Towards a Definition of the Victorian Ghost

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the definition of the Victorian ghost story by defining the specific kind of ghost that is typical for the genre. It is not enough to define a ghost story through the mere presence of a ghost or a supernatural event, since that would also include other genres such as fairy tales, legends, folklore and mystery stories. Furthermore, the entities that appear in stories up to the eighteenth century are significantly different from the new kind of ghost that emerges only in the nineteenth century. In order to define the Victorian ghost, I turn to Jacques Derrida's theory of the spectre as articulated in Spectres of Marx. *I argue that the specific characteristics he considers to be key to the spectre, most importantly its ability to destabilize both ontology and semantics, may be used to set apart the Victorian ghost from other kinds of ghosts. Furthermore, such a definition also means that events or entities which are not supernatural in nature but fulfil the same role as the Derridean spectre may be included within the definition of the Victorian ghost story, which would significantly redraw the boundaries of the genre.*

Keywords

Victorian ghost story, ghost, spectre, Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*

Victorian ghost stories have in the last fifty years come to the wider attention of literary scholars. Nevertheless, they are most often studied selectively and only in the light of certain topics such as colonialism, religion, economics or gender, while little effort has been made to provide a definition of the genre as a whole.[1] The first logical step towards defining the genre is to define the ghost, an element that is often taken for granted in such stories despite the fact that it may be represented in radically different ways. Furthermore, supernatural entities appear in other types of texts as well. In his own attempt to lay the coordinates for the genre of the fantastic, José Monleon points out that "supernaturalism […] is at once the most obvious and the most ignored aspect of fantastic literature."[2] It is clear that "a story that contains a supernatural event" is a woefully inadequate definition which encompasses not only ghost stories but also legends, fairy tales, folklore, fantasy and various other genres. Furthermore, such a delineation excludes instances of narratives whose events are revealed not to be supernatural, but they may be serviceably considered ghost stories as well. Julian Wolfreys argues that "haunting is irreducible to the apparition. The spectral or uncanny effect is not simply a matter of seeing a ghost."[3] How then does one define the ghost in these Victorian stories so that the classification not only excludes certain types of spiritual entities that exist as part of different genres, but also includes certain apparitions that turn out to have natural explanations, as well as supernatural events/beings that are not in fact ghosts but that function in the narrative in the same way? This article turns to Jacques Derrida's theories regarding the

1 For a discussion in terms of economics and colonialism see Simon Hay, *History of Modern British Ghost Story* (2011) and Andrew Smith *The Ghost Story, 1840–1920: A Cultural History* (2012). Gender focused readings can be found in Vanessa Dickerson's *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (1996) and Kate Krueger's *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850–1930* (2014). Religion is discussed in Zoë Lehmann Imfeld's *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology* (2016) and Jen Cadwallander's *Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction* (2016).

2 José Monleon, *A Spectre is Haunting Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 15.

3 Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 6.

spectre in order to rethink the definition of a Victorian ghost story and to provide several features that are specific to the ghosts that appear in this genre as opposed to other past and present texts.

At the outset of *Spectres of Marx* (1993), Derrida defines the spectre:

> It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, "this thing," but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [qui nous regarde], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy.[4]

The central point of the definition of the spectre seems to be that it subverts the conventional idea of knowledge. This is done in two ways – first of all, the ghost defies "ontology" by existing in between the traditional categories of "alive" or "dead," "past" or "present," "present" or "absent." Secondly, it defies "semantics" by having no obvious purpose and stating no reason for its presence. Both these characteristics can well be applied to the entities that haunt Victorian ghost stories and whose primary function does not seem to be to impart information or to threaten the protagonists but simply to challenge their ideas about reality and logic. Derrida's central characteristic of a spectre as something "one does not know"[5] can be linked to a key feature of the fantastic genre as described by Tzvetan Todorov in 1970. Todorov proposes hesitation as the defining trait of the fantastic, stating that the reader's (and possibly also the characters') judgement has to be suspended between two options: the uncanny – something unlikely but explainable through natural laws; or the marvellous – something supernatural but accepted as an "integral part of reality."[6] The ghosts that appear in Victorian ghost stories are meant to cause uncertainty, which is why both their purpose and origin can only be speculated about by the characters. The main conflict in Victorian ghost stories often turns on the characters' doubt and hesitation connected with their inability to 'exorcise' the ghost by explaining it, be it by human agency, a scientific law or a physical disorder, and on their questioning of the meaning of the apparition.

These characteristics separate Victorian ghosts from their precursors. Many authors note that in stories that predate the nineteenth century, ghosts usually appear with a specific purpose. In medieval times, ghosts were clearly divided according to their aim and origin: "in simple terms, ghosts from purgatory came to ask for help and ghