an exquisite corpse from memory’s rags. In a frenzied list of clause-clustered questions the poem interrogates language about

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<sup>120</sup> Boland explains that her “grandmother lived outside history. And she died there. A thirty-one-year-old woman, with five daughters, facing death in a hospital far from her home [...] in her lifetime Ireland had gone from oppression to upheaval. A language had been reclaimed. Laws had changed. Conspiracies and explosions were everyday occurrences. And she had existed at the edge of it” (1995: 68). On the edges of this history is that issue indelibly stamped with an impasse identified most famously by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and recycled thereafter with tireless fidelity: the question “can the subaltern speak?” Elsewhere, and with significant conviction, Spivak writes “I call it a prayer to be haunted by her ghost” (2003: 50). What would it mean to take up this prayer in relation to witnessing and poetry?

Craps observes that in “Fever” the contagion which led to Boland’s grandmother’s death “becomes an image for the *haunting power of the past*, the claim made by the past upon the present” (172, my emphasis). He continues,

Boland’s self-consciously inadequate imaginative recreation of her grandmother’s harrowing experience is not an attempt at mastery, not a reaffirmation of what the poet takes to be given and certain, but a literary *testimony* that is receptive to the *unsettling strangeness of an irrevocably lost past* which punctures the complacency of the present. This *ghostly defiance* is reflected by the persistent use of enjambment in this poem, which counteracts the semblance of order, stability, and control created by the neat division of the lines into quatrains. Delirious, ex-static, beside herself, exiled from her own identity, the speaker by the end of the poem is in a position in which she is able to hear and to respond to the disquieting cry of the past which has gone unheard until now” (Craps 172-73, my emphasis).

Spectral language infiltrates Craps’ argument as he reads Boland through Spivak as writers who want “to be haunted by women who have been excluded from history,” and who are themselves women who have become “a spectral presence inhabiting language [...] so Spivak urges us to acknowledge the traces of exclusion in hegemonic speech, to hear the ghostly whisper of what could not be said” (174). Hearing a ghostly whisper is to witness such literary testimony.

<sup>121</sup> I echo Ann Laura Stoler’s description of the documents and traces that constitute the archival grain and its surfeit and that transgress an archive’s “policed edges” (19). Archives of “the visionary and expectant should rivet our attention upon their erratic moment back and forth,” Stoler writes; they are “[r]esplendent in the feared, the unrealized, and the ill-conceived, [...] and] invite [...] a strategy of ‘developing historical negatives’ to track a microspace of the everyday through what might become and could never be” (21). With a different tenor but a similar structural influence, the archive of the visionary and the poetic are, to use Stoler’s term, “blueprints of distress” (21).

survival, “as if silence could become rage, / as if what we lost is a contagion”; pushing forward, it asks about “what cannot be / shaken out from words or beaten out of meaning,” and about “what is given, what is certain” until, finally, loss has “burn[ed] away everything but this.” All that remains is the keening call “when / someone cries out someone’s name.” Whose name? Who calls? These questions echo in the poetic space already sounding a whisper: who is writing? In the Irish tradition, poems such as “Fever”, “The Muse Mother”, “Lava Cameo”, “Anna Liffey”, and the recent “Letters to the Dead” sequence from *Domestic Violence* (2007) situate Boland among other women writers such as Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. For these poets, Guinn Batten writes, silenced figures return in a “sometimes sinister but nonetheless corrective spirit; a revenant that reveals the gaps and silences that shaped the past and misshape the present” (175). While the return of the lost spirit is a seductive thought, and certainly appropriate following popular gothic apprehensions, I would suggest that in fact Boland’s revealed ghosts trace *without speaking* these misshapings; they are a fever-borne hallucination and they “speak” only as the poet “speaks,” by leaving utterance to the reader’s voice. To interpret either dead metaphor of speech for a veridical discourse is to drape one’s own voice in an assumed spectral garb.

The relationship of ghosts and speaking can be more clearly ascertained by turning back to poetry. Boland’s “Witness” (1998) elaborates on figures she calls “compound ghosts [...] paragons of dispossession” (1995: 171). In trim iambic trimeter the poem marshals stanzas that quietly reflect the addressed ranks of dead. Yet poetry’s prosopopoeiac act gives these ghosts not faces, but feet.

Out of my mouth they come:  
 The spurred and booted garrisons.  
 The men and women  
 the dispossessed. (2011: 247)

Melding the technical language of poetry (ghostly feet) with the ghostly procession’s figural image composes a spectropoetic event. “Witness” looks back to W.B. Yeats’

“Fragments” (1928), a poem that claims the power of a female medium to whom Yeats ascribed a prophet’s visionary discourse *ex nihilo*: “Where got I that truth? / Out of a medium’s mouth, / Out of nothing it came” (89). Yet I differ from Batten where she argues that Boland’s poem returns language-power to female agency (which, in fairness, Batten characterizes in the context of a shared skepticism of language’s ability to “liberate, given its complicity with oppression,” 179), or that, in a related move, “speech” might return creative artistry from colonial powers to the postcolonial writer. Boland’s conclusion to “Witness” suggests something different. The poem ends with a question,

What is a colony  
if not the brutal truth  
that when we speak  
the graves open.

And the dead walk? (2011: 247)

While Boland’s spectropoetic approach bears definite prosopopoeiac power, it cannot embody the dead in material form, no matter what radical powers a minoritarian or postcolonial writer accrues from linguistic conflict. Thus the importance of the fragment that closes “Witness” with a question mark: not a hope, even less a prayer, it asks the reader consider what a language of open graves might be. Graves “open” only in the yawning silence of the grave, and the walking dead in a written medium can only array themselves in dark ink over white pages as they take up the “feet” of a poetic line.

#### § WRITING HOSPITALITY AND THE INTIMATE ENEMY §

In 1931, Virginia Woolf argued that a woman who writes “still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome” (288). “Ghosts and prejudices,” Boland writes, echoing Woolf more than sixty years later, “[m]aybe it is time we took a look at those [things]” (1995: 246). In their ambiguous situation, it is important to ask whether or not we must fight ghosts, to use Woolf’s terms, or whether they can be somehow accommodated in a space of easeful dwelling. In Boland’s conflict between a poet’s vocation and a woman’s

identity the worst and most dangerous possibility is to betray oneself. “[F]or anyone who is drawn into either of these lives,” she writes, “the pressure is there to betray the other: to disown or simplify, to resolve an inherent tension by making a false design from the ethical capabilities of one life [as a woman] or the visionary possibilities of the other [as a poet]” (1995: xiv). Running against this possibility, Boland also sees that what she calls the “mover of the poem’s action – the voice, the speaker – must be at the same risk from that action as every other component in the poem” (1995: 186). A poet must risk her identity to enunciate lyric subjectivity and face the ghosts of tradition. Poetry objectifies women’s bodies as “metaphors and invocations, similes and muses [...] not by malice or misogyny but by an encounter between the power of poetic language and the erotic objectification poetry allowed and encouraged” (1995: 27). At worst, the process creates “exhausted fictions of the nation” in the place of human memories (Boland 1995: 137).

Yet the aesthetic process implies a degree of inevitability to abstract and failed representations, if not along specific ideological lines. Pure language – entirely “truthful” representation – dreams that the body could seamlessly become text. Such is not the case. Having become poetry, the living experience of the body disappears into the figures and figurings common to poetic traditions; from the other side, language becomes ghostly to objectify the body and reach past mechanical assumptions for the musical echoes of art’s call, themselves rhythms that could momentarily enliven memory in the reader’s body. Boland’s poetry offers hospitality through a way of writing different from authoritarian pronouncement. Here, she refines Virginia Woolf’s concern with tradition’s prejudices and ghosts. Even if the ghosts of past forms are rejected, she writes, their presence means that “No poet, however young or disaffected, writes alone.” Words as the dwelling places of ghosts are only ever “on hire,” and more permanently “owned by a complicated and interwoven past of language, history, happenstance” (Boland 1995: 106). This is hospitality of a sort, and you can pick your hosts. Boland sought refuge in Latin lyrics of unknown authorship and in the figure of Sylvia Plath as someone both “unsettled and local,” like Boland herself (1995: 113). These models allowed her to investigate how frictions between the lives of women and the craft of poetry create beauty – but also how



such conflict can “become fatal” (1995: 113). Escaping from the ghost hand of tradition, Boland sought in readers a writer’s “true accomplice” (2000: x). Acts of reading merge a reader’s vitality with a poem’s trace of historicity. With mutual hospitality they compress concerns of poetry and of life. To be such an accomplice, a reader can be no conspirator, for sharing breath is impossible. Instead, appropriations are made. In such hospitable acts of the lyric voice – its shared “I,” voiced or otherwise – there is a movement just as narcissistic as it is loving. The desired object for artistic transformation is possessed by expression’s power and, hauntingly, “becomes a beautiful mime of those forces of expression which have silenced it” (1995: 216). The triumph of expression, if that is what it has been called, is in the transformation of an entire human apparatus to the spectral realms of an inhuman art. What remains human is only the reader’s voice giving breath and intonation to the utterance of poetry’s lines. In poetry, *as in prose*, the interpretative axis of readerly creation interferes with the witnessing of ghosts that poetry otherwise calls its readers toward.

Boland calls the haunting hospitality of the lyric voice *love*, “an exasperating tenderness” that she extends to the inherited ghosts of literary tradition (1995: xi). What kind of love is this? One of trust, agency, and voice. Plato suspected poetry and painting on the grounds that “[t]hey create phantasms [and] not reality”; similarly, he called lyric poetics a “phantasmal technique” and deemed its product “a sort of man-made dream created for those who are awake” (*Republic* 599a; *Sophist* 234, 266c7-9; trans. Anne Carson 1999: 48). Recalling Plato’s arguments, Susan Stewart writes that the lyric voice is “a suspect source of thought” exactly because it calls to love from an ambiguous agency; that it is seductively charming but also that the “most dangerous aspect of this charm is that it is *unthought*” (111-12). Without clear agency, and without a human voice, poetry provokes Plato’s concern: “what is the source or cause of the sound that is heard in poetry?” (Stewart 111). A concern over agency is current to Boland’s and Agamben’s ghostly hands as well. Whose hand inscribes the translated meaning of a poem? Whose words – whose signature – underwrites the love that accepts the burnt offering of the ghostly lyric voice? Looking to Levinas, Stef Craps offers the idea of an “ethics of love [...]”

not as self-serving benevolence, narcissism, or fusion, but as a nonappropriative encounter with the other which puts the self into question,” and which emerges “not in the poet’s recovery of the voices of subaltern women but in her invention of *a mode of writing that bears witness*, in ‘good faith,’ to its own incapacity of recovering what lies outside history” (Craps 174, my emphasis). To bear witness: to discern in writing the possibility of alterity, over and above the recognized contradiction of presence and absence figured by a ghost. Thus Boland takes a stand in *Against Love Poetry* (2001), a book written, she says, “to mark the contradictions of a daily love” (2011: 280).<sup>122</sup> Contradictions are implicit in the word that must then stand for both a narcissistic investment of self in others and as a distanced, yearning desire for the irresolvably other. There may, however, be less of Levinas in Boland’s hospitality and more of an old Provençal idea inherited from the *troubadours*. According to Agamben, the love lyrics of these singers introduced an unrepresentable space of “ease” that we could identify as a boundless adjacency and free movement “where spatial proximity borders on opportune time [...] and convenience borders on the correct relation” (Agamben 1993: 25).<sup>123</sup> Such love welcomes strangers through intimacy, neither drawing its lovers close nor making them entirely known and exactly, geometrically, congruent, but rather exposing them in their discrete bodies (1995: 61). If there are echoes here from Levinas’ theories of the unutterable other, or even a trace of Abraham and Torok’s cryptonymy, they should be compared to the songs of twelfth-century poet Jaufrè Rudel in which the untranslatable phrase *Mout mi semblatz de bel aizin* is the greeting lovers exchange when they meet (Agamben 1993: 25). “Ease,” or *aizin*, becomes a technical term for the taking-place of love. Boland writes an easeful hospitality in a working poetics that finds space for ghosts to dwell, a place proper for love. Thus the seemingly perverse but quite appropriate title

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<sup>122</sup> Boland’s contradictory love chimes with Spivak’s “moral love”: both efforts are “attune[d] to the unheard, which may lead to the creation of new idioms for listening to the other” (Craps 174). Boland’s statement in the same collection that “every word here is written against love poetry” signifies her distaste for the traditional tropes and genres of idyllic love of the appropriative, silencing kind, and not emotional attachment as such.

<sup>123</sup> A further wrinkle in lyric’s relation to love, especially the kind of unconditional love Levinas poses, is found in Rachel Cole’s work with Agamben’s counter-intuitive but persuasive idea of poetics. Cole offers the competing idea of *satisfaction* and “an ethics of accord that complicates an insistence on the ultimate status of an ethics of respect” (387).

*Against Love Poetry*. The discovery of such hospitality also speak to Boland's increasing use of a colloquial "voice" that ends many later poems with grandeur or grace, and starkly contrasts her earlier, more brittle work, the lines of which sometimes carried only one beat, if that. Boland's reference to the "contradictions of a daily love" signals her concern with love's place in a poetry that reflects her own emphasis on the quotidian and rejects traditional tropes of feminine objectification. To replace the forms she was given, she crafts new ones in the shadow of their inherited ligatures that might articulate new desires and host ghosts who hitherto had found no easeful hospitality.

In 1998, Boland defined language as "a habitable grief" in a poem of the same name (2011: 255). In that habitation, a dwelling – a kind of *poiesis* or making – Boland makes space for not only the ghostly voices of the inherited tradition and the silenced ghosts of women's histories, but also for herself and her own becoming-spectrality. Poems such as "Anna Liffey" (1994) stage this disappearing act as a form of praise:

In the end  
 It will not matter  
 That I was a woman. I'm sure of it.  
 [...]  
 Everything that burdened and distinguished me  
 Will be lost in this:  
 I was a voice. (2011: 235-236)

The lyric's self-aware spectrality, its sense of loss, and the verb's critical pastness reveal the completed gambit of the writer's risk of self into poetry: "I *was* a voice." Plato asked about the sound of the voice and arrived at politics. To raise the poem's ghost, ask this question: *who is the I?* Taken up by readers, the lyric voice becomes both memory and prophecy. At heart it issues the speech of praise – *epideisis* – but Boland has qualified the genre's usual pose of "speaking for" another through love's transformation. She retains the epideictic lyric's second task, its encouragement of others through a choric voice that praises and dispraises equally (von Hallberg 51). The poem is a habitation beyond a self.

To explain this epideictic function, I return again to Boland's idea of the ghost hand and to Agamben's question that serves as the epigraph to this chapter: "Who moves the scribe's hand so that it will pass into the actuality of writing?" (1999: 248). The voice whispering to Boland prompts her to worry: "*Who was writing your poem?*" Self-criticism on the basis of the failures of received models can be its own type of gothic paralysis. Questions like this "would come back," she admits, "as hauntings, as shadows. When they did I remembered too late that I had never answered them" (2011: 8). With an answer unapparent, her *working through* of the question can be seen to generate an exemplary body of spectropoetic work marked by a tense and contradictory view of linguistic inheritance. "How do we create such figures," Boland asks. "What act of love or corruption makes us turn to a past full of obstruction and misinformation?" (1995: 16). Juxtaposing contradictory perspectives acknowledges that one holds language in trust and that, when one writes, one inherits a language haunted by histories of interpretation, traditions of meaning, desires of others, and the absence of many. To write is to acknowledge that in reading one has become a witness. "We inherit language in order to be able to bear witness to the fact that we are inheritors," Jacques Derrida writes (2002: 132). It is in the space of language, "this home outside oneself, that the spectre comes," Derrida writes, glossing a stanza's spectropoetic effect (2002: 132). The ghosts to whom Boland feels responsible are the "compound ghosts," "paragons of dispossession" whose lives were at odds with and thus silenced by the complex and referential traditions of poetry that objectified women to forestall their effort to speak (1995: 171). Boland's poetry constructs spectral kinships with *this* ghost, less a hand than a hope. "[A]t a certain point she ceased to be merely a suggestion and became a presence. In that sense," the poet writes, "her story is mine also" (1995: 16). Her responsibilities as a poet impel her to tell of ghosts: "I believe that if a woman poet survives [...] she has an obligation to tell as much as she knows of the ghosts within her, for they make up, in essence, her story as well" (1995: 249). These ghosts include those of poetry's metrical and thematic lineage. Boland quietly adopts another, perhaps more famous use of the term "compound ghost" in poetry. As T.S. Eliot in "Little Gidding" (1942) wrote

I caught the sudden look of some dead master  
 Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled  
     Both one and many; in the brown baked features  
 The eyes of a familiar compound ghost  
 Both intimate and unidentifiable. (1974: 204)

For T.S. Eliot, the compound ghost is Yeats; for Boland, it is an accretionary figure of past male Irish poets. As a theoretical concept, however, the compound ghost of regular iambic pentameter “is a perfect figure for a meter that bears the weight of many previous poets in its single rhythmic pattern” (Finch 124). Boland’s use of the term – which nods to Eliot’s prior claim – repurposes its vision of mastery to make it amenable to a thematics of memory work. The ghosts to whom poetry speaks include Eliot’s own metered conjuration of ghostly feet with whom “we trod the pavement in dead patrol” (1974: 204) but also, remembering Boland’s “Witness,” the imperial and militaristic ghosts of “spurred and booted garrisons.” A compound ghost speaks to a large body of writings that associate meter and form with a very specific kind of unspeaking choir. Ted Hughes, for example, admits that “the very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one’s own tune against that choir” (20). For Hughes, as for Boland, the turn to ghosts marks a thoughtful recognition about one’s relationship with poetic tradition and the perceived objects of linguistic discourse.

Survival entails an obligation to the ghosts whose hold on the living is contingent on the continuation of linguistic tradition. Boland’s chosen fields – the lives of women, the silent witness of familiar objects, the domestic space, her own life story – represent these concerns. To them Boland adds her own history of alienation from Ireland and its long literary traditions, drawing strength from the work of other twentieth-century Irish writers who also spoke of exile, such as Joyce and Beckett, and also from women alienated from their own national traditions for whom departure “seemed to be a response to the weight of the past” (2011: 136). From sources such as these Boland drew a description of poetry from American writer Ellen Bryant Voigt’s “Year’s End.” Poets are “like refugees who listen to the sea, / unable to fully rejoice, or fully grieve” (Voigt qtd. Boland 2011:

136). Between joy in poetic possibilities and grief at the losses of the past, Boland's poetry profanes the repressive literary traditions Virginia Woolf railed against.

Like Woolf, Boland does not give up on the makings of language though she knows that, in the end and after having risked all she can, her own voice too will join their haunting chorus. Perhaps that is precisely why she writes: to meld her hand with those that have guided hers, and thus to create a lyric form of disappearances. Eavan Boland's voice joins that of a ghostly host. The closing lines of her "Letters to the Dead" (2007) suggest that women past, both the daughters "young in a country that hated a woman's body" and those who "grew old in a country that hated a woman's body" had "asked for the counsel of the dead." The poem concludes: "They asked for the power of the dead. These are my letters to the dead" (2013: 215). Her poetry writes letters and crafts new figures too: new ghostly hands to hold and be held. "Becoming the Hand of John Speed" poetically imagines Boland's hands investing a ghostly agency in the dead appendages of an English cartographer whose *The Kingdome of Ireland, 1612* domesticated Irish topography for English audiences. As Boland bitterly puts it, Speed presented Ireland as "ready and flat and yearning to be claimed." The poet recognizes that she too has mapped a national consciousness in her writing. If she "was born in a nation / [she] had no part in making" (2013: 218), then her poetry has charted a new tradition for women poets following her. Describing a letter she would write to an imagined "Young Woman Poet," Boland acknowledges her own spectral pastness and continuing influence: times hauntingly mesh and are woven together in her encouragement for the future. "[T]his letter is full of irony and hope," she writes: "The hope that you will read in my absence what was shaped by the irony of your non-presence" (2011: 264). Perhaps Boland's ghost offers more hospitality than those of John Speed or the masculine tradition.

#### § "TIME AND VIOLENCE" §

In closing, I will refer to "Time and Violence" (1994), a lyric poem that collects the themes and thoughts of a spectro-poetics across Eavan Boland's prose and poetry under the *aegis* – but without the name – of the ghost. In this manner I hope to open outward

and suggest further readings of her poetry aligned with the spectropoetic. The poem's sharp, unrhymed tercets employ a similar voltaic structure to the earlier "Fever." Where the later poem replaces a singular lyric voice with one more obviously inhuman and plural, the collective "we" of history uneasily jostles against the bounds of the lyric form. True to Boland's increasingly bourgeois social concerns, the poem begins in the comfortable, prosaic everyday, and it is hard to discern whether the poem ever leaves that plane. More radically, however, "Time and Violence" suggests that the world of supposedly simple "being" is in fact a world of "becoming"; most specifically, the world is one of all things becoming ghostly. The poem also reflects on a history of traditional poetics and mythic figures. Ghosts flit between the stability of these discourses. They dwell in the poem's words between the page's ink and the sign's significance and they dress in words and adopt semantic supposition as their raiment. But a ghost might wish a change of habit; a tradition of poetry might itself change what it offers and present new possibility of inheritance and witnessing. The poem's chorus has the last word. In it, Boland's poetics open to a world different from the one visible but which the lyric I joins, inscribing the ghostly remembrance of the woman's voice to a text aimed at the future.

I will let the poet's "Time and Violence" show itself out. The poem is a lyric mediation on mortality and a carefully metered and measured space (it recalls Seamus Heaney's careful tercets of "Mid-Term Break" [1966] where the closing line "A four foot box, a foot for every year" uses the same deliberative meter to conclude its own funerary commemoration of a death committed to poetry) where time is both an agent of ongoing linguistic violence (in all its prosopopoeiac figurings of distortion and dispossession) but is also a potential for seasonal regrowth. Here is a poem to die into, a poem that gives away the ghost so as to better listen to a haunted chorus:

The evening was the same as any other.

I came out and stood on the step.

The suburb was closed in the weather

of an early spring and the shallow tips  
and washed-out yellows of narcissi  
resisted dusk. And crocuses and snowdrops.

I stood there and felt the melancholy  
of growing older in such a season,  
when all I could be certain of was simply

in this time of fragrance and refrain,  
whatever else might flower before the fruit,  
and be renewed, I would not. Not again.

A car splashed by in the twilight.  
Peat smoke stayed in the windless  
air overhead and I might have missed it:

a presence. Suddenly. In the very place  
where I would stand in other dusks, and look  
to pick out my child from the distance,

was a shepherdess, her smile cracked,  
her arm injured from the mantelpieces  
and pastorals where she posed with her crook.

Then I turned and saw in the spaces  
of the night sky constellations appear,  
one by one, over roof-tops and houses,  
and Cassiopeia trapped: stabbed where  
her thigh met her groin and her hand  
her glittering wrist, with the pin-point of a star.



And by the road where rain made standing  
pools of water underneath cherry trees,  
and blossoms swam on their images,

was a mermaid with inverted tresses,  
her breasts printed with the salt of it and all  
the desolation of the North Sea in her face.

I went nearer. They were disappearing.  
Dusk had turned to night but in the air –  
did I imagine it? – a voice was saying:

*This is what language did to us. Here  
is the wound, the silence, the wretchedness  
of tides and hillsides and stars where*

*we languish in a grammar of sighs,  
in the high-minded search for euphony,  
in the midnight rhetoric of poesie.*

*We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy.  
We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty.  
Help us to escape youth and beauty.*

*Write us out of the poem. Make us human  
in cadences of change and mortal pain  
and words we can grow old and die in.* (2011: 237-39)

### 3.4 Breyten Breytenbach and the Afrikaans Gothic

we carry death  
in a thousand cleaving spectres

Antjie Krog, "Country of Grief and Grace" (2000)

Who am I? ... Whom I haunt.

Andre Breton, *Nadja* (1928)

Like the poems of Eavan Boland, Breyten Breytenbach's poetry reflects on the haunted nature of authorial inscription. The South African poet's work employs a notably kaleidoscopic variety of mocking and fearful pseudonyms. These include Brother-I, Mister I, Mr. Investigator, Bird, Professor Bird, Don Espejuelo, B.B. Lasarus, Jan Blom, and, most infamously, Christian Galaska. This proliferation reflects the indeterminate purchase of textual pronouns in Breytenbach's work as a whole. In the "Apology" to *Mouiroir* (1984), a collection of his prison writings, he writes that his writings contain "an I and I's, a we, you's [*jye*], he's, she's, they's and you's [*julles*]. But *this* I is not *I*, and the you, dear reader, is not you; neither is the he the she the they or the you [*julle*] you [*ji*] or you [*julle*]" (1). Breytenbach's language shimmers with allusions and illusions, each recognizable as ghosts that occupy the poetic space of speculative potential. Reading it is to witness ghosts flit through a labyrinth of pronominal shifters and subject positions. Such *nom de plumes* recall the troubadour practice of using a pseudonym to conspire with audiences familiar with poetic conventions under the nose and sometimes keen eyes of aristocracy (Heller-Roazen 2013: 52-54). Writers refashioned the tactic for use in the South African apartheid state. Breytenbach's likenesses are protectively evacuated of a stable subject who could be made entirely Afrikaner or African and tortured into confessing sympathies of one for the other. These transient identities resemble nothing more than "someone or something who is not there, [...] a mirror reflection with no subject" (Warner 2006: 54). From such pseudonyms the poet crafts an identity non-identical to itself. In the ensuing mix of interrogators, readers, and watchers, Breytenbach becomes one ghost among many just as his poem confront a threatening world and a broken poetic tradition. Breytenbach's prolific essays and polemics frequently cast ghosts as expressions of his uncertainty over his writing's place in the world and, most specifically, his Afrikaans inheritance. While Breytenbach's prison writings have attracted significant critical attention, this chapter elaborates an Afrikaans spectropoetic tradition

by emphasizing the ghostliness of Breytenbach's poetry.<sup>124</sup> Where other poets craft epideictic lyrics of praise or grievance, Breytenbach distinguishes himself by publicly airing his blame and social criticism within a phantasmagoria of *prosopopoeiac* identities. His poetry houses ghosts between its flashing reflections.

#### § THE UNLIKELY GOTHIC OF INA ROUSSEAU §

Before turning to Breytenbach, it is important to contextualize the gothic elements of the Afrikaans poetic tradition in which he wrote. The gothic belly of Afrikaans poetry subtends discussions about the intellectual possibilities that poets, politicians, and other writers saw in the Afrikaans language, itself widely known as apartheid's tongue. During the height of nationalist confidence in Afrikaans in the middle of the twentieth century, many white South Africans regarded Afrikaans as a world language for literature.<sup>125</sup> In 1955, liberal intellectual Anthony Delius saw notable parallels "between the Irish and the South African literary situations" as he championed an Afrikaans poetry "scrolled with the consonants of local nuance and vowels of local characteristic, [and] with a whole ready alphabet of South African reference" (264).<sup>126</sup> Not all were as hopeful toward the literary dreams of Afrikanerdom, and despite the prominence of writers such as Sol T. Plaatje, black Afrikaans writing was nearly unheard of at the time.

At the very moment of its national suzerainty, sites of gothic unease emerged in Afrikaans poetry. Writers as different as the conservative Ina Rousseau and, after her, the more liberal Ingrid Jonker planted seeds of deep unease within the Afrikaans tradition. Rousseau's "Eden" (1954), for instance, develops a critique of the sort that blossoms in Breytenbach's poetry, though the two possess different motivations and politics. "Eden"

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. Harlow (1987), Jolly (1996), and Haslam (2005) for the best treatments of Breytenbach's prison writings.

<sup>125</sup> Afrikaans "rode to victory with a party's emergence to power, and now enjoys wide political respectability and active state sponsorship," Delius wrote; he wondered if it might "one day be the lingua franca of a civilized Africa" (261, 269). Compare Willemse's contemporary argument that "[t]he task now is to continue writing in Afrikaans and to constantly be aware of this dichotomy: the oppressed writing in the language of the oppressor" (1987: 238).

<sup>126</sup> The Driemanskap and Dertig poets of the 1930s struck a fresh and vibrant chapter for the Afrikaans literature. Against their literary strengths Delius contrasted those "Afrikaans dramatists, [who] like spirits summoned by a medium subject to sudden doubt, are always just failing to materialize" (266).

describes how the dream of nationalism fails at the moment of its triumph in baroque and gothic language. In five variegated stanzas, “Eden” subjects the colonialist tradition of Europeans who see South Africa as a rich and bounteous natural resource there for the taking to a series of questions. At the moment paradise opens, Rousseau sees only ruin.

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,  
 does there still stand, abandoned, like  
 a ruined city, gates sealed with grisly nails,  
 the luckless garden?

Is sultry day still followed there  
 by sultry dusk, sultry night,  
 where on the branches sallow and purple  
 the fruit hangs rotting?

Is there still, underground,  
 spreading like lace among the rocks  
 a network of unexploited lodes  
 onyx and gold?

Through the lush greenery  
 their wash echoing afar  
 do there still flow the four glassy streams  
 of which no mortal drinks?

Somewhere in Eden, after all this time,  
 does there still stand, like a city in ruins,  
 forsaken, doomed to slow decay,  
 the failed garden?

The *mislukte tuin* – a trope of the failed garden that draws on Olive Schreiner’s early twentieth-century writing (cf. Beningfield 81-82) – functions as a synecdoche for the

colony as a whole; further, it echoes the Company Garden in Cape Town's heart.<sup>127</sup>

Rousseau's colonial bias led her to bemoan the unexploited natural wonders that deform the cultural topography of the near-half century to follow. It was not her colonial politics but instead her language of gothic unease that resonated with Jonker and Breytenbach.

Ina Rousseau was foreign to political radicalism and staunchly conservative. The black pessimism of the *mislukte tuin* is surprisingly vibrant in her work. Reviewing Rousseau's *Versamelde gedigte* [Collected Poems]: 1954-1984 (1984), B.J. Toerien notes her dominant themes: religion, biblical figures, "marriage and household chores[,] as well as the husband" (650). For Afrikaners such as her, the gardens of empire were lost even before "Eden" told their gothic future. It is still a surprise to see the gothic in her work. J.M. Coetzee points out the startling incongruity of Ina Rousseau's vision: in 1954 nationalist Afrikaners were celebrating a victorious apartheid state, Communism was widely disparaged and the future promised by the Afrikaner National Party "was prosperous and secure" (2007: 11). Afrikaner nationalism's failed penetration of poetic discourse and changing social landscapes enabled new communities of writers to publish and thrive, including Breytenbach, Antjie Krog and Ingrid de Kok. These later Afrikaans writers, sensing the fragility of their linguistic tradition, and often themselves exiles, transformed Rousseau's elegiac conservatism into a poetics searching for stability within an Afrikaans culture at times resistant to and at other times complicit with apartheid.

#### § AFRIKAANS GOTHIC AND INGRID JONKER §

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<sup>127</sup> Off Queen Victoria Street and behind South Africa's Parliament building, the colonial garden city should not be confused with the famous early twentieth-century Garden City modeled by civic planners such as Ebenezer Howard. Cf. Hall, 88-141. The symbolic appropriation of Africa as a garden returns many times in different traditions. Twelve years after Rousseau's "Eden," *The Times* commissioned Irish poet Richard Murphy's "The God Who Eats Corn" (1963) to mark decolonization's onset in Southern Rhodesia. Against a backdrop of pass laws and Sharpesville bodies, Murphy's poem tells of how his retired parents gave up their Rhodesian farm. It sympathizes with the decolonizing movement and exposes his parents' imperialist, liberal beliefs; in it, Africa's idyllic topography has been irrevocably damaged: "the half-freed slaves are freed, / But not into a garden that anyone remembers" (63). To Murphy's father, ventriloquized in the poem, that garden was the location of empire's civility, its literal cultivation a synecdoche for the culture. "Tall in his garden," the poem nostalgically describes, "shaded and brick-walled, / He upholds the manners of a lost empire" (62). It was clear to Murphy that in his father's time the Southern Rhodesian experiment had already failed. Around the same time as Murphy, another poet, much more well known, was writing similar sentiments into his poem "Rivers Grow Small" (1963). "Rivers grow small," Czesław Miłosz wrote, "Cities grow small. And splendid gardens / show what we did not see there before: crippled leaves and dust" (2001: 198).

As in Boland's poetry, Ingrid Jonker's work charts new territory in Afrikaans poetry by championing women's issues; in it too are a fury and pain at the sight of Afrikaner culture's deep investment in apartheid. One of Jonker's signature poems, "*Die kind*," was written after rushing to a police station at Philippi, a Cape Town township in March 1960, the day of the Sharpeville massacre. In it, Jonker writes of a child whose death, immortalized in words, becomes haunting. Not quite putting face to the dead child – and thus forestalling prosopopoeiac appropriation – Jonker's poem instead organizes itself as a stringent and globally-minded casting of blame that empties death of specificity.

The child is not dead  
 neither at Langa nor at Nyanga  
 nor at Orlando nor at Sharpeville  
 nor at the police station in Philippi  
 where he lies with a bullet in his head

The child is the shadow of the soldiers  
 on guard with guns saracens and batons  
 the child is present at all meetings and legislations  
 the child peeps through the windows of houses and into the  
 hearts of mothers  
 the child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is  
 everywhere  
 the child who became a man treks through all of Africa  
 the child who became a giant travels through the whole world

Without a pass. (85)

In Jonker's *cri de coeur*, the child-as-symbol trades its singular humanity for melancholic ubiquity. The child's presumptive resurrection affirms Jonker's desperate belief "that nothing is ever lost" (qtd. Brink 2007: 15). Yet the poem delivers a warning on the nature of prosopopoeiac license. To adopt a ghost as one's subject dissolves the specificity of identity. Once transformed into poetry, "*Die kind*" could be anyone, a risk the poem

guards against through the geographical specificity of the pointing finger at the heart of the epideictic mode. Blame encounters death's spectacle bearing the injustice of a child's corpse that, once transformed into a spirit of the poem, works as a haunting agent for the poem's melancholic rage and anaphoric aggrandization. The lyric reaches out to the world in a path echoed by the poem's path to global publication. Rejected by nationalist newspapers, the poem was first published in the Netherlands, and only then translated into English, Hindi, and other languages including Zulu (in the pages of *Drum* magazine's 1963 edition). It would later find a provocative home in the pages of the famous photography collection *The Cordoned Heart* (1984) alongside a picture of black South African children sitting before a blackboard that reads "English." (The collection itself takes its title from the first stanza of an early version of "*Die kind*.") Translations of Jonker's work broadened the domestic remit of Afrikaans poetry before global audiences.

Safe to say, then, that as the liberal daughter of a prominent Afrikaner politician, Jonker's work echoes to radically invert Rousseau's conservative disillusionment. In a poem initially titled "*Suid-Afrika 1965*" and renamed "I drift in the wind," Jonker refashions the illusions of national consciousness and lyric voice. Her disillusionment organizes around a fragmenting lyric subject and produces a series of gothic images.

My black Africa  
 follow my lonely fingers  
 follow my absent image  
 lonely as an owl  
 and the loneliest fingers of the world  
 lonesome as my sister  
 My volk has rotted away from me  
 what will become of this rotted volk  
 a hand cannot pray on its own  
 The sun shall be covered by us  
 the sun in our eyes forever covered  
 with black butterflies. (126-127)

“I drift in the wind” is collected in *Tilting Sun* (1966), a volume posthumously published after Jonker, like Woolf before her, walked to death in the water. The poem asks lyric form to speak a living voice already gone. Biographers attribute Jonker’s suicide to her rage against apartheid culture, including its racial politics, censorship laws, casual bigotry, and racist treatment of non-white South Africans (Viljoen 134). Laurens van der Poste, an Afrikaans writer who met Jonker in Europe, mourned the young poet. For him, her death symbolized “the suicide of Afrikanerdom” (Jones 267). Six days before her death Jonker attended a séance hoping to contact her mother. The meeting dissolved in laughter after the medium was discovered to be a fake (Viljoen 124). As if to compensate for the séance’s illusion, Jonker’s poem testifies more positively to her experience and, reading it, it is almost possible to hear her ghost. “I drift in the wind” translates personal discontent into the bitterness of failed dreams. As the subject’s “lonely fingers” trace an “absent image,” the poem empties itself of meaning; thus dissolved, its voice drifts away from the homogeneity of Afrikaans culture, carrying with it gothic images. Christian Afrikanerdom’s prayers are impossible to perform in solitude and the bonds of family, friends, and people cannot compensate for a distressing rottenness at the core of apartheid social politics and affiliations. Symbolically, black butterflies eclipse the sun.<sup>128</sup>

Jonker’s work expanded the world of possibilities in Afrikaans poetry. Like Sylvia Plath in America and Eavan Boland in Ireland, Jonker broached the horizons of women’s writing in her hitherto masculinist national literary tradition – poets such as Ina Rousseau aside. Additionally, her cynicism cast a dilemma she saw as the most pressing South African problem in a gothic language that resonated far beyond nationalistic borders and race-determined forces of subjectivity. In this especially Breyten Breytenbach is her poetic inheritor, and in 1964 the two met, not in South Africa, but in Europe. A

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<sup>128</sup> The last line has been taken up as the title of a biopic about Jonker and as the title of a recent collection translated into English by Brink and Krog. It exists in two very distinct Afrikaans versions, one of which reads “black butterflies” and the other “black crows.” The image is from Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890). Jonker described “I drift in the sun” as her “van Gogh” poem (Viljoen 112), situating her own tortured art in a history of deep care and aesthetic promise: *Wheatfield* is van Gogh’s last painting before he killed himself. Whether butterflies or crows, the gothic edge of the figures is clear enough and lent resonance through the last lines of another poem, “When you write again”: “Remember / To see in my eyes / The sun that I now cover for ever / With black butterflies” (116).



flame passed from Jonker, the known poet who had just won the *Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel* [Afrikaans Bookseller's Prize], to Breytenbach, whose youthful debut *Die Ysterkoei moet sweet* [*The Iron Cow Must Sweat*] would receive the same prize the next year (Viljoen 101). With some bitterness and much distress, Breytenbach's life work addressed the conflict that cleft Jonker's vision of society in two.

§ BITTERNESS AND IMPRISONMENT – BREYTENBACH'S POETRY §

Like Jonker's "*Die kind*," Breytenbach derives an exposé of governmental powers and a strategy of written resistance from the possibility of ghosts. Breytenbach crafts an introspective but still public poetics that *interrogates* his own linguistic heritage and privileges as a white poet in apartheid culture. Though the tactic is distressing to readers, his poems often adopt guarded postures of listening or eavesdropping that compromise a word's claim to truth. Although easily confused with and often in close proximity to the posture of waiting, the guarded approach to possibility and hauntings in Breytenbach is a sign of neither death nor waning creativity.<sup>129</sup> If white writers in South Africa were, as Lazarus writes, "obliged to concede the severely limited nature of their spheres of competence" (1986a: 145), their writing edged ever closer to a haunting play of delicate or linguistic possibilities. In his "On the Concept of History" (1940), Benjamin writes that "every image from the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (2007: 257). This anguished concern permeates Breytenbach's poetics in which ghosts "speak" of tormented and yet still proud life. John Stuart Mill's famous definition of the lyric as "overheard" speech acquires a

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<sup>129</sup> Drawing on American anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano's diagnosis of a "pathological syndrome centered on waiting," Neil Lazarus argues that white South African writing during the 1970s and 1980s created "an obsessional literature, haunted and introspective" (1986b: 131-133). Crapanzano is even more severe. For him, the cultural angst of waiting signifies "a sort of holding action – a lingering [...] without elan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. Its only meaning lies in the future – in the arrival or non-arrival of the object of waiting" (44). Crapanzano's observations do not fully bear out for the South African writers who spoke their conscience. André Brink's *Writing in a State of Siege* (1983) takes as its epigraph Milan Kundera's aphorism that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Turning to spectral figures, Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) and *Something Out There* (1984) employ an unsettling mixture of hauntings and violence to reflect the culture surrounding them. Even a cursory glance at Breytenbach's works unearths savage and roiling turmoil. As Breytenbach wrote in 1976, "[t]his land is a screaming hell if only we cared to listen" (1980: 210).



listen, there's windrhyme there are dreams there  
 the voices of survivors (1988: 10-12)

A poem of sounds and questions, “out there” stages a lyric voice considering its options, not waiting but *wailing*, and listening beyond the bounds of South African tradition for poetry's voices. Fantasy's illusions offer an alternative to circular rhythms if only because they proclaim their fictiveness and resist the allegorical interpretation of sense. They “push aside the bars of light” to hear voices outside of language. Breytenbach's suspicion recalls Plato's distrust of the poetic allegory, and his poem contextualizes its call for hospitality with the suspicion that the “well-versed” poem is distant from life's realities. “[T]o assume form is to take on responsibility,” he writes (2009: 146). The exilic “out there” provides a hint for things to come for the poet: doors, locks, and bars.

Breytenbach's prison sentence in South African jails casts a long shadow across his work. Prison's influences refuse generalization. And yet a common experience of those who have been jailed can be described, as Jeremy Bentham does in his recognition that confinement creates deep recesses in the psychologies of those subject to constant vigilance. Bentham writes that in a prisoner's solitude “infantile superstitions, ghosts and spectres, recur to the imagination” (1981: 190). Prisoners defend their sense of privacy by giving up on the easily betrayed security of physical things. The illusions of those under surveillance render them blurry to disciplinary systems and, for dreamers, trade misery for hope to refuse the prison's reshaping influence on their mind. As an undisciplined prisoner, a person can simply be punished. The mind presents jailers other difficulties. As a result, despite surveillance prisoners might become ghostly to discipline (Mirzoeff 2002: 241).<sup>130</sup> In jail, Breytenbach's social position made him unique, for although incarcerated

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<sup>130</sup> Prison's ghosts are equivocal. While waiting for his 1895 trial in Holloway, Oscar Wilde imagined a “slim thing, gold-haired like an angel [...] always at my side” – a vision of Lord Alfred Douglas (Wilde 389) – but when sent back to prison against protestations of Wilde's growing madness, he threatened that he would “return an unwelcome visitant to a world that does not want me; a revenant, as the French say, as one whose face is grey with long imprisonment and crooked with pain. Horrible as are the dead when they rise from their tombs, the living who come out from tombs are more horrible still” (413). Anne Frank too found herself become-ghostly and strange as a result of her imprisonment writings, posing an intimate phantasmagoric effect of reading: “sometimes I look at myself through someone else's eyes [...] I see quite keenly then how things are with Anne Frank”, she writes, “I browse through the pages of her life as if she

he was *the* leading poet not only of his generation but of the entire embattled Afrikaans literary and language community who had placed their anxious hope in him as a young man. Afrikaners accounted his disdain for and refusal of conservative politics and values as youthful rebellion. Torturously, Breytenbach was made a symbol that spoke to people with whom he shared little politically. His stay in prison honed this difference to a knife's sharpness. Confronted by the bare elements of force, solitary confinement, and inscription, a person's writing, like their identity, breaks apart in the interests of survival in the repressive elements of imprisonment that seek to command the entirety of human identity (Foucault 1979: 236). Breytenbach's prison stay redoubled his phantasmagorical employment of subject positions in the writing he there undertook.

Although it left his body imperiled, literary creation distributed the poet's self-conception beyond the reach of prison guards. Thus, for instance, on receiving correspondence from his wife Yolande, Breytenbach's lyric "your letter" pleads for sanctuary. "I fled to your letter to read / of the orange tree decked out in white blossoms / opening with the sun," the poet writes; "grant that I may dwell in your letter / all the days of my life" (2007: 109-10). "your letter" finds time and safety in the lyric's abstraction from world but not from history. In its creation the world splits. On one hand is textual absence; on the other, a desiring body. Language creates a space that makes of memory an unfolding fantasy between absence and body. Its public address of intimacy finds refuge in abstraction. Memory, dislocated and out of joint, floods the present, and "as your letter opens, / there's an unfolding of sky, word from outside, memory" (2007: 110). The process that germinates in "your letter" would also engender the writing of *Mouir*, a book of short stories and parable-like mysteries that play with doubled identities, paranoia, mirrors, and death. Years later Breytenbach explained that, as he wrote, "I felt

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was a stranger" (455). Frank's coming to consciousness as if she was an other poses her own reading self as a strange ghostly figure who haunts Frank's life through the pages of her diary to report back to another, more corporeal writing self who, this readerly ghost recognizes, goes under the name of Anne Frank. Where Wilde equivocated prison with the tomb to access the vicious side of hauntings, Frank reveals the introverted reflection of ghost-effects.

[...] I was entering a world that started unfolding as you entered it” (Landsman, n.p). The participle *unfolding*, repeated in poem and in interview, is significant, especially its prefix. Poetry *undoes* social convention and physical organization: the folds of apartheid bureaucracy are undone in the services of something both less and more: human desire.

Not all prison lyrics find sanctuary through ghostly abstraction. Predating Breytenbach’s first volume of prison poems *Voetskrif* (*Footscript*, 1976) by three years, South African activist Dennis Brutus’ prison poem “Sirens Knuckles Boots” (1973) shows just how radical are the disjunctions in time and experience produced by anxiety and physical injury. Imprisonment produces horrors and nightmares among the many possible spectral companions. Such ghosts are no friend to the living. For Brutus, poetry released thoughts of suicide.

In the greyness of isolated time  
 where shafts appear down the echoing mind,  
 wraiths appear, whispers of horror  
 that people the labyrinth of self  
 [...]  
 hooting for recognition of one’s other selves  
 suicide, self-damnation, walks  
 if not a companionable ghost  
 then a familiar familiar,  
 a doppelgänger  
 not to be shaken off. (56-57)

These lines echo themes common to prison literature, especially that of the haunted mind surrounded by prison walls and, second, the close knowledge of prison suicides made intimate shades to be brutally mocked by governmental discourse (as Christopher van Wyk’s poem “In Detention” recollects).<sup>131</sup> For Helize van Vuuren, prison literature is

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<sup>131</sup> The poem – worth citing – moves from a straightforward recapitulation of police statements into an impressionistic

characterized by the refuge of sleep, psychological problems of loneliness, deep despair, unstructured time, self-disintegration, and the growing appeal of escape through suicide (43-44). According to Norbert Sillamy, products of disassociation influence grammar, logic, and language; each dissolves to neologisms and occasionally language “which loses its function as an instrument of communication” (217, qtd. and trans. van Vuuren 44). Poetry contests mental dissociation while accommodating its deformed or disassociated uses of language. Textual strategies blur identities and spectral doubles are enfolded with the reality of life in prison. If ghosts whisper their horrors, they do so only as pieces of one’s identity – Brutus’ “familiar familiar,” for example. Their sight recognizes the shock of identities split by brutality, reflection, and constant vigilance.<sup>132</sup>

Like his lyrics and *Mouvoir*, Breytenbach’s prison memoir *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* also vacillates between positions ascribed to “I” and “you.” In his “Note on the Relationship Between Detainee and Interrogator” Breytenbach describes a conflict

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confusion of details that paradoxically reflect the growing acceptance of meaningless statements of death once they begin to blur together. The straightforward doublespeak at the heart of the entire official discourse reveals itself as a heinous lie buttressed only by the simple incongruity of repetition and force.

He fell from the ninth floor  
 He hanged himself  
 He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
 He hanged himself  
 He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
 He fell from the ninth floor  
 He hanged himself while washing  
 He slipped from the ninth floor  
 He hung from the ninth floor  
 He slipped on the ninth floor while washing  
 He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
 He hung from the ninth floor  
 He washed from the ninth floor while slipping  
 He hung from a piece of soap while washing. (1979)

<sup>132</sup> The horrific physical torture Brutus and other prisoners experienced at the hands of warders and other prisoners correlates with the evocative influence of language, poetry, and drama, these latter being weapons in the psychological battle for sanity. Hard physical labour is itself “immense psychological action,” Brutus remarks (2011: 102), a “state of tension” intensified by “spiritual anxieties [...], which set up a wholly new phase of near insanity, and certainly of hallucinations ending in attempts at suicide” (2011: 105). Worth stating too is the difference in prison experiences between Breytenbach, very much a ward of the state, and political prisoners such as Dennis Brutus who were thrown mercilessly into a place that, from Brutus’ remembrances in *The Dennis Brutus Tapes* (2011), seems the incarnation of hell. Even looking out a window was punishable.

for dominance that reveals the humanity that undergirds both subject-positions and which obeys “the blind desire to force a resolution to and a resolution of the irreducible contradictions – precisely because you cannot accept the (self)-image revealed to you, nor the knowledge that never the twain shall meet” (1984: 341). The erotics of control merge with a disconcertingly immediate access to the imprisoned subject in an uncanny and blackly ironic arrangement. “However strange it may sound, Mr Eye,” Breytenbach writes, as if to himself, “I am convinced that some of the people they have killed in detention probably died when the interrogator was in a paroxysm of unresolved frustrations, even that the interrogator killed in an awkward expression of love and sympathy for a fellow human being” (1984: 50). This position is perhaps as valid in a metaphorical sense for Breytenbach’s social position as a dissenting but respected Afrikaner poet as it is more desperately true for those killed by such terrifying logic where the torturer or interrogator sympathizes with and understands the subject’s pain. Such intimacy “transfers the masochistic pleasure of appropriating another’s pain into the sadistic pleasure of causing it,” as Steven Bruhm points out (1994: 118). The local situation eerily echoed Breytenbach’s relationship with his cultural traditions more broadly. In *Mapmakers* André Brink argues that the Afrikaner Nationalists gained power by defining themselves against other cultures assumedly hostile: Dutch settlers, French Huguenots, British Cape authorities, black Southern Africans (1983: 15-17), an observation echoed by Breytenbach in the genealogy articulated by his “on paper” (1988).<sup>133</sup> An intimate other to nationalist culture, the poet was admired for his poetry and viewed as a traitor to Afrikanerdom. His work was eagerly published, read, and awarded literary prizes by the culture he rejected and which punished his beliefs and

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<sup>133</sup> The poem enumerates a list of peoples in a blackly humorous reduction of human dignity to the commonality of body parts; all is expressed in a coruscating scintilla of names that mocks the gravity of a biblical list:

all those noses  
and arseholes and arteries and ovaries of assorted nations,  
those Nederlanders, Engelschen, Franschen, Hoogduitzers  
(of many regions), Savoyaards, Italiaanen, Hungaaren, Maleyeers,  
Malabaaren, Cingaleezen, Javaanen, Macassaaren, Benjaanen,  
Ambioneezen, Bandaneezen, Boegineezen, Bubineezen, Chineezen,  
Madagascaaren, Angoleezen, inhabitants of Guinea  
and of the Zoute Eilanden,  
all of them using the Nederduitze, Maleitze and Portugeesche tongues (“on paper”, 1988: 84)

actions.<sup>134</sup> “I was born white,” he writes, and grew “under the signs of chlorosis [... and yet] I realized that my heart was black” (1988: 125). The flip reversal is deeply felt, yet both Afrikaner interpellations and black consciousness are made indistinct by his gothic take on racial identities.

Breytenbach’s phantasmagoric poetics aligns three thresholds of identity – illusions, mirrors, and ghosts – as epistemologically crucial to linguistic acts of creation. In his pivotal talk from 1984, “Fumbling Reflections on the Freedom of the Word and the Responsibility of the Author,” he says that artistry is created through “the awareness and the application of illusions by way of disguising the real: a mirror game [...]. We are imbued with the sense of impermanence, of mutilation, of not-knowing. And *we are haunted by the need to know, to understand, to be integrated*” (1986: 142, my emphasis). Unlike Boland’s free tropic play along ghosts as mediums and vessels, for Breytenbach writing’s *tools* are mirrors and illusions, and hauntings transform social phenomena into creative knowledge. His visionary poetics operates rigorously on the symbolic plane of language, lending a deep but necessarily metaphysical element to his poetry and broadly influencing his language. These reflections delineate his vision of literary and linguistic creation with a courage leading him to strained and formally extreme linguistic grounds. J.M. Coetzee observed that Breytenbach’s poetry “*stops at nothing*”; it “characteristically *goes beyond* [...] what one had thought could be said in Afrikaans” (1992: 379). In Breytenbach’s prose and poetry alike words shift along a paronymical discourse oscillating between an accusatory you and I. Take, for example, the following passage from *True Confessions*: “Mr. Investigator[:] you know that we’re always inventing our lives. ... You and I entwined and related, parasite and prey[,] image and image-mirror.

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<sup>134</sup> For J.M. Coetzee, this relationship has the smell of German Romanticism about it. With a hint of derision, he observes that, “by the standards of the Afrikaans literary tradition, Breytenbach is a great poet [...] whose emotional makeup includes feelings of passionate intimacy with the South African landscape that, Afrikaners like to think, can be expressed only in Afrikaans, and therefore [...] can be experienced only by the Afrikaner. Closeness of fit between land and language is – so the reasoning goes – proof of the Afrikaner’s *natural* ownership of the land” (1992: 377-78). In this poetic relationship – and its incipient yearning for a naturalized nation-state legitimized by poets of international renown – the prison sentence becomes less a possible death sentence than a parental scolding, however physical its immediacy for the poet: BOSS turned Oubass. Thus Coetzee diagnoses the “interest, even for official, establishment Afrikaans culture, in seeing Breytenbach as the bearer of a talent that he cannot, despite himself, betray; and to view his politics as an aberration that does not touch his poetic soul” (1992: 378).



[...] Mr. Investigator [...] I see you now as my dark mirror-brother. We need to talk, brother I. I must tell you what it was like to be an albino in a white land” (1984: 260). Doubles and mirrors are haunting; they scintillate in memory beyond distinctions between self and others.<sup>135</sup> Breytenbach’s troubled hold on language was equally haunted. He felt Afrikaans was thoroughly compromised by arrogance and oppression. This conflict broadened his vision of phantasmagorical power relationships and generated much of the harshness and “fitful intensity” of the poems (des Pres 137).

At times Breytenbach’s poems have the friction of sandpaper over skin. Their guttural barbs punctuate if not puncture lyric melody (des Pres 137), and they often question poetry’s reason for existence. “Constipation”, for instance, cynically asks “what is a poem / other than a black wind?” and deems Romantic poetry such as that of Coleridge “a waxy fart of hideous pain” (1978: 21). The crucial question is not whether poetry happens, but to what end. “Constipation” takes an epigraph from Artaud’s comment on van Gogh: “No one has ever written or painted, sculpted, modelled, built, invented except to get out of hell” (149). Hell is other people *and* their words: both South Africa *and* its language. Can the black wind of poetry transport a person from their land? Breytenbach sought as much from symbolism and surrealism. His affiliations turned his relationship with South Africa spectral and wraithlike – traceable perhaps to Breton’s phrase from *Nadja*: “Who am I? [...] Whom I ‘haunt’” (11). Despite any departure from the land of his birth, Breytenbach proved utterly unable to leave South Africa behind.

#### § THE HELL OF PARADISIACAL PHANTASMAGORIA §

In Breytenbach’s case his treacherous relationship with Afrikaans and close familiarity with French poetics, especially surrealism, resulted in the writings of *A Season in Paradise*

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<sup>135</sup> One might remember Charles Baudelaire and a French influence at this juncture. Breytenbach was very influenced by decadent and surrealist poets in addition to his long stay in France; additionally, he was released from prison only at French President François Mitterrand’s behest, in recognition of the poet’s long residence in France. Afterward he became a French citizen. At one point, Breytenbach called himself “the only Afrikaans writing French poet” (1986: 207). Conceivably, the poet would have been especially influenced by Baudelaire’s dictum that an artist is only deemed so “on the condition that he is double, and that he neglects no aspect of his dual nature” (qtd. in Wind 26-27); equally possible is that the anti-colonial legacy of the surrealists and especially their “Manifeste des 121” proved attractive.

and his prison sentence. *Season* is a travelogue of the poet's return to his homeland as well as a reply or transfiguration of Arthur Rimbaud's *Saison en Enfer* (*Season in Hell*, 1873). Where Rimbaud wrote hell, Breytenbach ironically substitutes paradise, reversing the long tradition of Afrikaner poets praising the natural beauty of the Cape as well as the almost Edenic qualities of colonial nationalism's land appropriation. In one of the stories collected in *A Season in Paradise*, Breytenbach tells how Rimbaud causes the death of Eugène Marais, one of the patriarchs of Afrikaans poetry. Afrikaner tradition symbolically succumbs to Rimbaud's legacy of surrealism's emblematic violence expressed by Breton's wish *to fire a pistol randomly into a crowd* (Des Pres 144). It speaks loudly that the South African was driven to such lengths when contemplating his own literary tradition. This violence was, at one point, an axiom of Breytenbach's philosophy of action or, as he put it, "Everyone should be an arms-smuggler at least once in his life" (1976: 142). Pursuing this goal, Breytenbach fell into the competent arms of South Africa's Bureau of State Security in what Terrence des Pres deems "[a] conceit became grimly real, and paradise passed into hell. Breytenbach's example provides a glimpse of the literary secret agent [...] who, like Byron, begins to take his literary identity seriously and comes to believe that what he is in his poems he must also be in the world" (145). At stake are questions of poetry's "conceit" and the creation or belief in a poet's manifold identities across text, archive, tradition, and person.

Breytenbach identified with South Africa in complex ways. Motivated by a sense of distance and frustration, the poet's pre-trial "eavesdropper" situates an exile outside his or her community, just as he had lived in Paris, far from South Africa, since 1960.

songs have faded  
 faces say nothing  
 dreams have been dreamt  
 and as if you're searching for love in a woman's seaweed hair  
 you forget yourself in a shuffling nameless mass  
 of early-aging revolutionaries,  
 of poets without languages and blind painters,

of letters without tidings like seas without tides,  
of those who choke of the childishness of longing,  
of those who call up spirits from the incense,  
conjure up landscapes on their tongues,  
throwing up the knowledge of self  
– must I too give a deeper meaning?  
that all of us are only exiles from Death  
soon to be allowed to ‘go home’? (1978: 51-53)

Only too plainly is Breytenbach recognizable in the anaphoric categories of selves forgotten in the “nameless mass.” The last darkly puns on the Catholic mass as a ghostly trick.<sup>136</sup> Breytenbach rewrites the tasks of poetry (from the epic’s *katabatic* powers to the ode’s *ekphrastic* conceit) as the sole purpose of epideictic prosopopoeia. In poems such as this one, the shades issuing from and returning toward the death for which they were born bitterly denounce the worldly realities they countenance as figures still alive.

The poetry of ghosts – who, to remember Boland’s work, are called by the thought of dwelling – sharpens its edge once home has been defined as death, as the end of “eavesdropper” does. What do exiled spectres speak about? Anticipating a return to South Africa, Breytenbach asks “But what will I find there? What late lamented ‘I’ will I encounter there?” (1976: 37). His release from prison intensified this questioning relationship with South Africa, as poems such as “the commitment” suggest:

what would happen  
were I to climb up the walls  
to chant from the parapet  
‘good morning Sout’ Efrica I love thee!’ (1988: 23)

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<sup>136</sup> To ceremoniously conjure spirits and landscapes is to boast of powers commanded beyond knowledge and sight. But, as Shakespeare knew, calling for ghosts is easier than listening for a response. *Henry IV*’s Owen Glendower boasts he “can call spirits from the vasty deep.” Hotspur’s response points to a question Breytenbach must also address. “Why so can I, or so can any man,” Hotspur says; “But will they come when you do call for them?” (III. i. 52-5).

Anticipating his own ghost – by no means sure of its future form – Breytenbach writes a haunted role to fill through lyric poetry. Writing's basic abstraction sets him at odds with his Afrikaner family as well as his "fatherland" and "mother tongue." The normal form of these relationships is inverted by the perceived distance of a writer whose life divides between his body and his work. Taking up the guise of an amateur anthropologist, Breytenbach reports that "the less of an outsider you are, the less you need to write down. Writing down is a surrogate and a substitute. Writing down is both the symptom of illness and the illness itself" (1976: 58). In words that recall Boland's ghost hand, Breytenbach observes that at times he was "not trying to hold the pen [...], it writes by itself. [...] When you're in foreign parts the friends and family of your youth gradually become phantoms" (1976: 219). Ideological separations redouble the distance of physical geography and memory's distortions. "And then you return. And now they are both as they are and as you had imagined them. And your imagination has possibly made them. Maybe they are prisoners of your imagination" (1976: 219). An exilic and then written distance from apartheid culture changed the topography of the poet's imagination.

From such distance, Breytenbach's task as a writer becomes clear: he will parse the phantasmagoria of the nation-state where ghosts figure as agents and products of apartheid society. "[W]e must learn to speak and to tell of the hideous figures in the shadows, the eavesdroppers in government cars" he says. A difficult task, for those figures too "create for themselves phantoms against which to fight, simplistic threats to justify the pain and dulling (and self-humiliation) of the actions they carry out every day [...] they themselves become victims of the system" (1976: 209-10). If apartheid's servants are shadowy eavesdroppers, so too Breytenbach feels himself a voyeur who watches South Africa from abroad and reconstructs his friends, family, and home in his mind. If the phantoms raised by the government to justify its apartheid policies are exposed and mocked, so Breytenbach also casts the plight of himself and other South Africans as one that will haunt the world over: "We South Africans, we will go on haunting the world forever" (1976: 203). Through the prosopopoeiac act of personification and duplicity, poetry works with the images yet to be wholly forgotten in order to answer the worry that

language might fail memory; that their haunting will be for nothing, their efforts failed. Later, in her poem “Some There Be” (2002), Afrikaans poet Ingrid de Kok wonders, “Can the forgotten / be born again / into a land of names?” (112). The possibility of rebirth through language entails that readers witness ghosts in Breytenbach’s spectropoetics while trusting to the poet’s chosen but consciously betrayed linguistic vocation.

§ THE COMPLAINT OF LANGUAGE §

Behind the apparently submissive medium of the lyric voice, networks of treacherous words twist and hide from the seemingly-required translucence of readerly attentions. For Breytenbach, these often figure in addresses to Death that are often connected to the mirror and its illusory replication of identities in turn. Thus, for example, the startling opening to “mirror-fresh reflection” (1988): “you! you! you! / it’s you motherfucker I’m talking to” (40). This poem ends in what might elsewhere seem childish singsong but, here, seem rather a muttering secret at the end of a complicated and desperate charade:

need I wait any longer  
my pure white shadow Death?  
ah, my very own intelligent spook  
I’ll be yours til the end of time  
and you are  
mine, mine, mine (1988: 41).

The poem’s subject positions of poet, reader and addressee end blurred and fuzzy, lost to a sense of injustice that, pendulum like, points first at the accused but then includes the accuser as well. While the poem initially blames an apostrophized agent of the NSA-like Broederbond, it also internalizes such accusations and wraps its endeavour in the governing image of the prosopopoeiac subjects reflected in mirrors and shadows, all identities revealed as counterfeit but somehow, spectrally, still human. A single constant feature remains the absent body indebted to and in fact haunted by death. Noting Sylvia Plath’s influence, Coetzee argues that the lyric I of “mirror-fresh reflection” identifies with “the vindictive, death-ridden jailor” and also “the self that longs for liberation,

despite seeing no other form of liberation looming but death” (1996: 227). The body politic and the skin of culture sickened; the language of poetry reflects social cancer. Like a mirror – or like the transforming charcoal animations of William Kentridge’s *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) – a poem reflects a series of apparent selves endlessly self-creating and then wiping themselves clean from the ink in which the complaint is uttered.



**Figure(s) 4: Stills from William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).  
Projection with sound.**

The poem’s intimate address to *you*, Coetzee continues, speaks to Breytenbach as a prisoner but also to “the persecuting figure of the oppressed slave, as well as the lover death whose perverse embrace he craves [...] the ever watcher other in the mirror [...] many of the avatars of the I – censor, secret policeman, winged guardian-persecutor – are shared by the You” (1996: 227). Such paronymic shifts disturb the assumedly dialogic address of a lyric I to its intimate you, which in any case has been upset by the poem’s gleefully indelicate first line: “you! you! you! / it’s you motherfucker that I’m talking to” (1988: 40). Such havoc with subject positions puts intimacy on guard; it renders the sharing of secrets a public affair, for there can be no certain listener, and it undercuts the possibility for stable identities with ones that are more fluidly spectral. Breytenbach’s “death sets in at the feet” works with equally jagged rhythms: “For now I gaze through a mirror into a riddle / but tomorrow it will be from face to face” (2007: 6-7).

Language generates Breytenbach’s condition and his complaint. His poetry takes shape from its technical abstraction and the traumatic experience of writing confession

after confession to account for his radical transformation in the public eye, for if he began a prominent son of a famous family, he became a foreign terrorist. These written confessions exerted a pressure of consistent identity through language that would, in turn, provoke his repeating stories of loss and change. Released from prison, Breytenbach writes that he was “to be made a convict of respectability and accountability. [...] I am responsible. I must report. And so I became hemmed in by my own books, by all these images which like spectres took possession of my eyes to deform my vision” (1988: 131). Called to answer to the incorporeal body of literature, the author’s words phantasmically mirrored, even determined, the movements of his physical body. A lyric identity made of words, images and ghosts was inconsistent with his vision of himself. As it works its way out in a poetry of tensed anxiety, this vision reveals the forces and betrayals that language serves on the subject; by the very nature of poetry, however, language must remain.

Breytenbach’s “(lotus)” employs a poetics that suspects words but also accepts their inhuman resistance to meaning: “all words are only phantoms / galloping like horses of breath / through the emptiness” (1978: 143) The association between phantom words and horses elaborates on the trace of life committed by the poet and resuscitated by the reader. The page’s emptiness, like a memory wandering through blank history, transformed when it meets poetry, itself a land of names. Breytenbach may be cribbing from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) where a character speaks of his own *inability* to write poetry: “Words and words and words, how they gallop – how they lash their long manes and tails, but for some fault in me I cannot give myself over to their backs; I cannot fly with them” (1931: 82-3). Beckett too dreamed that poetry wore the image of a horse or, as he called it “[t]hat intractable beast. An untamed horse. A wild animal one has to ride” (qtd. in Atik 2001: 91). Breytenbach shortens Woolf’s description to sustain the ghost of an image. Revisiting Afrikaans metaphors that claim a holistic connection to African lands, the riding of wild beasts becomes, for an exiled South African, so much talk of ghosts. In the process of returning language to its material referent his poetry whirls with nervous energy and shattered images.

Despite faint signs of musical sibilance and anaphora, “(lotus)” trades the clarity of consistency for an internal logic not easily parsed. Its play of metaphors reflects on the synesthesia of lyric language where sounds and words are exchanged to create poetry, an exchange of “images dissolving into music and music becoming visible” that itself depends on poetry’s “alternation between the specular and the acoustic, sense and sound, cognition and sensation” (Blasing 85). For Breytenbach the effort becomes a theme for reflection, communication, and identity; the metaphor’s metonymic relation to language serves as a skeleton for his poetry. It is a poem where shadows become knives and flowers hide pearls, themselves food for horses; neither surrealist nor dadalike, it has surrendered the fragility of meaning for something else, something haunting.

for I must shake that shadow  
 from the night-mouth  
 and with that shadow as a knife  
 bareback and astride that tongue  
 I must be able to unfold all your leaves  
  
 to hear where you turn to a pearl,  
 to the blind, self-fulfilling pearl  
  
 don’t you smell the stars now?  
 everything comes up out of emptiness  
 and sinks back into it again:  
 the horses eat pearls (1978: 145)

The poem’s lyric speaker addresses the reader while its opaque subject positions leave open only the possibilities of conjurer and witness. It is worth remembering that, for Maurice Blanchot, a poem is defined by a marvelous oscillation “between its presence as language and the absence of the things of the world” (1989: 45). Language’s presence, inasmuch it can ever be present, is more than untimely, more than limited; it “is itself oscillating perpetuity: oscillation between the successive unreality of terms that terminate nothing, and the total realization of this movement – language, that is, become the whole



of language” (1989: 45). Or, to look again at Breytenbach’s words, “everything comes up out of emptiness / and sinks back into it again.” The poem’s metaphoric opacity inhibits interpretations of meaning and time, seeking to cure language of its common tendencies. Words cannibalize their essence, the poem reports, and as it does so its allegory disperses and reveals more than the parts of which it is made (language without metaphysical pretensions) but also less, a collapsed syllogism of ludic metaphysics where the game of language becomes a refutation of common logic. The playful, perpetual oscillation of words in poetry reveals their phantasmic passage. Invoking illusion as the textual fabric of poetry is unsurprising, given illusion’s etymological roots in Latin *ludere*, “to play.” An earlier poem, “isla negra” puts this play in context of the grave and the departed. Itself a lament for the recently dead Pablo Neruda, “isla negra” calls “the grave a mirror” and asserts that “words are cadavers / voice is of the wind in the trees at night” (2007: 18).

Dangers both political and sensual brush against spectro-poetic play. Witnessing “lotus,” readers are called to hear, smell, and even touch “shadow as a knife”; they taste “that shadow / from the night-mouth.” The poem keeps itself in abeyance to linger on conjuration’s threshold, waiting in the shadows for the shape of possibilities that, another poem states, “especially ... brings phantom images: / limitless mutations of anxiety and pain” (1988: 61). As “eavesdropper” asked, “must I too give a deeper meaning”? Breytenbach’s language remains painfully nihilistic, carrying dark remnants of Christian belief in which illusions, desires, and enigmas are the work of evil and where witnesses testify to truth beyond possibility. Words betray their own ghosts and the philosophical bankruptcy of their interpretation as human “expression.” Poetry’s surreal play provides no refuge to allegories for truth and meaning, as the late poem “winter work” argues:

language is not the cloth of meaning  
 there is no deep knowledge which  
 when unwrapped must be gutted and debunked  
 mystery already whispers  
 in the surface movements (2007: 147-48).

The pressure on tropological relations with truth has instigated a system so perverse that acts of personification are undercut as not only counterfeit but as *the counterfeit of figures already ghostly* – an important thought and another version of Jerrold Hogle’s counterfeit ghost.<sup>137</sup> A reading of Breytenbach’s spectral turn on the figure of figures, prosopopoeia, reveals disconnections between language and meaning, ghosts and telling.

As it was in Boland’s experiments without truth, the refusal of meaning and the imperative to “tell” is neither pleasant nor easily amenable to positivist interpretation and celebration. It yields shadows of knives, mouths in the dark, and a hidden sound of voices singing: Afrikaans poems such as “(lotus)” and English-language poems such as “winter work” have not garnered Breytenbach the South African Herzog Prize or his other literary accolades. They are written against those prize granting institutions and reveal his gothic foundations as the depthless play of his poetics. In the context of English poetry and language after the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Terry Castle has written that “Until it is possible to speak of the ghost inhabiting, as it were the mind of rationalism itself, this sense of being haunted is likely to remain – far more than any nervous fear of the police – the distinctive paranoia of modern life” (189). Breytenbach’s poetry treads between Castle’s paranoias; for him, to be haunted is a state of being. Writing invents the ghosts of things effaced by social forces and language equally. And poetry? A linguistic border land placed squarely between meaninglessness and history, haunted by the humanist dream of expression, and dressed in metaphors of uncertain currency. Despite the different languages in which they were originally composed, “(lotus)” and “winter work” trace a spectropoetic line that refuses interpretative acts that make language *meaningful*.

Breytenbach’s turn away from Afrikaans and toward the global exchange of cultural traditions must close my discussion of his work. The poet speaks with admirable celerity about his relationship with his “mother tongue” and, in that context, his shift to

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. Jerrold Hogle’s *The Underground of The Phantom of the Opera* (2002), especially 34-36, and Hogle’s “The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit” (2000) on the “recounterfeiting of the already counterfeit” (295) and “the evacuated ‘signified’ of the Gothic signifier [...] the ghost of the counterfeit” (298). These speculative derivatives in the gothic market of gravestone signifiers are a product of both complexity and cryptonymic desires.

English reveals political and personal significance and raises questions about Afrikaans poetic traditions.<sup>138</sup> Loosening the linguistic rhythms that bound him to a culture he felt betrayed by and yet which he also felt accountable toward, drastically eroding the beliefs and morality he associated with his maternal, nationalist language. Breytenbach's turn to the global affords his poetry cosmopolitan forms and marks even more strongly uncanny features of what was otherwise his homely (or *heimlich*) parent language. Breytenbach's global perspective is indebted to his gothic poetics that mix globalgothic interests with those of critics interested in Afrikaans poetry. Housing the "lyric I" in an unhomely language, Breytenbach hides his voice in plain sight among the ghostly mirrors of poetry. A voice lacks definition and opposes those things that seem solid; "by nature," Mladen Dolar observes, the voice is "on the side of the event, not of being" (79). The relationship between the written voice and the events of life provides the subject of a later chapter on the events of the *Zong* atrocity in the late eighteenth century. Before that, however, with Samuel Beckett I examine the limits of what constitutes poetry.

### 3.5

#### *Nohow On* from Here: Samuel Beckett's Worsening Writings

[P]oetry is an incantatory attempt to suggest Being in and by the vibratory disappearance of the word: by insisting on his verbal impotence, by making words mad, the poet makes us suspect that beyond this chaos that cancels itself out, there are silent densities; since we cannot keep quiet, we must *make silence with language*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* (1948)

"You want me to say it *worse*?"

Robert Frost (apocryphal)

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

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<sup>138</sup> Coetzee is especially enlightening on Breytenbach's use of Afrikaans in poetry (1996: 220-227).

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves.

[*Long silence.*]

Vladimir: Say something!

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1954)

Derek Mahon made no mistake when he included under the title “All the Dead Voices” the above lines from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in his *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972). Choosing to retain stage directions, character names, and all, Mahon describes the lines as “a lyrical passage” (111-14). His choice recognizes the poetic rhythms possible in Vladimir and Estragon’s speech while also suggesting new tactics for modern poets. Within the passage, the five breaks for silence almost stand for stanzaic breaks. The characters’ lines fluidly perform natural similes and alliteration, replete with a contrarian’s variation of verbal soundscapes and progressively degenerating nouns. There is even dialogic tension when, in the fifth stanza, leaves and feathers turn to a quiescence and ashy silence only broken by the harsh “Say something!” that begins the speaking

again. Defending his inclusion, Mahon calls the passage a sublime example of paradox and reflection: “it signifies nothing,” he writes, and so it becomes “a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound, and comment comment” (1984: 91). Disquietingly, the pensive lines speak to a larger reading of *Godot* where “every presence [...] seems likely [...] to be a ghostly repetition” (Connor 120), and where characters themselves (despite their embodied stage presence) become an emblem of language and, cipher-like, disappear into the *mise-en-abyme* of literary potential. It is as if the performative illusion that dramatizes language could become inverted and, turning inward on itself and remediated in text, become itself a ghostly whisper. While Breytenbach and Michaels thought that their literary creations might have a form of inhuman agency, in these lines by Beckett we see the becoming literary of linguistic self-conception. For Foucault, “it is because [language] has never ceased to speak within itself that we can speak within it in that endless murmur in which literature is born” (1970: 103). A specific type of poetry crosses the threshold between this conception of language and the play’s speakers: a murmuring crucible of rustling feathers and, *as if one could witness them*, the voiceless ghosts discussing their lives. It is what Mahon in his poem “Leaves” (1975) calls “an afterlife / Of dead leaves, / A forest filled with an infinite / Rustling and sighing” (2011: 59). These leaves are pages, the forest a library. In Beckett, ghosts motivate linguistic performance regardless of genre, which is only an expectation, after all. Above all witnesses must expect to be surprised.

Art’s figurative eschatologies are no transcendent thing, but simply an ambiguous situation. As I have cited above, in rehearsals for *Footfalls* Billie Whitelaw asked Beckett “Am I dead?” Beckett’s reply suits Vladimir and Estragon’s situation as much as it did for Whitelaw’s: “Let’s just say you’re not quite... there” (Whitelaw 30). An experiment without truth produces much to consider.<sup>139</sup> In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon’s patter reflexively becomes that of the murmuring and rustling leaves, the life-

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<sup>139</sup> Another of Mahon’s poems, this one written in residence at the University of Western Ontario, breezily misreads Beckett’s character Molloy to produce another example of a productive paradox. The poem, “Exit Molloy,” ends with a couplet: “Strictly speaking I am already dead / But still I can hear the birds sing on over my head” (1966, 38).

talk about those for whom it is “not enough” to have lived. Nor are they *there* to be dead, mourned and buried in the earth. “They have to talk about it.” The dead live on to speak incessantly. They are ghosts who remember for us the possibility of a voice. Like the uncanny spectro-poetic voice that is both intimate and strange, material and imagined, Beckett’s understanding of voice is vexed at the best of times. In the sustained emergency of *The Unnamable* (1953), for instance, the supposed narrative voice’s “appears to be in some space *between* being and language” (Connor 77). The text propels a propositional definition across declarations of paradoxical absence much like one might drag skin over sandpaper to see the blood beneath: “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words [...] I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words [...] and nothing else, yes, something else [...] something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks” (Beckett 2009: 379-380). The usual case for Beckett, then. Although “nothing speaks,” the construct called voice forges on ahead. Or, in the simpler case of the later work, *Nohow On*: “On. Say on” (1996: 89). “Nothing” is recast in the empty shape of a ghost.

Connor’s remark and Mahon’s reading of Beckett’s earliest performed play as a poetic text contextualize Ackerley and Gontarski’s praise of the “ghostly, disembodied, externalized voices of Beckett’s late fiction and drama” (ii). In truth, these “ghostly, disembodied” voices shape the current of Beckett’s writing from his first trilogy to his last, from his earliest and most famous stage play to the final, esoteric teleplays. This chapter examines Beckett’s late written work with an eye to the what Michael Davidson calls “technologies of presence,” poetic assemblages “within which the voice achieves enough autonomy to regard itself as present-unto-itself” (1997: 199). I again take inspiration from Blanchot’s comment about poetry as the place where “words begin to make their appearance.” While Davidson regards Beckett’s recourse to technology as “paranoid” and deeply unhappy, Krapp’s obsession with his tape recorder as a case in point (1997: 199), I find Beckett’s exploration of technologies more spectro-poetic. If “voice” has an ontology in Beckett’s writings, it is haunted, detached from the illusory narcissistic presence from the start. Writing from nostalgia, Anne Atik remembers Beckett reciting poems from

memory with her husband for hours in a songlike, otherworldly way (2002: 47). Yet his works are not the man's remains. From that fissure between author and writing emerge the word-ghosts who trace his voice before our witnessing eyes. The technologies by which this voice takes shape are not structures of fear. They are constraints and constrictions assembled under the *aegis* of the linguistic medium through which it is still possible for a voice to pass *on*, if with some difficulty and rhythmic interruption. Atik, again, speaking about Beckett: "I mention having read of writers [...] writing in rhythm according with their pulse and respiration. S.: 'In that case I would be panting. *Halétant*'" (2001: 104). *Halétant*. Aspirated and getting worse, Samuel Beckett's writing *gasps*.

#### § VARIOUS POSITIONS IN BECKETT'S POETRY §

Evidence for hauntological readings of Beckett's poetic voice can be found in two oft-canonized poems, "Dieppe" and "Saint-Lô."<sup>140</sup> Echoes of these early poems in Beckett's later prose illustrate his consistent use of linguistic media. The result is a poetics that resembles the published form of prose but that sounds its "voice" while read and takes occasional shape in "talking plays" that increasingly resemble contemplative monologues. First, "Dieppe," a poem that typifies what Beckett called an "existential lyric" in "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934: 74). Its thoughtful, delicate stanzas speak of grief and turmoil:

my way is in the sand flowing  
 between the shingle and the dune  
 the summer rain rains on my life  
 on me my life harrying fleeing  
 to its beginning to its end

my peace is there in the receding mist  
 when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds

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<sup>140</sup> Of other early poems such as *Whoroscope* I concur with Derek Mahon: "Whoroscope is such a bad poem that there is nothing of consequence to be said of it" (1984: 88). Nothing perhaps for William Bysshe Stein's incandescent essay "Beckett's *Whoroscope*: Turdy Ooscopy" which develops a method of study through egg divination and ironically reading "Whoroscope" as an "improvisation of a literary conundrum with a concinnity of rhetoric *sui generis*" (125).

and live the space of a door  
that opens and shuts. (1986: 59)

“Dieppe” articulates the crux of experience, memory, expression, and thought on a single threshold by memorably troping lyric subjectivity as “the space of a door / that opens and shuts.” The similar activity of books that also open and shut becomes uncanny and implies a connection between the lyric “I” and a reader’s existence. These lines almost merge the activities of reading and writing as a confluence along one of the poem’s “long shifting thresholds.” Beckett’s examination of the potentiality of the text in the world precedes the work of theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who also observe that “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (2003: 249). The lyric voice of the threshold asks questions of the world around it. To do so, “Dieppe” appropriates terms more often used to describe ghosts, the “voices voiceless”:

what would I do what I did yesterday and the day before  
peering out of my deadlight looking for another  
wandering like me eddying far from all the living  
in a convulsive space  
among the voices voiceless  
that throng my hiddenness (1986: 61)

The haunting poetic voice articulates not only the place of a modern individual but also, I contend, the poet in a tradition figured here as a “convulsive space” subject to change.

Beckett returned to the theme of the dwelling’s threshold in his late text “neither” (1979). Initially designed to be sung by a single soprano voice in an opera written specifically for the task by Morton Feltman, the text has been published as poetry and as prose, sometimes lineated and sometimes not. It recalls a number of recurring themes:

to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow  
  
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself  
by way of neither



as between two lit refuges whose doors once  
 neared gently close, once away turned from  
 gently part again

beckoned back and forth and turned away

heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam  
 or the other

unheard footfalls only sound

till at last halt for good, absent for good  
 from self and other

then no sound

then gently light unfading on that unheeded  
 neither

unspeakable home (1979: vii)

An experiment without truth in a phantasmal shell game of unfolding identities – shadow to shadow, self to self across the surface of things – Beckett’s “neither” adroitly recovers the fractured moment of the perceptual event: a closing door, a gleam, a footfall.

Performing these words, Feldman’s opera *Neither* presents what Albright calls “a probing mind trying to find a musical dialectic aligned, or skewed, with the dialectic of Beckett’s words.” The text remains “a fantasia on limbo, on the no-man’s-land between self and unself, subject and object, where we are all forced to dwell” (149). When dialectics cross in such fantastical geometries it is understandable to see a mind at play, but this limbo permits no such bodily contortions to be witnessed. Language offers up no man; a text such as “neither” exposes this as illusion, plays in it, and mourns its inability to truly pass. Reading the musical accompaniment in which a singer would be required to situate herself, Albright describes “the soprano’s inability to assimilate these notes properly into

the vocal line” and tells of the shrieks, moans, swoons, and *stile concitato* or rapid stuttering with which performers have approached the passage (148-49).

A different poem, “Saint-Lô”, published on 24 June 1946, lays bare in a single stanza the resonance between voice and ghost. “Saint-Lô” also strikes close to Beckett’s way of reciting poetry as a kind of singing or crooning. In this it sharply contrasts against his stage directions requiring actors to strictly moderate emotion and meter their spoken patterns (Atik 2002: 47). The poem’s tetrameter shrinks and quiets in its closing line’s trimeter. Significantly, in terms of its complex use of English, the poem goes without French translation in Beckett’s *Collected Poems*. It is organized around the plurilinguistic influence of a transforming *turn*, a trope of change, the old French verb *virer*.

Vire will wind in other shadows  
 unborn through the bright ways tremble  
 and the old mind ghost-forsaken  
 sink into its havoc. (32)

What is compelling here? The sense of a mind being undone and abandoned by its ghosts, themselves read as the apparitions that illustrate remembrances of lived experience. A continuing affect of life’s sibilant forces move through the world “in other shadows” to render the subject ghostly, as in “Dieppe.”

Is a ghost negative? The influence of spectrality can be cast in negative terms that seem to pick up on poetry’s unfolding or undoing. For instance, in an essay called “The Art of Failure,” Brian Burton writes that Beckett and Mahon after him “express the misery of being human” (55). Burton’s dour view reads the two as poets whose approach leads to “Obliterating texts, blackening margins, darkening the page, [and] obscuring the written word *in perpetuum* just as speech obfuscates thought” (55). It is true that a poem such as Mahon’s “Matthew 5 V.29-30” evidences a pessimism potentially inherited from Beckett’s work though its play with a radically divided and suspected lyric “I.” Mahon’s poem exploits the Biblical phrase “If thine eye offend thee pluck it out” in the services of black comedy. “Lord, mine eye offended, so I plucked it out”, the poem begins,

Imagine my chagrin  
 when the offence continued.  
 So I plucked out  
 the other; but the offence continued.

In the dark now, and working by touch,  
 I shaved my head.

(The offence continued.)

Removed an ear,  
 another, dispatched the nose.

The offence continued.

Imagine my chagrin. (1975: 13)

It goes on. No shaving will eradicate the surface area of humanity on the imagined body. Yet in moments such as this Mahon gives sway to emotional extremes uncommon in Beckett, however ruthless the latter's texts treat humanist beliefs in textual "voice." Mahon's destructive poetics of negative accretion takes up an unreflexively spectral vision of lyric identity. Only when taken to its extremes does his poem reveal its ghostly subject, and then only after fetishizing the violence of reduction. In contrast, for "Saint-Lô" negativity, if it can be called that, stems from a failing nostalgia for translucent thought and speech. Poetry exchanges the silence of thought for the ghostly sounds of lyric speech. Contrary to negative portrayals of violent human misery, I find in the sounding whistle of long-I sounds in "Saint-Lô" an after-echo of lyric subjectivity still seeking its proper haunts on the page. Nowhere singular, the sound of "I" infiltrates the assonance of the first line: "Vire will wínd ín othér shadows." A generative ghost survives, lifted from the old mind's despair and troped, which is to say *turned*, into the yet-unborn trembling though "bright ways" such as the "peace" Beckett cited in "Dieppe" as a threshold space of the door-turned-book or even the "unspeakable home" cited in the last line of "neither" (1976; 1995: 258). The sounding 'I's of the first line trap a ghostly voice in the static havoc of the page from which it might – perhaps! – whisper free. Although "the 'I' and its

‘voice’ are both eliminated, language and speech are allowed to continue” as Katz observes about another passage. He continues: “voicelessness is not silence in Beckett, on the contrary, and ‘nothingness’ does not follow from the ‘I’s failure to be” (2). Ghostly survival retains subjectivity beyond failure and identity. Its subject has no ‘I’ save for in a memory of sound and in sonorous trace. Beckett’s lesson, then is that witnessing a ghost as such entails simply reading. No magic required, but no figures form either.

The ongoing creation of seemingly contradictory elements generates spiraling interpretations by incorporating spectral absence into an affective centre. Critical discourse necessarily exaggerates one or the other side and can only unite the sense of the story or poem by re-citing or interpreting it. Similar to the prose ear of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* – “an empty tympanum vibrating between mind and world, belonging to neither” (Janus 181) – “Saint-Lô” offers up another sensory mediation between poetic medium and the active world in which the lyric voice operates and where the poetic “I” is constructed. Neither voice nor I exists, save for as a ghostly linguistic rhythm brought into being by a person whose reading turns them into a listener. We might see another media-centric and haunted aesthetic threshold where subject and object meet only to breakdown and thus signify, as Beckett wrote in an early essay, a “rupture of the lines of communication” (1934: 70). The translation posed by thresholds makes this breakdown an inevitable consequence, yet a tradition is nonetheless evident among all these ghostly voices. Despite the homonymic play on eye/I, the poem’s extended threshold is in the ear where the sonorous work of language is heard *even as* the poem on the page is read. In the act of sounding a poem, a reader witnesses its ghosts.

#### § NOHOW ON TO WORSTWARD HO §

The ghostly voices of the three short works of *Nohow On* (1989) provide another subject for spectral analysis, for their poetics achieve a sense of rhythm and haunted temporalities that blurs the genres of narrative fiction and lyric poetry and so provokes questions about the nature of poetry as such. In a manner of theoretical clarification, these texts demonstrate the “deep structure of verbal expression” that distinguishes the *poetic text*

from “the language of what is commonly called poetry” (Abraham 1995: 41-42). Thus they read “more like poetry than prose,” Jonathan Boulter writes, and since they exemplify the functions of a “literature of the unword” that will itself “set out the ground rules for interpreting his [Beckett’s] world” (2008: 138, 16), we must take them at their word – or, better, at the worsening, failing words toward which they drive. The aggregate effect amounts to a lyric sung by the disappearing voice: a *gasping*. *Halétant*.

Beckett’s first and very proud autobiographical note included in Putnam’s *The European Caravan* sets certain terms by which he can still be read. Of the younger Irish writers, Beckett is (he writes of himself) “the most interesting [...] His impulse is lyric, but has been deepened through [Joyce’s] influence and the influence of Proust and the historic method” (qtd. in Bair, 129-130). This lyric impulse and Proustian call on time cultivates a spectro-poetics that, in biographical terms, survives Beckett’s clear rejection of poetry in his middle years, transforms the efforts of difficult work such as *How It Is*, and culminates in *Nohow On*. A warning: in a letter of 1957 to Barney Russet, Beckett advocated a strict aesthetic philosophy: “If we can’t keep our genres more or less distinct, or extricate them from the confusion that has them where they are, we might as well go home and lie down” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 24). Aware of this remark, I am not proposing to read dramatic texts or narrative texts *as* lyric poetry and thus running the risk of being told to go home and lie down. Rather, I argue that the spectro-poetic uncanny of lyric poetry runs throughout events of great felt intensity in drama and narrative in deeply structured linguistic moments called *poetic*. Having witnessed this in *Waiting for Godot*, and having identified the hospitality for spectres in Beckett’s poetry, I turn to *Nohow On: Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* [*Mal vu mal dit*] (1981), and *Worstward Ho* (1983). My analysis will chiefly focus on the last of these texts. To analyze this trilogy, many would advocate a reading of Beckett’s famous German letter of 1937. In that letter to his friend Axel Kaun Beckett produced what many since have made a manifesto:

more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. [...] It is to be hoped the time will come [...] when language is best used where it is most

efficiently abused. [...] To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeming through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today’s writer. (2009: 518)

These lines recall Blanchot’s similar vision of a language torn apart to reveal whatever “something or nothing” is left. In *The Space of Literature* (1955), he wrote that

Writing never consists in perfecting the language in use, rendering it pure. Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to silence if one wants, at last, to be heard. (48)

Blanchot’s remarks suggest that, whatever Beckett’s effect on the language employed in this sequence of texts, it is still shadowed by the haunting influence of a material distance between the linguistic image of the thing spoken and “heard” and the imagined language spoken by no one and internal to the self, a language not yet proffering a linguistic subject and thus ungraspable by writers or readers: *rein Sprache*, in short.

This veiled threshold remains, however haunted and overwritten it might be in order that a writer is “heard,” even as that writer attempts to interject voices of loss into otherwise hostile or indifferent traditions as if carving up an inhuman medium. Such hauntings compose poetry’s continuing influence even though, as Eavan Boland or Breyten Breytenbach suggest, ghosts do *not* attempt to speak for the dead or absent. Katz observes that “the disavowal of the (non)speaking subjects in Beckett of the speech they (don’t) utter partakes, in paradoxical form, of an extremely old literary tradition – that of the ‘orphyic’ moment in poetry, when speech is somehow given to the mute, expression to the inexpressive” (11). The effect demonstrates “one of the most traditional poetic conceits: that of giving voice to the voiceless” (Katz 11). Where Boland joined the haunted chorus, and where Breytenbach became one of a host of South African ghosts haunting the world, Beckett’s spectropoetics articulate an individual subject’s

disappearance into noisy silence. The orphic issue of voicing the voiceless lingers. But in the end a poet is also voiceless and “somehow given a voice not his own. [...] That which ‘speaks’ has received not a gift but a punishment, being forced to express that it cannot express, in a speech which gives the lie to its condition” (Katz 14). The lyric subject’s gift to the poet – speech – entails its own burden: to construct a dwelling for the ghostly remainder of what once was and will continue to be. A spectro-poetic process’ effect on the poet’s speech is textuality’s transformed materiality.

The unlineated texts of *Nohow On* fail to qualify as verse.<sup>141</sup> Yet the entirety of *Company* – fables of long walks notwithstanding – seem almost ready for an act of compression that created poems such as the one Beckett showed Anne Atik in 1981:

Head on hands  
 hold me  
 unclasp  
 hold me. (Beckett qtd. in Atik 2001: 107).

The simple lines of movement and strict economy of words delineate an intensive affect of repetitive rocking gestures; voicing their rhythm, traces of what is almost a linguistic form of breathing can be heard through predominantly aspirated *h*-sounds and sonorous long-*o*’s. Thematically, if not formally, this fragment oddly echoes in the seemingly still embodied prose figurations of *Company*’s closing lines, quoted below. For many readers, these lines illustrate the (illusory) bodily presence that anchors the text’s narrative arc:

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<sup>141</sup> That said, even traditional prosodists such as Hartman routinely note that the definition of verse as “language in lines [...] is not really a satisfying definition” (11). Without proposing a solution to this problem, I want to signal the provisional quality of definitions of poetry that settle on linear enjambment, whether in free verse or otherwise. The problem comes to the fore in Beckett’s work but can be extended. In order to accommodate the labyrinthine folds of most prose documents, the “lyric” subject might more accurately be called a “networked” subject in contemporary global discourse. As Tom McCarthy puts it, “Where the liberal-humanist sensibility has always held the literary work to be a form of self-expression, a meticulous sculpting of the thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual who has mastered his or her poetic craft, a technologically savvy sensibility might see it completely differently: as a set of transmissions, filtered through subjects whom technology and the live word have ruptured, broken open, made receptive”; thus we find “not selves, but networks” (2010). These networks run through cables and software – the product of sand and of reflective surfaces across an arbitrarily binary language. For Mirzoeff, network subjects are the consequence of globalization in new media and information technologies, both of which dislocate time in the manner of a ghost: a “network, like a ghost, is from the past but is still yet to come” (2006: 335). Cf. Chun 2008, Wark 2006.

So in the dark now huddled and now supine you toil in vain. And just as from the former position to the latter the shift grows easier in time and more alacritous so from the latter to the former the reverse is true. Till from the occasional relief it was supineness becomes habitual and finally the rule. You now on your back in the dark shall not rise to your arse again to clasp your legs in your arms and bow down your head till it can bow down no further. But with face upturned for good labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone. (1996: 46)

This passage adds a miniaturist's precision to the poem's comparatively straightforwardly imagist rhythm. Notably, it dismantles any illusion of language's potential for evocative and narrative representation: it *fables*. *Company* thus clarifies its rejection of "the exemplary autobiographical desire to reveal oneself to oneself, to make visible the obscure and give face to the faceless, to engender one's own double" (Katz 170). The untitled lyric quatrain contains seeds of tendencies later manifest in prose, if to different effects.

Of the three texts that compose *Nohow On*, *Company* cleaves closest to prose while also adopting one of the most conspicuous poetic tropes, namely orphic poetry. This paradox entails a brief gloss. Familiar from Eliot, Heaney, Walcott, and Boland, to cite only several twentieth-century examples, the periphrastic or orphic movement of a compound ghost pervades the story, a spectre shaped by stories circling around a memory that, as they degrade, expose narrative's bones and then disappear entirely, leaving only the absence of a walking ghost. Ghosts are a trope in the epic tradition of *katabasis* – a descent into the world of the dead – that in the ancient world signified the pursuit and gain of understanding (Freccero 107). Familiar to these poets is not *katabasis*, save in Derek Walcott's case, but *nekuia*, a specific *prosopopoeiac* mode used when poets "need to face up (and stage a face-off with) literary history" (Michael Thurston 88). Eliot



and Boland's "compound ghost" resonates with Heaney's shades of writers and relatives in "Station Island," particularly the poem's last nameless figure and its inaugural bell-tolls that "conjured through the air / until the field was full / of half-remembered faces" (1998: 244). Melodic threnody grounds the poem's moral stature in remembrance and social responsibility. The *nekuia* is also familiar in Thomas Kinsella's raw "A Butcher's Dozen" (1972), written after the Widgery Tribunal Report exonerated the British Army troops responsible for Bloody Sunday. In Kinsella's poem, ghosts of the "brutal and stupid massacre" testify directly to injustice. Yet it is deceptive to say that any of these spectral figures put a face to the dead, for that is precisely what they do *not* do. Their visions of traditional figures are anxious self-justifications aware of possible self-recriminations. Facing off with angst haunts their efforts, while they know that poetry's real work is to make a space in the world and return them from terminological death to the living vibrancy of words; it entails a "descen[t] into the word's depths with a sound box [...] which picks up the 'hoarse' voices of the once loquacious dead" (Harrison 73).

Like Beckett's ironic and gasping prosopopoeia that refuses the very mechanism that sustains it, these walking ghosts trope the poetic feet who constitute them and, in doing so, expunge the singularity of their signatures while signaling the living poet's acknowledgement of the poetic traditions these ghosts represent. Critics commonly assign Eliot's figure the identity of W.B. Yeats and Heaney's figure that of James Joyce (Thurston 92, 166; Goodby 2000: 217). Yet this act of interpretative identification accedes to an unsustainable logic of lyric mediumship that would return an unsustainable "voice" to the dead through the intercession of a spirit medium turned visionary poet. Reading such ghosts as witnesses to the events of which they speak accrues undue moral force to the machinic assemblage of the poem, as Thurston does when he writes that such ghosts are "necromantic moment[s] [...] imbued with the purgatorial energies that animate the poem[s] as a whole" (172). It would be akin to saying that *Company* is a transcription of walks Beckett took with his father: the error mistakes a technology of textual production for an authentic expression of a confessional autobiographer. It is closer to see in *Company*'s mechanical images an ironized version of spectral orphism as revealed in

Heaney's clipped "Widgeon" (1984) where the dead bird's "broken windpipe" is given breath and song by the anonymous subject of the poem (1998: 233). Beckett's *nekuiac* infusion through a father-figure and not one of literary origin speaks eloquently about his sense of influence and tradition. This is the value then of the raid into worlds of memory's departed figures exemplified by Beckett's late work.

A proposed movement toward a true ventriloquism of the past inevitably collapses in lyric poetry at some point. Linguistic subjectivity masquerades under the proper names that exist in the lyric subject's eternal time of the "present" that, as Katz argues through Émile Benveniste, "is in itself an effect of the 'moment' of utterance, rather than a temporal space that receives an utterance as it passes. [...] the 'I' no longer refers to a previously existing subjective substance or latency, but rather refers to its own saying, becoming itself the 'referent' that it is supposed to signify" (21). The *nekuia* reveals its hospitality to lyric subjectivity even in the walking words of *Company* as it constructs a temporary home for a narrative identity of "You": "an old man plodding along a narrow country road [...] Halted too at *your* elbow during these computations *your* father's shade" (9, my emphasis). This temporary construction is inevitably and ironically undercut by reminders of its constructed nature; in other words, *Company* undermines its own feigned autobiography. The ghost figures its own writer to show that this text, like any other, was made of shades all along. Like an apparition to the eye in the dark, vision compromises itself: "at first sight seems clear. But as the eye dwells it grows obscure" (*Company* 15). Understanding textual effects as spectropoetic does not itself mediate "the usual inscrutability of the voice's origin" with great clarity (Katz 176). What is clear is that the text exemplifies a spectropoetics without lineation that flourishes unencumbered by worries about origins, authenticity, presence, or identity.

It is indicative then that Katz sees the "apparently autobiographical" *Company* give way in a "haunting feel" at its end "to the clearly fanciful" *Ill Seen Ill Said* (170, 173). This text too is unlined, but readers can commit productive forms of violence. Marjorie Perloff chooses to impress *Ill Seen Ill Said* into poetic form in order to note its strong patterns of binary rhyme, rhythmic associations, and syntactic ruptures of crucial

words such as “on.” Such formal features mark the text with an “odd prose-verse ambiguity; either a single unit can be constructed both ways or a ‘poetic’ unit is directly followed by a prose one” (Perloff 1982: 416-17). As an example, she points to passages such as “Rigid with face and hands / against the pane she stands / and marvels long” (qtd. 417). In her strophic arrangement, Perloff finds two proceeding rhymes in an iambic trimeter that recalls the metrical arrangement of “Saint-Lô.” Similarly, reading the opening of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, Perloff finds six dimeter lines and three anapestic trimeters:

From where she lies  
she sees Venus rise.

On.

From where she lies  
when the skies are clear  
she sees Venus rise  
followed by the sun.

Then she rails at the source of all life.

On.

At evenings where the skies are clear  
she savours its star’s revenge. (1982: 416, compare Beckett 1996: 49)

The whole of this beginning, Perloff notes, is “bound together by the alliteration of voiced and voiceless spirants” (1982: 416). Perloff and Katz additionally isolate the key morpheme “on,” that will, of course, recur across the text of *Worstward Ho*, and that Joycean-like bookends the collection’s title: *Nohow On*. But where Katz describes the linguistic proceedings of *Company* and where Perloff memorably transforms *Ill Seen Ill Said*, I will tackle the third text in the trio, *Worstward Ho*. After Perloff’s superb lineal manipulations and *Company*’s mooting of that point, form is not the question – whether or not the lines of *Worstward Ho* “work” as poetry. Rather, I am interested in asking what *kind* of truth is spoken by gasping lines.

Addressing a reviewer who rearranged some of her lines into a prose paragraph, Anne Carson responded in *Thumbscrew* by stating flatly that “[t]o print verse as prose is an act of contempt that verges on falsification” (58). Such falsification forgets textual materiality to perversely invest in poetic orality and a teleological illusion. Enjambed long lines check a reader’s flow and their rush to interpretative narrative; form reminds a reader of printed texts’ materiality. While *Worstward Ho*’s skeletal paragraphs and fragmentary sentences are not lineated in the usual sense, they are certainly irregular to prose. Like the earlier texts, *Worstward Ho* takes shape through spectro-poetic means. The form of the text cannot be made obscure: secret’s form *gasps*, not the matter itself. Whatever “truth” accords the text’s “secret” depends on provisional values assigned to a text that gets worse and worse in order to fail better. At which point, as even incidental readers of Beckett know, “Best worse no farther. Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on. / Said nohow on.” (1996: 116).



One way to begin *Worstward Ho* is to rule out what it is *not*: a definitively shaped form that completely accedes to the usual demands of form and constrained textual potential. If the text is a form of poetry, then it is a utopian exercise that accords with the thought that “poetry is writing that has not yet come entirely into being” (von Hallberg 5). If a reader intends to listen to the text’s ghosts, they must be careful to discern the influence of various past attempts to *speak over* the text-as-haunting and to attribute narrative and meaning where there is none. Although the grammatical worsenings of *Worstward Ho* are no Rorschach blot, they reveal an attraction of like kind for critics who attempt to spell out the text’s “meaning.” Thus Dougald McMillan’s narrative *mise-en-scène*:

An unidentified speaker ruminates to himself. Slowly out of the verbiage a vision emerges of narrator represented by a skull ‘oozing’ words out of one black hole. He is observing an old man and a child who plod hand in hand toward a final scene at a graveyard, where they observe the bowed back of an old woman. (207)

An initial glance at the text reveals that this paraphrase, in truth very seductive as a construction of narrative shape, has nonetheless stripped away all features that made the text's poetics actively compelling. It effortlessly murders the emergent lyric subjectivity whose ghost voice winds and worsens in the original, to say nothing of the fact that, as a summary, it makes attributions of personal pronouns where none are marked in *Worstward Ho*. This last, parenthetically, is *not* "merely a rhetorical, superficial sign of Beckett's refusal to adhere to the conventions of literary subjectivism" (Casanova 2006: 19). A narrative sketch makes of the original grammar exactly that which it refuses: the consistent troping of figures and pronouns that define *prose fiction* considered wholesale. In consistency's place are "pure figments, pure fictions, in a language barely able to sustain them" (Boulter 2008: 148). The logic of this appropriation of language's ghostly textualism runs nearly parallel to the explorations by Mark O'Connor in "The Stunning Success of 'Fail Better'" (2014). As O'Connor traces it, "Fail better," a phrase from the fourth strophe of *Worstward Ho*, is the readymade slogan for deracination in wisdom. No wonder we want to make of poetry a narrative text: it helps us explain better. Dislocated from the worsening gasp of *Worstward Ho*, the line in question – "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (89) – carries only a pleasingly buoyant rhythm that appeals to an elementary belief in humanism. Cut off from the matrix of the text, the words abandon the modular logic of change through repetition to which they should be returned. For the text's next strophe unravels humanist strands to expose a retching cleanliness. "Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. *Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all*" (90). Here shifting rhythms and a propulsive beat *parody* optimism in increasingly compact clauses. Even amid grammatical imperatives, something human arguably survives, however, "if only as phantom, as trace, as spectre" (Boulter 2008: 156). It is a lyric survival witnessed under the auspices of a ghost. Rather than seeing Beckett's written performance as a human voice proceeding through the darkness of obscurity, I propose seeing the play of endings and continuings as an oscillation between speech, on the one hand, fluid and endless, and, on the other hand, a lyric that desires concision and displays linguistic power. This opposition is structural:

“we shall call poetry the discourse in which it is possible to set a metrical limit against a syntactic one,” Agamben writes in *The Idea of Prose*; “Prose is the discourse in which this is impossible” (39). With no opposition to create a perpetual dynamic where metre jostles against syntax, prose works itself out in narrative arcs, then ends. The lyric occupies a plateau of intensity where words vibrate. In contrast, prose affords no ability to continue its procession apart from narrative interpolations. It therefore breaks down.

Rhythmic intonation can be detected within a lyric’s patterned alternation evident in *Worstward Ho*’s oscillations, a musicality of differences where words stop only to start again. With increasing linguistic precision, they pursue a program of intensities and not narrative meaning-making. *Worstward Ho* playfully perverts Alexander Pope’s sanctified poetic imperative where “the sound must seem an echo of the sense” (1711: 22). Pope’s traditional interpretation of lyric poetry relies on acoustic determinations that imbue a text with meaning to make *sound* seem *an echo*. Beckett traces the failures of this interpolated vocal presence into a silently instructional grammatical text. If a lyric is defined by its lineated enjambment, here the strophes are unlineated and poetry’s usual sign thus inverted. However, in *Worstward Ho* the authority of semantic interpretation does *not* rest with an embodied speaker. Instead it is pushed through the sheer force of syntax and grammar, themselves constructions with neither a proper name nor a clearly legible history. Thus the lack of personal pronouns. Ovid’s Echo, of course, had only the simulacrum of a voice: she spoke from nowhere, saying nothing of her own origin.

In *The End of the Poem* Giorgio Agamben offers a counter-theory to Pope. For Agamben, poetry “lives only in the tension and difference [...] between sound and sense [...] between the semiotic and the semantic sphere” (1999: 109). Sound and sense are to be understood not as substances, but as “two *intensities*, two *tonoi* of the same linguistic substance” (1999: 114, my emphasis).<sup>142</sup> From his distrust of metalanguage Agamben

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<sup>142</sup> The division between sound and sense is similar to that proposed by Erich Auerbach in his two types of forms: an outward shape of a thing, or the empty *figura*, and the *forma* or iterable version of a thing similar to *morphē*. Like the lines which differentiate a silhouette from a skeleton, or between an extrinsic trace and an internal structure (Hollander 1988: 5), the famous poetic dispute between sound and sense opposes form to content only to find itself in

proposes a critical gaze that levels poetry's gamut by refusing metaphysical distinctions between sound and sense, each a shape of linguistic intensity. If poetry is defined by its enjambment, Agamben writes, then a surprising logic reveals itself at a poem's "end."

The disorder of the last verse [its ending: a pros/e/aic line ending in a period] is an index of the structural relevance to the economy of the poem of the event I have called 'the end of the poem.' As if the poem as a formal structure would not and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense. At the point in which sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense, the poem looks for shelter in suspending its own end in a declaration, so to speak, of the state of poetic emergency. (1999: 113)

Worse from its very beginning, *Worstward Ho*'s unlineated lyric lines duck the question of an end – or the "sense of an ending" – entirely. They dispense with this question in the first strophe. Never mind the ostentatious repetition in "Try Again. Fail Again": the poem's effect nowhere produces the *semantics* of what a voice *intends* to say, assumedly; Beckett has instead bequeathed a structure that, having already ended, continues to live on despite itself, as a ghost. A worsening posthumous text without intent whose sound has already been "ruined in the abyss of sense," the text ineluctably continues, haunting on. Having generated from the very essence of poetic closure the engine of its poetic rhythm, it teeters on the brink of ending while delicately balancing itself between poetry and prose. *Worstward Ho* celebrates Pope's bathetic definition of poetry as "*a morbid secretion from the brain*" (2006: 198). Pope was not wrong, just not necessarily ironic. "As

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the quicksands of what constitutes form at all. Paul de Man deems this intimate crux the "extravagant claim" of poetry that might undo space, time, and the reader in a musical passage or threshold. "Once we succeed in hearing the song hidden in language," de Man writes, "it will conduct us by itself to the reconciliation of time and existence" (1979: 32). A hidden song, a haunting melody: to weave past this dispute is to remember that a poem's sound is memory, its sense is interpretation. Taken as a whole, poetry's silhouette *and* skeleton compose something somehow more than an interplay of haunting voices through quotation marks, citational derivations, and traces of a "voice" in textuality.

I would not suddenly stop a cold in the head, or dry up my neighbour's issue," Pope continues, "I would as little hinder him from necessary writing" (2006: 198). Seizing this observation, Beckett locates his mistrust of language's capacity for expression in poetry's equivocation trade between false formalist poetics and linguistic failure. Beckett's "morbid secretion" intensifies grammatical directives. "Where then but there see--" (1996: 92) becomes intense, and present: "Where then but there see *now*--" (1996: 93). Textuality imperatives lie bare to sight and ask for little other than a momentary interest in the incessantly more conscious requirement to *write*. "From bad to worsen," the text suggests, "Try worsen. From merely bad" (1996: 100). A reasonable suggestion. But how?

In the light of *Company* and *Ill Seen, Ill Said*, the imagistic sketches in *Worstward Ho* appear as already-failing structures, the memory of which contribute to another crucial element of this text: the imagination's procedural self-*decreation*. Decreation, as theorists from Simone Weil to Giorgio Agamben and Anne Carson write, is a process of undoing: undoing the subject in language and undoing the fixed assumptions of an object to render once more its intrinsic potential. It is the palpable object of the imagination in *Worstward Ho* as the strictures of textual production go from bad to "worsen": words suggest a picture that the text dismantles. Here is an illustrative passage:

It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand. Somehow up. Somehow stand. Remains of mind where none for the sake of pain. Here of bones. Other examples if needs must. Of pain. Relief from. Change of. (1996: 90)

Readers partake in such questioning sessions much as they enter a Socratic dialogue: parsing what seems prose, they instead find themselves reconstructing the jagged rhythms of a subjectivity without a subject in a poetry of variegated image-making. Begun and curiously invigorated by the provocation of an activated verb, "stands," the text proceeds



to make the case for a barren structural assemblage of imaginative ground and humanity, each reduced to its illimitable elements: bones, pain, ground. Each is arranged with logical consideration around a conceivable if illusory arrangement of those bare elements – “the bones may pain till no choice but stand,” for instance – but the text proceeds only when finding the worse formulation “Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand.” From that point on – *nohow* on, there is no progress but worse examples – the imagination’s clarity disintegrates under the weight of its own imagistic improbability, devolving to a revelation of pain and an acknowledgement of other possible images with which to occupy the mind or, in a term the text prefers, the skull: *Waiting for Godot*’s “the skull the skull the skull of Connemara” (47) taken to an insular, even lunar and phantasmic barrenness, the lengths of which makes it difficult to connect to the lived biosystem of a human body. As one of the characters in Martin McDonagh’s play *A Skull in Connemara* says, holding up the skeletal remains of a man’s head, “It’s hard to believe you have one of these on the inside of your head” (115). Equally hard to hear a voice *outside* a body.

As Elaine Scarry reminds us while speaking of ghosts, “all fictionally asserted objects are equally airy” (1999: 25). Fiction’s pretext constitutes a subject’s body, affect, and surroundings; after its narrative has been dispensed with, the poetics of writing reassert a lyric poetry to writing otherwise taken for prose. The text gestures to a “new creature” that, decreed, “reaches the indemonstrable center of its ‘occurrence-or-nonoccurrence’” (Agamben 1999a: 271): the potential or non-potential of itself to be. A “lyric subject” without subject and without lyric is the *worst* lyric subject imaginable. A “voice,” especially that of a lyric subject, can say nothing other than show itself and trace its edges; it cannot declare itself in a metalanguage. Like the God of Simone Weil’s description, it creates a text that “can only be present in creation under the form of absence” (109). Without a place from which to make pronouncements on language, outside of language (thus the great critical tradition of asserting biography, subjectivity, etc. in textual subjects that cannot properly contain those assertions), the lyric subject must speak its voice and explore its limits in the language that obliterates its free subjectivity. Beckett’s drive toward the constitution of humanity in its worsening

condition, pain, gains grammatical reflection in a poetry of worsening language. The unity of human beings is assumed on the basis of “not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language,” Agamben writes, but rather “a vision of language itself and, therefore, the experience of language’s limits, its *end*” (1999b: 47). In Weil and Carson’s terms, decreation is “an undoing of the creature in us—that creature enclosed in self and defined by self” (Carson 2005: 179). Beckett’s text displaces this tracing of absolute limits into poetry, the closest (and worst) expression of human identity possible.

To undo the solidity of a textual image decreates the limits of lyric subjectivity in the language that gives it backbone. Decreation makes of text a series of ghosts. This series can now be precisely defined as a sequential trace of images at the moment they disappear. One shade follows another. Along with its grammatical logic of addition and substitution, the immutable intensity of *Worstward Ho* finds power in the paradox of imagination’s failure to die. “In the skull all gone,” the text reads, but immediately asks “All? No. All cannot go” (102). It can be made worse. First, the images that issue from the skull, the haunting imagination, can be unsaid, and thus “Shades can blur” when viewed as solitary phenomena or as “somehow words again” (111) in sudden, vertiginous verbicide. The lyric decreates in front of our eyes. More important is Beckett’s challenge to the seat of language, the skull: the creature in us. Perspicaciously, as we are living yet, the skull remains, although it has been battered and reduced to bare life, bare language: “So skull not go” (116). The surface play of language is left to itself. Gasping and giving up, it parodies the possibility of metalanguage by crafting a final refuge through refutation of the lyric I and the verbal power that, after verbicidal decreation, continues to work nonetheless. “Nohow on,” the text ends, but reflexively acknowledges that statement, injecting a solidity to the past statement through apparent agency the way a ghost might solidify the “human” forms surrounding it, and so makes of its preceding lines a dramatic utterance by a hidden or decreated speaker that means nothing other than what it has “said”: “‘Nohow on.’ / Said nohow on” (116). At this moment the text is uncannily close to Vladimir’s line that begins this chapter (it misses only the named attribution of dramatic characters, having effectively *said itself*): “Say something!”

*Worstward Ho* plays out a lyric form stripped bare to reveal its skeletal, gasping grammar. Unlineated and begging the question of its end, it patiently despairs over the possibility of poetic subjectivity. Its use of decreation numbers it among a tradition that de la Durantaye describes as “a poetic and philosophical ‘experiments without truth’ that challenge our accepted conditions of existence” (83). The cumulation of such aesthetic experiments “call[s] into question Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false” (Agamben 1999a: 260). The decreeted conclusion to this effect draws together the experiments without truth of Eavan Boland, Breyten Breytenbach, Samuel Beckett, and, as I shall now describe, David Dabydeen and M. NourbeSe Philip.

### 3.6

#### Scholia on a Case Study: Imagining the *Zong*

I speak as one who has stood up against slavery amidst strife and opposition, in company with brave men who have bared their bosom to the storm in defence of their principles. We fall back for assistance upon British sentiment, upon English literature, and our common Christianity. [...] Send us a purified, a vivifying literature; a literature instinct with the principles of freedom. [...] Thus shall we reach the ears of men whom the voice of the American abolitionist cannot reach. Thus shall we convince their judgements, until they shall acknowledge the truth of our principles, and unite with us in their dissemination, and then slavery shall cease.

Henry B. Staten *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (1840)

A photograph of a ghost is sound.

Anne Michaels and John Berger, *Railtracks* (2013)

In Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image* (1982), a meditation on the haunting, troubling, and erotic nature of photography, the French writer makes a surprising admission. Failing to capture a crucial photograph of his mother – he misses the event of photography – Guibert reveals a preference for words in which he recreates the missing event over the photograph he might otherwise have possessed, were its taking possible. Losing the *proof* of experience, Guibert’s imagination provides more and less than he could have hoped:

The picture would be in front of me, probably framed, perfect and false, even more unreal than a photograph from childhood – the proof, the evidence of an

almost diabolical practice. More than a bit of sleight-of-hand or prestidigitation – a machine to stop time. For this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or fogged image – a ghost image... (16)

Guibert's observation of photography's threat to stop time struck a chord. In *Camera Obscura*, published just prior to Guibert's text, Barthes observed that early photographic devices adopted old practices of carpentry and exacting machinery: "cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing" (2010: 15). There is always dissonance between machines of order and their subjects. Clocks can be stopped while time runs on quite happily. The subjects of photography live out their days despite having their images "taken." Describing his words as ghostly, Guibert identifies an image's condition of "despair" given the non-synchronous relationship between time and media that seek to freeze it – between events and those who wish to recover the past, themselves writing over memory with new material just as Guibert's imagined photograph is haunted by his text. Margaret Atwood's poem "This is a Photograph of Me" (1966) makes the same point. The poem's lyric speaker conjures up the shape and size of a photograph in which, as s/he reveals, they have drowned. In a parenthetical aside the ghost declares itself a haunting absence:

This photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center  
of the picture, just under the surface. (19-20)

Atwood's poem tells a veritable ghost story of its own, but it also bears witness to the despair of non-synchronicity in ekphrastic media; being out of joint from a medium is to be knowingly severed. For Guibert, the act of capturing an event on film "obliterate[s] all memory of the emotion, for photography envelops things and causes forgetfulness, whereas writing, which it can only hinder, is a melancholy act" (22). Poetry presumes to dissolve the melancholic despair of images by fashioning ghostly shapes of memory and emotion, "ghost images" readers witness by following words and tracing absent visions, resurrecting as yet lingering emotions, unresolved tensions, and unforgotten dreams.

## § “HOW DO GHOSTS LOOK?” §

Poetry offers at least two kinds of imaginative ghosts. Some works, such as Beckett’s *Worstward Ho*, exemplify a spectro-poetics of words at their limit. In his ruthlessly anti-imagist sequence of grammatical severity, imagination, once dead, is tirelessly reborn. Yet the lyric has another potential use that writers have used ever since the Grecian lyricist Simonides of Ceos (c. 556 – 468). Philosophers as early as Cicero cite Simonides as the inventor of an art of memory and a *mnemotechnics* of places (*loci*) and images (*imagines*).<sup>143</sup> This craft finds an energetic invention in memory’s creations – investing what is dead and gone with the new, half-life of literature and culture – is the incessant haunting of language. Critchley’s *Memory Theatre* suggests that *mnemotechnical* acts place linguistic ghosts on history’s stage in order to “reach down into the deep immemorial strata that contain the latent collective energy of the past” (67). As Francis Yates and Anne Carson remind us, Simonides’ unique vision of aesthetics and memory pit the verbal arts against painting. The Grecian poet invented not just an *ars memorandi* but also literary criticism; for Carson, at least, he is the first Western literary critic,

the first person in our extant tradition to theorize about the nature and function of poetry. The central dictum of his literary critical theory is well known, much celebrated and little understood. ‘Simonides says that painting is silent poetry while poetry is painting that talks,’ Plutarch tells us. (Carson 1999: 46)

Cicero also notes how Simonides privileges visual senses over the others, something Quintilian, author of *Institutio oratoria*, another foundational treatise on the art of memory, does not assign much significance (Yates 41). The puzzling philosophical link between the art of memory and the tools of imagination – images called, by the Greeks, *phantasmata* – stayed current well into the time of Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). In his commentary on Aristotle, Aquinas observes that “if we wish to remember intelligible notions more easily, we should link them with some kind of phantasms” (1949: 93; qtd.

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. footnote 93 above.

and trans. Yates 82).<sup>144</sup> The impulse to memorialize the world in words does not always reference Cicero's *memoria* and *inventio*. Adapted from philosophy, these terms bear divinity's stamp (Yates 59), while other interpretations of literary and especially poetic powers are much more secular. At heart, the lyric performs its ekphrastic function in the services of a rigorous determination to memorialize words, names, and the dead with the passions of the living, as in the story of Simonides at the banquet. Poetry's essential vocation is remembrance's survival. To Maurice Blanchot, for instance, as an author's voice disappears the work of literature gains the potential to house its subjects and its readers alike. Literature possesses the power "to save things, yes, to make them invisible, but in order that they be reborn in their invisibility. And so death [...] again becomes the promise of survival" (1989: 145). Reading a poem is not quite the same as overhearing a conversation. It does bear witness to ghosts. Simonides' ekphrastic arts assist poetry's efforts at remembrance by emphasizing that ghosts have a form beyond that of whispers.

The lyric takes perceptual shape in sonic and imaginative form. How does one see a ghost in lyric poetry? "How do ghosts look?", Mirzoeff asks. They find little shape in omniscient narrative prose, especially once its poetic oscillations have been frozen by the sense of an ending. Instead, by the perceptual slippage between genres that ekphrasis performs, a ghost "becomes visible to itself and others in the constantly weaving spiral of transculture, a transforming encounter that leaves nothing the same as it was before" (Mirzoeff 2002: 250). Reading a poem brings it to life and instigates a remarkable act of imagination. The reflective play of words engenders a haunting ambiguity in what becomes the shape and skeleton of a ghost: its body made of the felt relationship between words and concepts, an echo of the arrangement of words on the page that, gesturing toward the visual, sound out meaning and sense. As lyric becomes ekphrastic its ghosts become the absent centre of things. Despite the rhythmic resuscitation of voice that lend vibrancy to the spectro-poetic act, a question remains. How can one listen to a ghost?

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<sup>144</sup> Aristotle and Aquinas both link the act of remembrance with a corporeal function, taking as their cue "the fact that men in trying to remember strike their heads and agitate their bodies" (Yates 83), an echo of an Aristotelian concept that reads *phantasmata* as *tupoi*, marks of experience physically inscribed above the heart (cf. Sisko).

(Anne Michaels and John Berger: “A photograph of a ghost is sound.”) Ghosts cannot be *heard* in the technological artefact of a poem on the page. Yet reading a poem invests the text with the possibility of transforming traces into a kind of voice, or hallucinates a ghost of the assumed lyric subject’s presence through the performance of one’s own voice, all while qualifying a poem’s suggested metrical and syntactic features with the reader’s own accentual and semantic assumptions. Constrained by poetry, a ghost’s potential survival rests in imagination’s paradox exemplified by Simonides: that, *in the act of listening, which is a performance of the reader, ghosts can be seen and even witnessed*. Lyric poetry, Hollander asserts, “is indeed lifelike: how else, outside of literature, do we have access to other minds?” Spectrality remains. Poetry resembles experience, but yet, as Hollander goes on to observe, “in our inability to ask questions of, and get answers from it, lyric poetry is not at all lifelike, but picturelike: once having sung, it is mute” (1988: 199). Moving from a semblance of life experience to conjured pictures that invoke the imagined gesture of *looking* means that a reader becomes lost in the unstable labyrinth of words that convey human experience and memory. The act figures itself as a “ghost, a link to some unknown end that can sometimes be accessed and sometimes not” (Mirzoeff 2002: 251). Whereas the spectacle of drama tells ghost stories by foregrounding artifice, the ongoing creation of poetry engenders by enlivening sight and sound in its readers; poetry is an act of witnessing that re-orientates past events, its own forms and, inevitably, ethics.

The argument that follows takes up the ekphrastic relationship between spectro-poetics and the event by reading two contemporary poems that, in their own ways, both respond to the *Zong* atrocity of 1781. A contrast between David Dabydeen’s *Turner* (1994) and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) rests on the difference between mourning and remembrance. On the one hand, Dabydeen’s *Turner* performs the work of mourning through a failed address to a melancholy painting. His ekphrastic, even orphic poem attempts to give voice to those who have been lost twice, first to death in the Middle Passage and then again to an imperial archive of exotic objects and sublime representations. In comparison, NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* refuses mourning and

melancholia alike, electing instead to drive readers back onto their own affective resources and thus prompt questions about poetry's historical grounding and contemporary readership. At stake is a simple question. How can a poet respond to loss in an aesthetic form? What does Dabydeen's *Turner* do as a poem that its namesake painter was unable to illustrate on canvas? How do *Zong!*'s agrammatic lists and brutal scattering of words across the page constitute a related kind of ekphrastic poetry? Poetry is an active exchange between living desire and a paralyzed history. Writers grasp for command over historical events, but as previous sections have shown, they are in turn grasped by writing's prophesy of death. Refocusing the question on poetry's relationship with events accepts the author's "death" and moves on to examining the influence of literary writing over history's ongoing lacunae and the bodies of poetry's readers alike.

#### § ZONG §

One form of the story of the *Zong* goes like this. In 1783, while crossing the Atlantic, a slave ship with the improbable name of the *Zong* encountered serious difficulties. Its cargo – African slaves from Accra – were falling sick and its new captain, a surgeon named Luke Collingwood, was incapacitated; moreover, poor navigational choices and a pressing lack of fresh water threatened the ship. Hedging their bets and hoping to avoid the uninsurable "natural death" of the ship's human cargo, the crew threw the slaves overboard, much like the desperate will burn house and home for insurance. Some 133 men, women and children were cast into the sea over only a few short days. One person was reportedly able to crawl back on board.<sup>145</sup> The ship's name is improbable not for its contemporary suggestion of a dog's toy but for the way its actions degrade the ship's original name, "*Zorgue*," the Dutch word for "care." The ship's 1781 owners were careful enough to claim the insurance for the human cargo cast overboard. The ragged crew in charge of the murders were enabled by Liverpool businessmen whose money, interest,

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<sup>145</sup> Fehskens traces the uncertain numbers in which the human identities of the African slaves have been lost: "Of the 470 or 442 or 440 slaves, either 150, 133, 132, or 123 were thrown in the Atlantic. Forty or fifty may have jumped into the water to avoid being thrown or ordered to jump against their will. Thirty more were dead on arrival" (407).



and word set the *Zong* in action. These men pursued the matter in court in the attempt to collect insurance over the calculated loss of the Africans. James Walvin points out that by publicly pursuing reimbursement for what happened aboard the *Zong* the ship owners ironically also publicized the story to a broader public (100). It was, however, no irony that the ensuing trial had nothing to do with murder.

Former slave ship captain become minister and abolitionist John Newton, also the composer of *Amazing Grace*, deemed the whole affair “a melancholy story” (18-19). Melancholy indeed, and with ample material for memory to engender the sense of haunting loss that emerges through so many responsive texts and discussions in which circulates the unfindable sensation of loss. Literary acts shape a home for ghosts and serve as a threshold for memory. Stories of the *Zong* almost immediately found a place in art, though first painting and not poetry first seized the subject of remembrance, and then only as a matter of secondary consequence. In addition, the sensational mass murders and the 1783 suit over insurance fraud made the *Zong* a celebrity cause for abolitionists, particularly Granville Sharp. Thomas Clarkson’s famous *History of the Abolition of Slave Trade* (1808) describes the events in detail. In 1840, just after Clarkson’s book was reprinted, J.M.W. Turner exhibited his famous canvas *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* in the Royal Academy in London.



**Figure 5: J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship* (1840). Oil on Canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**

Turner's exhibition took place just down the street from the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in Exeter Hall. The (near) distance speaks volumes, for while the work's title clearly refers to the *Zong*, its more powerful commentators picked up on the work's more abstract features. Despite negative reviews – “a tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of tomatoes,” Mark Twain complained (159)<sup>146</sup> – no description of the painting was more famous or powerful than that of John Ruskin who, in the first volume of his influential *Modern Painters* (1846), exclaimed upon the painting's “daring conception,” “absolutely

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<sup>146</sup> Twain carefully distanced himself from this statement by attributing it to an anonymous Boston reviewer. However, with equal care, Jerrold Ziff notes that Twain first composed the remark in a notebook entry of 1878 (28). Perhaps Twain had second thoughts about the joke's veracity but thought the phrase too good to give up entirely.

perfect” colour, and selection of “the most sublime of subjects and impressions [...] the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, illimitable sea” (160). The painting was clearly a masterpiece and the art critic sought to match its heights with prose. Marina Warner describes Ruskin’s rapture as “one of his most gorgeous, most impassioned paeans to the sublime,” yet she correctly notes that Ruskin never describes the painting’s subject (1994a: 1). He ignores the display before him and dreads to stray from appreciation into an ekphrastic reconstruction of the scene – into the “despair of the image,” as Guibert might say. Like a mourner might laugh incredulously instead of cry, Ruskin refuses to acknowledge the painting’s melancholy subject. More than a hundred years after Ruskin, Graham Reynolds describes the painting’s effect in similar terms to those of the conservative art critic before him. “There is no more majestic or terrifying instance of the wind and sea as elemental and destructive powers in all Turner’s work,” Reynolds judges, “the ship itself, silhouetted against the storm, acquires something of the mythical quality of the ghost ships which haunt maritime imaginations” (1969: 179). Reynolds’ ship appears spectral *and* historically displaced: a ghost twice over.

In two very different contexts, Ruskin and Reynolds illustrate the continuing influence of the Romantic sublime. To their vision the painting’s other subject – the drowning slaves, the ship – are unremarkable, mere casualties to art. The sublime exploits a subject to render it objectively unrepresentable. Anne Carson calls the sublime a kind of aesthetic “banditry” (2005: 47). In it, the spectator steals the show, while the sublime work occludes the ostensible subjects of its abolitionary politics to present instead a show of spectacular generality more palatable to a liberal viewer. In place of slaves and abolitionist politics, art criticism forwards a moral framework derived from Adam Smith and David Hume that takes as its major focus the sympathetic imagination of the enlightened liberal subject contemplating the sublime work of art. The currency of this moral framework is suffering. Its intended image, the ghost image of photography’s desire, is reduced to “an untimely affective event” experienced by the viewer, who “belatedly suffers the idea of the slaves’ suffering[,] and so sentimentally secures the ‘past feelings’ of the slave” (Baucom 2005: 293). Turner’s painting appropriates the gravity of suffering without acknowledging

the crucial pastness of those who suffered: a form of banditry by the sublime. Art may thus obscure that which is already distended by time or lost through disconnection.

Ruskin observed only a part of Turner's *Slavers*, but the limitations of his view are necessary to social criticism from his milieu. The force of a canvas suffices when the paucity of the critic's interpretation fails; thematically as well as formally, the canvas is "less a singular image of things as they are than a representative image of what we do not see" (Baucom 2005: 275). For Turner, conceivably, the painting responded to impulses such as those recorded by Thomas Clarkson, who struggled to depict and describe the world of slavery. "How shall I describe their feelings?", Clarkson asked in honest failure. "How shall I exhibit their sufferings?" Yet, for Clarkson, the important questions seemed also "Where shall I find language?" and "Where shall I find words?" (I: 14-15). Clearly, the abolitionist struggled to shape an image of slavery's affective and material effect on the world. Turner's painting stands as an answer to these questions derived from a certain model of liberal humanism and "a typical image of a global modernity whose most essential, most urgently interesting things are what we do not see" (Baucom 2005: 275). This story of global modernity is also one of hidden mysteries that strain against the darkness of alterity – a story of the globalgothic, in other words. The melancholic language of Romantic sympathy incipient to Turner's brushstrokes and Clarkson's statistics jointly access in ekphrastic fashion "an image of what, seeing we yet cannot see [...] beneath the banality of number, beneath the smear of paint, beneath the deck, beneath the water" (Baucom 2005: 275): a ghost image that lingers in a language for future generations to inherit. Unsurprisingly, the story of the *Zong* and Turner's painting have inspired many literary responses.<sup>147</sup> For Abigail Ward, "the case of the *Zong* has become infamous – [it is] a true 'ghost ship' of mythic proportions" (155).

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<sup>147</sup> In addition to Dabydeen and Philip's poems, these include novels such as British writer Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (1992), Jamaican-American Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1993), and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), and extend even to American academic Ian Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic* (2005).

Of the many retellings of this melancholic story, two – Dabydeen’s *Turner*, a minatory epic of twenty-five unrhymed stanzas, and NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, a booklength exercise in textual experimentation – represent significant variations on the ekphrastic theme. These poems experiment with both lyric and the epic by challenging formal assumptions about genre and style. *Turner*, for example, is an epic after the precedent of, if not in the same form as, Derek Walcott’s influential *Omeros* (1990). Walcott’s new kind of epic poetry is both traditional and modern; it subverts a genre Bakhtin once identified as a conservative hierarchy dependent on a monological and unified aesthetic (Burkitt 169, 161). In addition, *Omeros* recognizes how the pain of new achievement might challenge dominant stories of the Middle Passage drawn from the imperial archive; in other words, Walcott’s epic form is painfully non-palliative and melancholic: its muse sings in rage as its author “reinvigorates the epic form to mourn the many who were erased or distorted in the pages of that archive” (Carpio 47). Dabydeen and the poets who write after Walcott inherit this new epic poetry. Yet when Dabydeen adopts the form, his poetry is twice removed from the events that form his subject material. Dabydeen triangulates his work directly through the imperial archive in the form of Turner’s *Slave Ship*.<sup>148</sup> NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* takes up altogether a different history of epic poetry, approaching it not traditionally but through the epic’s propensity to use lists. Her poem does away with the image, leaving only words and ghosts.

#### § THE EPIC CONTEST OF EKPHRASIS VERSUS NARRATIVE §

A resistance to explanatory and palliative narrative unites *Zong!* and *Turner*. *Turner*’s entire “narrative” arc is a failing, dematerializing dream imagined from the submerged head of a drowning African slave. In *Zong!*, a narrative is simply impossible to sustain from the dispersed and scattered words – unless, that is, one imagines a suitable context, in which case one is an agent of narrative creation (itself a new form of banditry). In either poem, any possible narrative lasts for no time at all, or coins itself in an eternity

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<sup>148</sup> Some classify Dabydeen’s *Turner* as a “verse novel” along the lines of Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* (1998). This classification depends on the reader’s perception of narrative elements in the work (cf. Addison 2009).

without end; in both, the text waits for a reader to kindle time within it. Poetry bears little relationship to the sustained duration of narrative. Its textual existence frustrates the progressive nature of time as the words that constitute its body circulate through language communities and into an unseen future through the ongoing translation of ekphrastic processes. As Murray Krieger argues, an anti-narrative creates the “mirage” of ekphrasis. Why mirage? At its Greek root, *ekphrazin* means “to speak out” or “to tell in full.” This modified prosopopoeia helps a silent artwork to “speak” through descriptive text that gives more than a figure and less than a face to words, but gives the sustained illusion of an object’s voice. Mary Lou Emery describes ekphrasis by drawing on Françoise Meltzer’s terminology: “when an apparently static work of art is described within a narrative,” Emery writes, “two things happen: first, the main narrative appears suspended [...] and, second, what seems to be a spatially fixed object – the work of art – becomes the site for the intercalation of another narrative, *the story the work of art speaks*” (186, my emphasis). The illusion makes something from nothing so that poetry might have a technique to “explicitly represent representation itself” (Heffernan 4). Without offering a representation as such, ekphrasis works “to dictate an interpretation” (Riffaterre 125). It refuses representation and interpretations of narrative progress, for in the moment of description time freezes. To speak itself in full, the ekphrastic poem takes no time to tell at all. Instead, suspended within the ekphrastic opening Dabydeen’s poem bores in the representational figuration of Turner’s painting, or lifted from the archives of legal discourse, as Philips’ poem does, the poems expose their ideological underpinnings in a violence that lasts for less than a moment: their grammar provides an *illusion* of narrative. In relation to the events that it describes, Dabydeen’s *Turner* performs the mournful work of memory’s recollection in a place stripped of the pretense of real activity through a conscious illusion. Similarly, NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* takes up an anti-narrative force through its confrontation with the reader, the archive, and history.

Ekphrastic scenes traditionally occur in epic poetry. It is no surprise that longing and phantasms coincide in the ekphrastic moment of creative, paradoxical description. As in Homer’s account of Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad*, epic poets illustrate the stylistic

stasis of visual art in the dynamic, inevitably narrative longing of words (Heffernan 4). Ekphrastic poetry promises “to achieve the impossible: to render the visual image through words and, in doing so, to still narrative flow in a spatialized moment” (Emery 222). In short, ekphrasis allows a reader to see an image where only words exist, and has traditionally been viewed as one of the forms of *enargia*: a “visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone [...] ‘before your very eyes’” (Lanham 64). Ekphrasis is “dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication” (Heffernan 5). Explication holds strongest in poetry that seeks narrative singularity, while repeatability and an intense focus on language as such empties images of their semantic attributions: repetition stretches as if to measure language, but reveals something else entirely. Homer’s account of the Trojan War does not have the near-sadistic repeatability of a play such as Eugene Ionescu’s *The Bald Soprano*, for instance, with its endlessly cyclical lines, or of Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language* (1988) that could, its author suggests, “go on for hour after hour, on and on and on, the same pattern repeated over and over again, on and on, hour after hour” (20). In the ceaseless everywhere of a play like Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, what “happens” is immaterial. Instead, the image formed of two men on a stage overtakes considerations of story. In a similar fashion, Dabydeen’s *Turner* and NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* occupy the lost time of an event. Hauntingly, ekphrasis neither loses nor sacrifices image and text. The two form a conceptual lattice that contains the impossible, namely, history’s events. This kind of framework demonstrates ekphrastic ambivalence, a “a subtle – we might say spectral – approach [...] characterized by a positive ambivalence which does not require the outright destruction or disappearance of either image or word” (Baldwin 30).<sup>149</sup> At this still, turning moment, a trope in the rented space between image and words, live the ghosts of ekphrastic poetry: timeless, wordless, phantasmal. The *Zong* and poems that

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<sup>149</sup> Continuing to cite Mitchell’s language on the icon, Baldwin searches for a language adequate to the spectral effect of images – and behind them, events – in ekphrastic language: “The picture as spectre, while never literally ‘present’, is a ‘potent absence’ or ‘fictive, figural present,’” he writes: “a sort of ‘unapproachable and unrepresentable “black hole” in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping it and affecting it in fundamental ways” (30).

address it are at once tied together and, at the same time, completely dissolute objects inhabiting different times. This relationship's structural stress points afford ghosts and haunting tropological schemes from those who witness it. Many critics rely on arguments that align past events with the literature that continues their inhuman existence. Ward writes that "hauntings do not occur indiscriminately, but arise specifically from the failure of past events to be resolved, or the living to adequately mourn [...] ghosts 'possess' those that are alive, and prevent them from continuing 'the task of the living'" (187). To Patke, *Turner* "speaks on behalf of all those who made a forced and perilous journey westwards" (85). Equivocations between the living and the dead operate in conversation and criticism alike, but poetry such as that of Dabydeen and Philip passionately sabotages the commonplace of a poem's "speaking" its "ghosts." Any critical presumption that indiscriminately combines the living with the dead betrays the works it otherwise seeks to champion.

Figures of the haunting relationship between event and literature cannot pretend to speak for the dead, though they can speak to being themselves *haunted*. Thus, as Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic* proclaims, while "[t]he *Zong* may be absent, in name, from these pages of my text [...] its spectre haunts everything I have to say here" (24). This too is a ghost story of a kind, as are the many documents that spring from the *Zong*'s inheritance. What kind of hauntings result from an event enshrined in poetry? Virginia Woolf believed that modern ghosts should induce fear and, in this, the tropes of Gothic literature have failed. "We are not afraid of ruins, or moonlight, or ghosts" Woolf writes (1918: 295). Fear is neither a bodily reaction to danger nor the "undignified and demoralizing sensation" of mindless panic (Woolf 1918: 293). A properly affective haunting must "terrify us not by the ghosts of the dead, but by those ghosts which are living within ourselves" (Woolf 1918: 294). While some types of fear quicken the pulse and set the mind racing, the fear of ghosts within us "comes from the force with which it makes us realize the power that our minds possess for such excursions into the darkness" (Woolf 1918: 295). To do so would *use* ghosts. Do Dabydeen and NourbeSe Philip's poetry of ghosts create this force of fear? Are they gothic poems? An open question.



A comparison is illustrative. In his novel *Feeding the Ghosts*, Guyanese poet Fred D'Aguiar takes up the story of the *Zong*. The novel's most conventionally "truthful" and melancholic feature is the clipboard on which the ship *Zong*'s Captain Collingwood marks the dead two by two in demented remembrance of Noah's Arc. A symbol of clinical bio-political management, the clipboard suggests that insurance and calculated profit obsess Collingwood. "The captain was the maddest of all," the text explains. "His ledger was his greatest treasure. [...] He consulted it as though it dictated to him the precise means by which the ship should be run. All in the name of profit" (128). From the chronotrope of the ship, D'Aguiar pares away a single, devastating image: the *mise-en-abyme* of the captain's clipboard that is the only textual survival of the African slaves who have no names, no histories, nothing for those after them to remember. An insurer's demand for accountability transforms human death into simple pen strokes. Figuring a nexus between profit and the law, the slave ship translates abstract visions of speculative finances that define slaves as commodities valued by recuperative insurance into a regime of biopolitical domination enacted by sailors on African slaves. The captain's madness enlivens a visionary goal for his mostly illiterate crew. Yet the novel's own recapitulation of the insurer's accountability causes lingering uncertainty: D'Aguiar's narrative holds the past to accountability by retelling the acts already taken by history's agents. So much for prose. What of other genres that have taken on this ghost story – what is ekphrastic poetry's role in this new *speculative accounting*? The madness of transforming human lives into pen strokes extends from Captain Collingwood's clipboard to written accounts of the atrocity and includes documentary accounts and poetry. Dabydeen and NourbeSe Philip re-devastate the lyric form by refusing to trope the dead with names and faces. They refuse prosopopoeia just as they destroy narrative.

These genre-challenging efforts were preceded by abolitionist activists such as Granville Sharp in their uneasy relationship to telling ghost stories. Eighteenth-century activist Granville Sharp, one of the first writers to try and make sense of the tale of the *Zong*, was seemingly infected by a madness akin to Captain Collingwood's. Briefing the case of the *Zong*'s events for the Lord's Commissioners in charge of examining the case,

Sharp compiled a document of 138 handwritten pages that incorporated multiple sources. It was enormously repetitive in its tellings and retellings of the story from multiple perspectives, assembling a mass of information that did not so much “tell the story” but show how a story is repeatedly told through retroactive contemplation. Sharp’s dossier of documents reveals that ethical decisions are made by recollecting an event as a phantasm of the mind and, thus, that “the event which the act of juridical or ethical decision in this sense does not so much follow as constitute and precede, an event that manifests itself in the present only, and precisely, as a spectre called forth by the recognizably tautological act of decision being made upon it” (Baucom 2005: 128). This logic of telling extends beyond the events of the *Zong*. It is the same method of transmitting ghost stories through print and oral culture from those who tell them to the compilers who discuss and re-inscribe them. Texts as different as Sasha Handley’s academic *Visions of an Unseen World* and Peter Ackroyd’s curatorial *The English Ghost* recount to reaffirm the missing moment of the event where the ghost supposedly appears. To compensate the absence of their subject, they amass contextual information in staggering detail. The Cock Lane ghost and the ghost of Margaret Bargrave are only two prominent examples of stories that manufacture their ghosts in the moment at which they are told simply by virtue of tale-telling’s belated relationship to events past. Describing an image, the storyteller arrives at a phantasm, an image whose only validity rests in the resonance with the past-oriented memory and the future-oriented decision making of those in the hermeneutic circle of interpretation; in other words, the validity of an image is consonant with the audience’s frame of mind. In *Ghosts in the Middle Ages* (1998), Jean-Claude Schmitt argues that long before the image of the diaphanous and flickering ghost dominated the popular imagination, ghosts looked much like people (212). Textual envisioning revisits the question of what a ghost might look like in the linguistically-derived affective imagination. Decreation saves the phantasmic image from truth’s crucible. Unlike spectators before artwork such as Turner’s canvases, readers’ imaginations *decreate* poetry’s ekphrastic verbal images; art returns the spectacles of hallucinated material presence into the raw suspicion of creative possibility.

The work of decreative ekphrasis produces ghosts that compose a third line of aesthetic haunting to accompany the *Zong* trial's other critical discourses of speculative finance capital, sentimentality, and romantic melancholy – all “secret sharers in the philosophical discourse of modernity” (Baucom 2005: 205). The *Zong* relates to the globalgothic in its political guise, the historical manifestation of economic value's abstraction from its concrete referent and the global circulation of ghostly values. These spectres of value – a term current to writing by Ian Baucom, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson – are “at least doubly spectral: they are both the imaginary, disembodied value forms trading on the floor [...] of the globe's money markets and stock exchanges and the ghostly reappearances of such exchangeable abstractions, haunting reminders and revenants of the present's what-has-been” (Baucom 2005: 144). Modern politics *still* takes place on an imperial landscape of capital accumulation that emerges from an Atlantic nexus of slavery and profit; the world *still* turns on the spectrality of human beings who are made ciphers of economic value. (Once in a while a *ghost* might survive.) This global lineage of insurance, credit, and stock speculators creates spectral strands that continue to produce deep seated economic and identity-based fears about human understanding and evaluation. Communism no longer haunts Europe: now, embedded *even* in acts of narrative speculation previously the prerogative of ekphrasis, financial capital haunts the world over. A new form of paragonal struggle emerges as the work of poetry accordingly seeks to wrest from capital the ways and means of abstract production that generate ghosts. Not all technologies and effects of abstraction – or poetry – are equal.

### 3.7

## Recreation at Decreation's Edge: David Dabydeen & M. NourbeSe Philip

What cannot be stated, what cannot be archived is the language in which the author succeeds in bearing witness to his incapacity to speak. In this language, a language that survives the subjects who spoke it coincides with a speaker who remains beyond it. This is the language of “dark shadows.”

Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999)

Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated.

Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947)

The Middle Passage presents a forbidding lineage to those who would seek to address it. Diedrich, Gates Jr., and Pederson suggest that any text responding to this infamous history must “recover the many voices silenced by the monologic master narrative” and also “embrace the polyphony of [the voices’] re-memories” (10). Yet history’s calcified archives oppose this desire for the dead to have their say, and critics in trauma studies tirelessly point out how re-covering voice literally covers over historical loss. Placed in the role of responding to loss, literature functions as a prosthesis for the work of mourning that enacts an aporetic, oscillating poetics where mourners are suspended “between two impossible choices – two infidelities: to write and therefore to deny the deceased the right to speak or not to write,” or, on the other hand, “to send the deceased from the silence of death to the silence of forgetting” (Gana 42). Ekphrasis and prosopopoeia are similar in that they imitate something totally different to themselves, but also in that they supplant an ostensible reference with their own figurations. In mourning, prosopopoeia ironically defeats the desire to give *voice* to loss; its ekphrastic work displaces what it describes, just as the promise of mourning bears the melancholic possibility that our memories of the dead and gone are entirely our own fabrication. Before discussing NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, this chapter will take up David Dabydeen’s *Turner*.

*Turner* recognizes the force of aporetic responses to the Middle Passage and the events of the *Zong* through an ekphrastic apostrophe, a turn toward an absence described in another artistic medium’s decreation. Like any ekphrastic art, Dabydeen’s *Turner* presents different concepts of semiotic power struggling for dominance and clarity as it orients its subject matter.<sup>150</sup> The failing desires of ekphrasis are exposed through a poem that certainly *seems* to give “voice to what is absent from the painting, missing and submerged” (Döring 2002: 147). Yet the poem goes on to disturb the value of a visual

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<sup>150</sup> In *Iconology* (1986) W. J. T. Mitchell calls this a *paragonal* struggle.

culture of representations that Ruskin declared “the perfect system of all truth” and which would, if asked, promise to carry the authenticity of an absent voice (1987: 160). Thus, while the poem’s ostensible speaker is a drowned African slave who fabricates an entire life in turns pastoral and broken, idyllic and violated, his voice becomes increasingly ghostly as the specifics of narrative identity fall away, however, much as Marlow disappears from the London ship’s deck while he tells the framed narrative in *Heart of Darkness*. The poem’s only stable referent is a memory of the still-manacled foot raised in oblique protest from the sharks of Turner’s *Slave Ship* sea.



**Figure 6 and 7: J.M.W. Turner, Detail from *The Slave Ship* (1840). Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Detail from *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1555). Oil on canvas. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.**

A painting attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560s), employs a precisely parallel visual structure, and revealingly both paintings engender ekphrastic poetry. Bruegel’s painting, of course, is referred to by W.H. Auden in his “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1939) and by William Carlos Williams in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (1960). In both *Landscape* and *Slave Ship* the whole of the work turns on the same single limb lifted from the heaving sea around it; in both paintings the presence of ships that ostensibly demand the viewer’s attention – those “expensive delicate ship[s]” that “Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on” (Auden 80) – seemingly require the intervention of an ekphrastic poem to restate the situation

depicted and clarify its moral and aesthetic stakes. From a lifted limb alone, representation places a hefty weight of signification in the turn from painting to poetry. Picking up on this figuration, *Turner* crafts an absent speaker who reifies the desire of mourning-work for its lost object – the possibility of a voice stolen from death; *recovery*, in fact. However, refuting the act of representation, *Turner* escapes mourning's usual aporia by denying its speaker any specificity.

Unlike Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," *Turner* preemptively admits defeat before the force of what writers from Freud to Derrida deem the impossibility of mourning work. In the space of prosopopoeia's foreclosed desire to voice the lost, Dabydeen installs a spectropoetics that exposes "voice" as an already-dead metaphor. To do so his poem's figures turn phantasmic; as a whole, the poem *decreates* archival images and recasts the Middle Passage as a phantasm's passage. The speaker's failing ghostly voice opposes ideas that literature's power lies in its ability to "makes the ghosts of slavery *speak*," (Sharpe xii, my emphasis). This lure of recovery fails to recognize the ghostly inventions of poetic discourse and the imagination as such. Dabydeen's turn to the spectral leaves few objects of nostalgic creation to remain for an ethical *jouissance* hinging on representation's lure. But *Turner* operates in a very specific aesthetic history. It is thus necessary to first discuss its namesake, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* (1840), for the painting and the poem which follows it share a belated historicity and phantasmal relationship to the object of their referential discourse.

§ TURNER TO *TURNER*: THE SELF-TURNING SCREW; OR, ONE TURN DESERVES ANOTHER §

Turner's painting registers the difficulties of mourning work when it gives in to the lure of representation. The canvas responds to specific aesthetic distinctions between poetry and painting, where painting – distinct from the discursive assembly of poetry – has a "capacity to isolate the 'pregnant moment,' that instant in a narrative sequence which might sum up the developments of past, present and future" (Gage 187). Painting bears the documentary imprimatur of the archive. Turner's awareness of, if not his sympathy with, this idea explains his painting's long title – *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead*

*and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* – and ironizes its common abbreviation to “*Slave Ship*.” The chosen title precisely situates the painting’s environment and chronology. Yet, unhappy with the idea of the limitations of the image presented alone, Turner gave the canvas poetic lines in the voice of a cargo-shorn speculator (as Warner points out, 1994a: 2). Not for nothing does Dabydeen so closely align the ship’s captain and the painting’s creator in his own, later poem. A plaque below Turner’s painting reads:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;  
 Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds  
 Declare the Typhon’s coming.  
 Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard  
 The dead and dying – ne’er heed their chains  
 Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!  
 Where is thy market now? (qtd. in Gage 194)

In their own media, both poem and painting exploit the aesthetics of the sublime emanating from the literary Gothic of Turner’s time. Both “invest in the iconography of the slave trade while at the same time dazzling the beholder’s eye with a sublime ecstasy of light and colour” (Döring 2002, 142). The lines narrate a chronology only implicit in the painting, from the murder of enslaved Africans to an expectation of recouped market insurance. Most importantly, perhaps, the poem nuances the painting’s work of memory. It is a further failing gesture attempting to historicize the image as details proliferate but cannot compensate for the real loss of life gestured toward by poem and painting.

Between its representational scheme and attendant lines, the painting symptomizes a melancholic obsession reified by uncomprehending images. It unites the temporally disjointed artistic and financial speculators, and sells itself just as its quoted “market” would sell the murdered Africans onboard. In the end, Turner’s *Zong* does not itself resurrect the history of an event; instead, it makes its viewers complicit in its own ideological scheme of representation; “what *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* renders visible is not the Zong massacre, but – like Smith’s *Theory* and Scott’s

novels – the very mind of romantic liberalism, contemplating such things (Baucom 2005: 288). Turner’s Romanticism has much in common with that of German painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) illustrates the perspective of spectators before Turner’s *Slavers*: transcendent, above and somehow after a remote object that is either sublime, horrific, or cause for suffering, and wrapped in an idea of self impressed with its own perceived alienation.



**Figure 8: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Kunsthalle Hamburg. Oil on canvas.**

Melding the language of David Hume and Adam Smith with that of gothic duplicity in an effort to describe the view of the spectator before Turner’s painting, Baucom writes that



As the idea is to the impression in this general scheme (a less vibrant double, phantom, afterimage, or specter of an original feeling), so the “idea of the suffering of the Africans” is to the “instantaneous impression of horror” the image of the slave ship affords. The “idea” of suffering, the one thing the image was designed to create, constitutes, in other words, an untimely affective event in the experience of *the spectator*. (2005: 293)

Doubles, phantoms, spectres, untimely affective events: liberal philosophy teems with gothic language and a distinctly transhistorical conception of the imagination’s power to conceive the affects of the other. Classical liberalism fails at the very moment it operates. Behind this debate over the imaginative capacity of witnesses to artwork is a question about the relationship of an *event* to *artistry*. Turner’s *Slavers* and Dabydeen’s *Turner* reify the aesthetic of appropriation and its speculative agent through a peculiar ekphrastic act. Repeating the prior work of art, Dabydeen deconstructs its melancholic liberal suffering without replacing it with a purportedly *more* authentic subject-who-suffers. Instead, he falls back upon a form of spectro-poetics that accepts as its subject only that which exists in and through discourse: a phantasm. From *Slavers’* spectator to *Turner’s* spectre, this apostrophic evolution turns the work of art from melancholic to mournful.

Given the above, it is unsurprising that Turner’s abolitionist convictions conflict with the sheer force of his late paintings. Taken as a whole, these demonstrate a belief in the “glorious adventure and mastery” of seafaring British imperialism (Warner 1994b: 66). Canvases such as *Rockets and Blue Light* (1840) hung just across the hall from *Slavers* in the Royal Academy. Taken as an aggregate, they testify to Turner’s glorified view of empire, if qualified by occasional criticism. *Rockets* symbolizes the time and space of British power. It is, Baucom observes, “a painting of the steam age, of the new imperialism, of the current majesty of British naval power, of a present and future global order firmly *after* the age of sail, the age of slavery, and the age of interest” (2005: 292).



**Figure 9: J.M.W. Turner, *Rockets and Blue Light* (1840). Oil on canvas. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.**

Turner's painting refracts the imagery of empire so that the historical embarrassment of slavery is aligned with the technologically outdated need for human labour. His aesthetic suggestion conveniently forgets the exploitation that financed imperial industries despite the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and retroactively casts slavery as a necessary act through the ineluctable and self-justifying movement of historical progress. No better chronicler of empire can be found than Joseph Conrad's Marlow: "What redeems it [empire] is the idea only [...] not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to..." (31-32). Conrad's aesthetic symptomizes Turner's milieu.

Liverpool's history illustrates the situation well. A capital of the eighteenth-century slave trade, Liverpool is also where the *Zong* was twice debated in court since the ship's owners were prominent Liverpool slave traders. One, William Gregson, later became the city's mayor. In the words of a contemporary guide to the city, slavery was regrettably pragmatic. "As a simple moral question, considered in the abstract, it [slavery] can meet with no countenance. In a political point of view, every thing favours it" (Moss 100). Politics, guiding or guided by mercantile interests, followed the scent of profit.

Historian James Walvin calculates that Gregson alone had a stake in 152 slaving voyages carrying 58,201 Africans, of whom an estimated 49,053 survived the journey.

Even in the desolate world of slave statistics, these are astonishing figures for an individual slave merchant, and they speak not only to Gregson's commercial fortunes, but also to his entrepreneurial skills. Yet Gregson was just one personal example of the slave trading success which transformed the city of Liverpool. His rise paralleled almost exactly Liverpool's transformation from being a poor rival to Bristol, to becoming Britain's pre-eminent slave port. (Walvin 57)

It is arguable whether Turner's aesthetic or his perceived historical context triggers Dabydeen's response. Even after parsing the differences and similarities between Turner's aesthetic politics and those of his milieu, something unsettling about *Slave Ship* remains. Its evanescent liberal gesture toward any possible ethics is quickly consumed by the sheer fact of the saleable oil canvas. "To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house," John Berger argues; "If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents" (1972: 104). At its grossest level, *Slave Ship* capitalized on and sold sympathy and slavery joined in one ambitious, facile image. After its first showing, the painting was immediately purchased by John Ruskin.

§ "THE SEA DECORATES, VIOLATES" §

David Dabydeen bypasses the classic mystification of liberalism and directly addresses the nexus of sentiment, capital, and complicity. In his poem, the slave ship – an object in reality but also an object displaced in time, a chronotope – is a thing "anchored in compassion / And for profit's sake" (9). The handwringing of Turner's sentimental aesthetic is only a smokescreen for *Turner's* real target, however; the meaningful object of contention is the loss effected by history. Couched in terms of aesthetic judgement, Dabydeen's preface polemically argues that the "intensity of Turner's painting is such that I believe the artist in private must have savoured the sadism he publicly denounced." The painting's figures may neither "escape Turner's representation of them as exotic and sublime victims" nor "describe themselves anew," Dabydeen continues. They are

“indelibly stained by Turner’s language and imagery” (8). Dabydeen’s preface does not speak to the manner in which the poem casts its figures, but it is possible to read them as *phantasms*, vessels of resurrected figures in a broken tradition of representations that do not *recover* so much as decreation or undo the bound permanence of what has been lost. A phantasm, Peter Hallward writes, “explodes the coherence of its subject so as to release the non-actual potential that swarms within it” (94). Dabydeen’s critique of images of loss drawn solely from the imperial archive leaves very little possible to traditional forms of figuration and representation. The poem’s spectral voice emerges from this devastated site of ruined aesthetics to produce a pale mirror of the events referred to:

What was deemed mere food for sharks,  
 [...]
   
                   will become  
 My fable. I named it Turner  
 As I have given fresh names to birds and fish  
 And humankind, all things living but unknown,  
 Dimly recalled, or dead. (9)<sup>151</sup>

The poem’s opening already questions archival representations and challenges existing systems of nomenclature. The speaker implies a restorative effort when he manufactures “fresh names” in his self-proclaimed invention, his “fable,” that attempts to name the

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<sup>151</sup> It is fruitful to compare Dabydeen’s lines to those from Auden’s “To ask the hard question is simple” given their shared mediation on questions of the *method* of remembering as a process of ghostly properties.

And forgetting to listen or see  
 Makes forgetting easy;  
 Only remembering the method of remembering,  
 Remembering only in another way,  
 Only the strangely exciting lie,  
 Afraid  
 To remember what the fish ignored,  
 How the bird escaped, or if the sheep obeyed.  
  
 Till, losing memory,  
 Bird, fish and sheep are ghostly,  
 And ghosts must do again  
 What gives them pain. (18)

world around him in a line that can be traced through Linnaeus back to Adam and which reoccurs in much postcolonial poetry struggling to reject the cultural baggage of the English language (Coetzee 1988: 8). When Dabydeen describes the poem's speaker (the "I" of the preceding quotation) as "the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner's painting," he reveals the failures of these "fresh names."

To name the unobservable dead is an impossible task, especially if they are lost to the sea, which is why the sea emblemizes the loss endemic to signifiers. Synge's *Maurya* serves proof of this – "is it Patch or Michael or what is it at all?", she asks. Yet this yearning to humanize loss through named language is what lyric poetry expresses in a seemingly natural terminus to figurations of meaning such as prosopopoeiac apostrophes. De Man points out that anthropomorphic gestures such as prosopopoeia "freez[e] the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence that, as such, excludes all others. It is no longer a proposition but a proper name" (1984: 241). Fresh names for new poetics, maybe, but also the eternal recurrence of the same desire. One difference: Dabydeen's embittered postcolonial aesthetic allows little Romantic representationality to remain. The naturalized prosopopoeiac attribution of name to face to limb is interrupted and even haunted by its clearly counterfeit mechanism. The names that serve as propositions for "truth," as in Boland, Breytenbach, or Beckett, have not been frozen so much as they have been spectralized by memory and vision. Dabydeen's vision eventually rejects these fresh names, just as in *Turner*

the African rejects the fabrications of an idyllic past. His real desire is to begin anew in the sea but he is too trapped by grievous memory to escape history. Although the sea has transformed him [...] [t]he desire for transfiguration or newness or creative amnesia is frustrated. The agent of self-recognition is a stillborn child tossed overboard from a future ship. [...] He wants to give it life, to mother it, but the child – his unconscious and his origin – cannot bear the future and its inventions, drowned as it is in memory of ancient cruelty. (Dabydeen 7-8)

The poem lingers between positions of mourning-work. Desiring to bring the lost African's voice up from the silence of forgetting, the poem's words no more let that voice "speak" than Turner was able to illustrate its bodily absence. Both attempts replace absence with art. Thus Dabydeen can only posit a fictional "agent of self-recognition," a child of the future whose aborted, invented nature reflects the drowned speaker's own inventive enterprise in naming the world. To use the poem's first words, both are "Stillborn from all the signs" (9) and woundingly inscribed by frustrated desire. Driven back on aesthetic evaluation, Dabydeen returns to Ruskin's description of the painting's subject – the "open, illimitable sea" – as a place in which to submerge his speaker. "I float eyeless, indelibly / My mind a garment of invention" (19) the speaker explains. Once submerged in the ocean – having descended however illusorily into the unreadable archive, as discussed in relation to Synge and Walcott – the waters wash and change him:

bleached [...] of colour, /  
 Painted [...] gaudy [with] dabs of ebony,  
 An arabesque of blues and vermilions,  
 Sea-quats cling to my body like gorgeous  
 Ornaments. I have become the sea's whore,  
 Yielding. (19)

As a lapidary phrase from a previous stanza has it, "The sea decorates, violates" (15). We are not far from the way in which Shakespeare's *The Tempest* elegantly shapes the sea's transformative powers in a lush language of deathly reflection.

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
 Of his bones are coral made,  
 Those are pearls that were his eyes.  
 Nothing of him doth fade  
 But doth suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange. (1. II. 389-394)

Similarly, Turner's sublime image of the sea returns the speaker bleached and missing signs of individuation. The speaker's "voice" transforms into the phantom object of poetry's gorgeous, albeit uncanny, ornament, "something rich and strange." His body disappears as he passes into textuality – a drastic "sea-change" indeed. Ghostly echoes remain to resonate memories of Turner's sublime and brilliantly coloured, invented sea. "[E]yeless" and with an "I" produced by a "garment of invention" read as the creative fabric of textuality, the already figured speaker is reborn into art. A ghost returns for the first time. Yet there is still a reminder that this semiotic phantasmagoria cannot succeed.

From the poem's inaugural gesture where "all the signs" render mourning's desires stillborn, the poem *Turner* signals a concern with the ways in which the creative machine of language fails to carry out the desires of its users. This is not to say that it escapes signification. As Anne Carson reminds us, "the failing of the sign is itself a sign" (2012: Ep. 5). This is precisely the point: there is no escape. Signs are all that remain. In a turn from Shakespeare's pearls to the things that hold language, Dabydeen's African speaker laments that "Words are all I have left of my eyes. / Words of my own dreaming and those that Turner / Primed in my mouth" (19). Although an uneasy inheritance, words and the linguistic systems in which they circulate to gain meaning are also nevertheless the lasting ruins of lost things; words remain threshold markers of ideologies and suspicions, dreams and visions. The poem rages against Turner's (and Ruskin's) language: "*blessed, angelic, / Sublime*; words that seemed to flow endlessly / From him, filling our mouths and bellies / Endlessly" (40). The poem's dense, conceptually obscure diction and intricate imagery enact their distrust of language. Lyric poetics decreate their internal systems as if a poem could purge its imperial heritage by deconstructing the medium, figures, and images that articulate that very heritage. Dabydeen's *Turner* both relies on and resists historical cultures and authorities who "preceded and discursively dominated the very position which it must now reclaim" (Döring 2007, 40). Turner's *Slave Ship* is a convenient site of these precedents, not least because its enormous success obscures the abolitionary culture from which it draws. One turn follows another.

Signaling the terminus to its decreative project, the poem ends with a crescendo of negative potentiality. This ending effectively unmoors the poem's entire structure that had, however shakily, hitherto granted it narrative coherence. Its final stanza narrates the stillborn infant leaving the speaker and the structures of representation previously used to capture it. In a moment outside of time, the body is described as "loosening from the hook / Of my desire, drifting away from / My body of lies" (41). Here the speaker clarifies the connection between mourning's work and the torture attributed to Turner – "the hook / Of my desire" – in the falsifying work of narrative as desire reaches toward its lost object. Finally, once all is lost again, the poem's invented memories collapse. "No savannah, gods, magicians, / To heal or curse," the poem's final lines run: "No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds, / No stars, no land, no words, no community, / No mother" (42). Negative possibilities clear an aesthetic space for Dabydeen's "creative amnesia." Their demolition frustrates representation's melancholy lure.

With the final loss of mother – and, "by implication, of mother country" (Döring 2002: 167) – the creative liberation of an aesthetic *ex nihilo* that traces historical lacunae might come. The past is named and negated as "absent memories are textually present, and even in denial their past is reaffirmed through verbal acts" (Döring 2002: 167). Dabydeen calls the process a movement toward epistemological freedom through linguistic creolization. "[W]hat creolization should be," he says, is "an awareness that we are free [...] we were freed of certain traditions, knowledge's, and so on, and while we have sorrow about the loss of those, nevertheless, we are always on the threshold of originality" (2001: 202). In this spectro-poetic approach, images of lost objects are imagined only to be decreated as phantasms. Subjects of the linguistic imagination are exposed as creative figures, nothing more. For Benjamin, decreation occurs at those "moments of transition where phenomena are about to dissolve [and become] ephemeral images fading into memory" (qtd. in Teyssot 90). Passing over this threshold crosses the phantasm, a fugitive figure not of memory, but of *remembrance*.



Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris suggest that today the Middle Passage is a threshold. For those living today, its memory is a “certain kind of gateway to the new world” (Brathwaite 1993: 233), “a limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean,” and, almost, a “shared phantom limb” that facilitates the “psychic assembly or re-assembly of the muse of a people” (Harris 1999: 157, 162). Picking up on the frozen limb in Turner’s canvas, an anthropomorphic trope of the inked canvas, Dabydeen’s decreation renders this phantom limb as a shared motif between Turner’s work and his own. Each circulates in the currency of the Middle Passage, and while neither crosses the threshold, its gateway issues forth an acknowledgment of representation’s failure. The word threshold is crucial: German etymology suggests that what is *sublime* or *subliminal* is defined as what is *beneath the threshold*. The limbo of language-space extends beyond semantics. In it perch phantasms always on the verge of decreation. As a technology of abstraction and recognition, language is “the medium ... [and] to hint at a *medium* is to embrace a vision of patterns and capacities beneath and beyond every conventional game of one-sided meaning” (Harris 1967: 21). These are “uncanny lines” in Anglo-Caribbean writing that transform haunting affects into responsive literatures (Harris 1999, 249). To the optimistic eye, the “figurative movement from ghost to spirit provides a foundation for a Middle Passage poetics: ghosts trapped in repressed history and reified systems of representation are transmuted [...] into spirits whose restless energy is creative, improvisational, healing, and unifying” (Smith 2008: 417). Although the recuperative value of transformations is unsure, especially in Dabydeen’s and Philip’s work, the fundamental grounding of figures revealed to be spectral – ghosts, spirits, or decreeted assumptions in literary production and reception – holds as true as any paradox.

Dabydeen’s decreeted African voice in *Turner*, like Philip’s wrecked *Zong!* (more on this soon) exemplifies this uncanny, aseptic space. Dabydeen’s poem speaks of the indistinct passage of a phantasm lured by imaginative liberties and appropriated by the hook of mourning’s desire. Images of painting are replaced by language’s ekphrastic phantasms through a poetic that reframes the discussion of history and aesthetics as it turns from melancholia to mourning. Despair’s abyss becomes creative. Agamben

suggests that “what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost” (1993: 20). If *Turner* is in fact – to use its author’s words – not just “a great howl of pessimism about the inability to recover anything meaningful from the past,” it is at the same time “a kind of howl that is also a release into the future” (2001: 197-98). It exposes the powers of a spectral voice in a belated text. From this turn Philip pivots to present a text that rages at the failure of voice and narrative. But, before that, in *Turner* there must be a clearing of ground. Self-effacing but not self-destructive, the African slave’s ghostly voice works neither in the memories of an imperial archive nor in melancholic despair. It dwells in a creative negation of future-oriented remembrance. “No mother,” the poem ends, and negatively affirms the speaker’s ghostly status, for his mother was “neither ghost / Nor portent of a past or future life / *Such as I am now*” (24, emphasis mine). A voice that is no voice at all reveals itself as a “ghost” and “portent of a past or future life”: a phantasmic construct that visibly figures mourning. A story has been told so that it reveals itself as a poetic lie. In the ruins of the lyric voice, the bankrupt imperial archive and the losses given up as fictions, the ghost waits for hospitality. To see ghosts one must only look at the page to see memory’s outlines. Phantasms wait between the black ink and the white page for the reader’s desiring hospitality.

§ TO REMEMBER THE ZONG ONE MUST REFUSE TIME §

M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* betrays its hauntedness before a reader reaches its table of contents. *Zong!* begins with two epigraphs, of which the first, a quotation from Dylan Thomas’ “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” (1933) is a sea-drenched resurrection:

Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again.

The second takes up the spectre of justice in Hamlet’s oath of witness to the ghost:

The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite  
That ever I was born to set it right!

*Zong!*'s epigraphs gesture to the ghosts that rise out of the ocean but also to the need for the living to address the events that happened without their knowledge but which continue to influence their future. Both epigraphs convey resolve and recognize the difficulty this task entails. Both refer to the sense of madness implicit to ghosts. As in Dabydeen's *Turner*, they countenance the frustration of responding to unchangeable events. Hamlet's much discussed deliberation resemble that of an artist who hesitates before history, having realized art's inability to change the past. Time might not be changed, but its influence might be radically redressed and *refused* by ghostly rejoinders.

*Zong!* is "hauntological," Philip writes, "a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present (2008: 201). Like Dabydeen, Philip recognizes that "only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it's not told – literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning" (2008: 201). Not-telling. Anti-meaning. From anemic ghosts of potential alone, Philip seeks the space of potentiality where a story is not told. History reveals its "geography of silence" (Patke 32) with recesses and secrets the ironic witnesses to power and lies. How does poetry intercede? Where Dabydeen's epic poem drew from recognizable shapes and traditions such as Walcott's visionary *Omeros*, Philip's approach is more similar to Kamau Brathwaite's "voicing of history" (Infante 149) through the use of dissonant music and experimental forms. Brathwaite describes the "West Indian voice" as a mixed form of colonial language and "the mainly *submerged* patterns of the 'folk'" (1993: 115, my emphasis). In a different way, Philip's formal poetics of voice take up banners of disavowal and decreation since the ostensible speakers covered over by history have been, in a cruel irony, literally drowned. They cannot be reached. Nor can their disappearance be forgotten.

Decreative poetics disassemble the material world's assumed permanence in relation to fixed subjects as creatures with ideas of themselves. Disavowal rejects ideological supports and calls into question the political structures of literary production. Paired together, decreation and disavowal suggest an artistry of negative potentiality: a poetics of loss, in short, in which art carves out a space where "what could have not been

but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not” (Agamben 1999a: 270; cf. Diehl 371-380).<sup>152</sup> Disavowal confronts the clarity of received knowledge about the past with a contemporary judgement regarding unreal and impossible objects read as phantasms of desire and melancholy introspection. In this counterfactual space, conventional meanings become doubtful and ghosts ensue as figures of potential untarnished by memory’s failure. Ideology, selfhood, and formal semantics all become unstuck in the face of catastrophe, but in this poetics of loss artwork gains reparative, even recuperative power to persuasively craft possibility from the impossible. Having decreed the spaces and figures of the received past, the processes of such a work of art traces “neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather [...] their becoming possible once again” (Agamben 1999a: 267). Where Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* reveals the closeness of lyric poetry, experimental prose, and decreation, in a different way *Zong!* disavows the lyric form by subjecting the archive to decreation and remembrance. Thus Philip serves a rejoinder to a Caribbean poetics in which, as Simon Gikandi argues, “the self must come to terms with the history of its repression” (2004: 23) by decentering self and history without losing sight of justice and historical repression.

Philip’s earlier poetry reveals an incisive linguist’s knife that pares constructions in language to their bare elements which she then proceeds to invest with rhythmic propulsion and vivacity. As a result, her poems “jump off the page,” Patke observes; “the printed word ask[s] to be heard as sound and pulse [...] bruised language becomes in itself a new expressive device, at once injury and anodyne” (35). While accurate, these oft-used terms – expressive, bruised, asking, jumps – describe an agency indicative of readerly investment in a text’s agency, itself a linguistic illusion. Such words witness the ghost of voices calling for medical aid and cast in an iron rejection of colonial history and

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<sup>152</sup> Although Peter Hallward goes to some lengths to distinguish the decreation of Simone Weil’s thought from the counter-actualization of Gilles Deleuze, Deleuze’s thought in *Cinema 1* – which Hallward calls the “pivotal question” (4) – seems remarkably similar to Anne Carson’s idea that decreation “is an undoing of the creature in us – that creature enclosed in self and defined by self” (2005: 179). Deleuze’s question is simple: “How can we rid ourselves of ourselves, and demolish ourselves?” (1986: 66). Thus, as Hallward concedes, the projects of Weil and Deleuze are not in fact so different (86). For Alessia Ricciardi, Weil is similar to Agamben in their shared belief that “decreation involves a renunciation of the principle of reason,” if with diverging prospective outcomes (2009: 81).

debilitation. The temporal disjunction of language becomes a tool “to articulate the silence of a fictive origin” (Patke 37) enfolded in the phantasmatic power of “image-making” (Philip 79) but also in its undoing: ekphrastic decreation. Ultimately, Philip takes poetry’s ekphrastic power as a radical power to shape a haunting reminder of the past through dislocation and startling complexity. In the disjunction between historical events, personal experiences, and artistic works, the *topoi* of the formally inexpressible beckon. Few such are as consistent as ghosts in the refusal to speak from a dubious ontological or epistemological status. But the ghost is a figure, not a genre, and so approaches to the Middle Passage have taken different but equally inexpressive forms: J.M.W. Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* reworks the classic landscape portrait; David Dabydeen’s *Turner* draws on epic poetry, mediated through modern expectations of length and lyric density, as does Philip’s *Zong!*; and Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* disrupts the discourse of narrative fiction through metafictional disease. Hauntedness is common to each, if along different formal lines. Each deals in questions of ekphrasis and events. To do so, the poems decreate the formal sharpness of images to achieve a poetic power of inexpressivity and haunting desire.

Although resolutely anti-lyric in form, *Zong!* nevertheless shares the lyric’s affective trajectory as it positions itself through and against spectres of the past: it moves from the melancholia of conjuring ghosts to the mourning that incorporates them into the fabric of poetic expression. The movement rejects singular and unique selfhood in order to question ideological constructions of the material present. To accomplish these goals, the poem paradoxically, or, more precisely, hauntologically speaks through a thing that refuses to speak. The poem’s words are drawn from the corpus of legal documents that discuss the insurance trials. Its material is exactly that of imperial history’s self-constituting archive. Even recirculated, the poem’s words “stray[s] far from historical revisionist accounts of the massacre by returning to its archive [...] and literally pulling [it] apart,” Fehskens notes: “[t]his disorganizational fiat counsels with the supreme trope of order, the literary catalogue, to produce a non-narratable expression of and response to the *Zong* massacre” (422). Capitalizing on the imagistic power of language unhinged from

its grammatical structures and dislocated from the lure of narrative, *Zong!* employs the disavowed powers of the lyric in sympathy with the remembered, absent bodies of the lost, all triangulated through the unacceptable remnants of the archive.

§ ZONG! CHANT! SHOUT! ULULATE! MOAN! MUTTER! HOWL! SHRIEK! SONG! §

An unlikely formal candidate, the list serves *Zong!* well as an organizing trope with its often unrecognizably anarchic undertow. Taking her poem's words from a list created through the archive of legal documents allows Philip to reject lyric subjectivity by drawing on another of poetry's specific resources, namely, the epic catalogue. Foucault gleefully observed that Borges saw in the list's fundamental disjunction a logical joke (1970: xv). Yet lists are also the work of frustration, desperation, or expressive elegance, and their documentary appeal is often employed to countenance the sublime of failing language. Umberto Eco, in an interview with Susanne Beyer for *Der Spiegel*, compares the relationship of lists to the expression of a witness before singularity; crucially, for him a list is the reaction of a person who experiences "a deficiency of language, a lack of words to express their feelings" but who nevertheless continues to try, and so comes up with lists (n.p.). When unable to describe a thing, a person often resorts to listing its perceived attributes. Acts of itemization lead to capital appropriations of said attenuated features, for when delineated as discrete items objects can be more easily bought and sold. In turn, this stolen salesmanship recalls Carson's definition of the sublime and the indescribable as a form of banditry that has stolen your senses from you. Lists are the first and last resort of descriptions and systems of order. For many, the response to the question of 'What does something look like?' is to provide a list. For *Zong!*, Philip breaks apart lyric poetry with the cacophony and disorientation a list entails when extended beyond comfort. Like photography, the lists of epic poetry stop time; they carve from narrative progression the latitude of genealogy, cartography, space and time. And yet, given *Zong!*'s declared intent to "snap the spine of time" (141), the poem "destroys the skeleton on which the body of time hangs [...] and the catalogue mode that haunts *Zong!* enacts its final, accretive, non-ordering, and non-narrative revenge" (Fehskens 421). Disordered by its variations of order and separated into five major movements – *Os*, *Sal*, *Ventus*, *Ratio*,

and *Ferrum – Zong!*'s lists raise the ghosts that haunt every trace left by the events on board the ship. And yet they continue to work within the globalization of affect and imaginative currency in which writers as different as Fugard, Kani, Ntshona, Dabydeen, and Baucom attribute history's ills, and which generates the brand of globalgothic regime of themes and figures that diverges from gothic traditions more generally. As Philip says, "so much of what we're living with today is linked to that first experience in globalization where the currency of globalization was the black body" (qtd. in Saunders 76). The list as a form proves complicit with the media of tabulation that circulate such currency. Against its hegemonic powers of ordering and deracination, Philip poses the oral force of song and lyric intensity.

Despite the poem's insistence on textuality and anti-lyric listing, performances of *Zong!* are oral events that employ audiences to contribute vocal support and create a polyvocalic event. Equally as important, Philip's concluding essay on the poem ends by observing the closeness of "Song" and "Zong," a near-cryptonym virtually hiding the lyric dream in the haunting space of the ship: "*Zong!* is chant!", Philip writes, "Shout! And ululation! *Zong!* is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* is 'Pure utterance.' *Zong!* is Song! [...] the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its untelling" (207). Using formal descriptors that resurrect the terms Kamau Brathwaite employed for the intensities of English in the Caribbean, Philip mobilizes intensity in the service of an archetypical lyric, the Song that can speak of survival through decreation and language; it is, she writes, "what has kept the soul of the African intact when they 'want(ed) water ... sustenance... preservation'" (207). Along these lines, the names written across the pages of *Zong!*, largely of Shona and Yoruba descent with others Arabic, Kikuyu, and Akan, make for a virtual song of Pan-Africanism. While performing the text, these names are recited as the poet reads her lines in a fragmented series of almost-images.

At first, *Zong!* seems to be mono- or di-glossically organized. But read otherwise, its scattering of text across the page resembles nothing other than a sowing over fields: carefully organized yet untraceably ordered to the casual eye. In the context of its textual

organization and performances, it opens into a staggering inventory of languages, lists, appendices, fonts, and arrangements united by an insistence on an asemic song. These choices almost mimetically relate to significant features of the *Zong* events. The verticality and order of words in the last two sections, for instance, “corresponds to the vertical position of bodies as they are brought on deck and hurled into the ocean”; meanwhile, in the rest of the sections the horizontally distributed words reflect “the floating and drifting bodies, no longer coherent and contained, that cover the ocean surface and floor as they are thrown from the *Zong*” (Fehskens 420). Disparately disposed, listing crazily, a shipwreck in all but name, the white space of *Zong!* covers over memories of the sea.

Take, for example, *Zong!* #20. While it is difficult to reproduce sections of Philip’s text, this short passage conceptualizes the space of loss articulated between legal discourses, the lost event of history, and the current of life that still sustains them:

this necessity of loss  
 this quantity of not  
 perils underwriters  
                   insurers  
                                   of  
   the throw in circumstance  
   the instance in attempt  
   the attempt in voyage  
   the may in become  
                                   in  
 the between of day  
                                   a sea of negroes  
                                   drowned  
   live  
                                   in the thirst (35)



Black text will not replace murdered black bodies. Ever-present are the ghosts that survive decreation and that continue to gesture in their songlike intensities to the survival of remembrance and the desire of memory in spite of historical loss. The witness of ghost photography before narrative is nothing less than an image imagined from an occluded sound – a knock, a whisper, a rustle, or a shout – after which all stories will follow, haunted by their traces of origin and rapidly interpolated into meaning. To undo the set narratives of history words themselves must scatter from the archive to find space and be able once more to breathe – to take sustenance, and not death, from water once more.

## 4 Conclusions

To see the ghostly outline of an old landscape is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths.

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (1995)

The media in which artists entrust their work resist interpretation's violent demand for translucency through various figures. Few, however, have a cultural resonance and power to equal that demonstrated by ghosts. Spaces of relation, like systems of language that articulate identities and relationships, challenge the ongoing translation of sight, identity, and emotion that makes up communication. These spaces and systems articulate modernity's compressed alienation and haunting sense of reflection. The great offering of poets and dramatists whose work proves haunting, whether in tellings which we make narrative or in inhuman events to which we bear witness, is that they reflect on this resistance while still conveying the desire of communication across linguistic media. Writers give thought to myriad representations of the modern world and address themselves to articulating relationships between what is human and what isn't, what is seen and what can't be. Unlike the strong theories of critics and scholars, the theoretical burdens of poetry and drama leave openings for their readers and audiences who might interpret but who also might embody and enact meaning, thus making of theory a form of practice. In this way, hauntings and ghosts can be articulated in their diverse and changing roles that predominantly circulate around the role of perception and the possibilities of sight. Why is the unseen ghostly? Because it is haunting. This is only another way of saying that it lingers beyond or before its seen or anticipated presence. To

witness a ghost, or to watch its story told before you, is to take part in an economy of signs, symbols, and thought with both a history and a future – but darkly envisaged.

The language we use is never really a mistake. A precise term, the ghost invokes the gothic of everyday life as the inverse to clarity and definition and the resistance to truths and messages interpreted into systems of power and authority. Less a traditional gothic trope, the ghost is at once more and less useful. Its traces a ripple in the pool of language that crosses the Atlantic from the Caribbean to Ireland and moves southward on oceanic currents to South African shores, but it extends and retreats in circles beyond these too. Like the night, ghosts are all around us. Much as in a memory of darkness when the lights are turned on, to see ghosts is to remember the lineaments of absence, the shape of secrets, the ligatures between revelations and hiddenness. “That which is veiled, that which is closed in itself is the only content of the revelation,” Agamben writes. It follows then that “light is only the coming to itself of the dark” (1995: 119). But a ghost is not quite darkness. “Those who think they see ghosts are those who do not want to see the night,” Maurice Blanchot writes. “They crowd it with the terror of little images; they occupy and distract it by immobilizing it – stopping the oscillation of eternal starting over. It is empty, it is not; but we dress it up as a kind of being; we enclose it, if possible, in a name, a story and a resemblance” (1993: 163). To figure what can be called the night, a ghost, like the sea (to select only two of the images that trope the substance of nothing), makes recourse to so many imagistic and narrative defenses: poetry’s ekphrasis and prosopopoeia, drama’s intimate tellings, or art’s sensory conjuring.

#### § WHY GHOSTS? §

If this work *concludes* with any major observation, beyond the discussions that pertain to specific literary figures, traditions, and citational histories, it is that the role of poetics in imaginative constructions can be powerfully decreative, and that literature creates much of its intensity from the ability to say “no” to existing structures in the interest of openness, having effectively called attention to the fact that it is telling an illusory story, as in a performance, or by bearing witness to an experiment without truth, as in poetry. One

of the ways in which this happens is through the appearance of ghosts and the feeling of being haunted: since these are technical properties drawn from language as such in its peculiar form of abstraction, and since they often draw from gothic or gothic-seeming discourses, the *globalgothic* proves a hospitable roof under which these works might all shelter. The inhuman, nonproductive, or even perverse spaces which sometimes result resemble the related critical gestures made by discourses and figures such as queer studies or *Bartleby the Scrivener*, as they question and disrupt the ways in which metaphysical claims *justify* their relationships with the world in the interest of those ill served by naturalized metaphysical claims or meta-biological agents.

Two major conclusions follow: uncertainty is inheritly unstable, but it will reorient and rephrase thought and imagination. Ghosts fracture the serenity of metaphysical justifications for being – or they might at least make tactical spaces where a decreative poetics might enmesh narrative strategies of interpretation within structures that always fail to carry out the claims of meaning. Such claims are exceeded and fail, for they are not geometrical but imaginative. Splitting these claims between poetry and drama highlights the different genres' purchase in technological media and requires different heuristics for each, since readers and audiences find themselves differently positioned in the metaphysical work of representation. The lesson of the theatre is that we are paralyzed before the ghost – but during paralysis we might howl and cry and laugh and, later, somehow become reconciled with time and history. The lesson of poetry is that language has the power to undo the crystalized patterns of defense and retreat within us. These entirely unstated movements subtend the structures of power and subjectivity otherwise perceptible in the world outside. To witness a ghost is to find refuge in a world constrained by power but free from the shackles that enclose the night. Or it might be to feel haunted by fury, to trace and finger a wound. Both of these possibilities are held within genres that speak of their undoing.

Language exists in a space of performance and comfort wherein its users and witnesses can watch thinking and acting occur. Actors act for you: they tell you of hauntings as their performative actions support a mutual illusion. Obviously not what it

is, such dramatic performances articulation the truth of illusion, but they come up with their own resistance to acts of allegorical or critical interpretation. Performances of poetry stage a séance in which the ghost acts in ways expected of it. If witnessing in legal pledging and amid the juridical imperative bears the “responsibility of truth” as Shoshona Felman puts it, I contend that in poetry, witnessing takes responsibility for something different: the *experiment without truth*. For in moments of epistemological crisis – at which the intensity of language rises to a fever-pitch – when the ghost is asked if it is real, it resists. The answer must be “no.” What happens to such intensities in language outside of their event horizon? For Agamben, they fall apart and thus eject readers from the possibility of comprehension: “The double intensity animating language does not die away in a final comprehension; instead it collapses into silence, so to speak, in an endless falling” (1999b: 115). The revelation changes little. Audiences, critics, and readers will create meaning from this negative expose of illusion. Poetics might find another use, one where poetry is the wave in which language curls, the long fetch of the sea that travels the distance from its origins under the wind to where it founders on shore. A poem: what is it but a wave that undoes the line that carries it? This heuristic of poetics would be not a revolution “but a way of knowing why it must come,” as Adrienne Rich writes in “Dreamwood” (1993: 136). A fearsome involution: decreation might undo the strictures within an animal’s body. It might address a ghost without intercession or narrative. What has been will come again, but for the first time. Decreation might address the “revenant [who] keeps watch / over the dead and the living” (Heraclitus fr. 123). Be fearless. New ghost stories will emerge through the ceaseless transformations and interpretative violence that reshape identities. In communities, we participate in the intimate illusion of drama – the darker the lights, the closer the stage, the more real the inhuman is – performance tells us who we are. In poetry we can return to the sites of language in which such stories might be decreated, and in which the strictures of history can be undone. In this way a new future will unfold.

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## Curriculum Vitae

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**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Western Ontario  
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University of Saskatchewan  
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**Honours and Awards:** Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2011-2012, 2012-2013 (declined), 2014-2015

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)  
Doctoral Fellowship  
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Sara Marie Jones Memorial Scholarship (UWO)  
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Western Graduate Research Scholarship (UWO)  
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Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)  
J.A. Bombardier CGS Master's Scholarship  
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Rose Litman Medal in the Humanities (U of S)  
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R.A. Wilson Memorial Scholarship (U of S)  
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University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Scholarship  
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James Hannon Estate Scholarship (U of S)  
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**Related Work  
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Instructor  
University of Western Ontario  
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Instructor  
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Lead Graduate Teaching Assistant  
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Graduate Teaching Assistant  
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2009-2010 (Dalhousie), 2010-2013 (UWO)

**Publications:**

“The Haunted Ocean: Mourning Language in Synge and Walcott.” Book chapter. *Caribbean / Irish Connections*. Eds. Alison Donnell, Evelyn O’Callahan, and Maria McGarrity. University of West Indies Cave Hill University Press, 11 May 2015. 203-220.

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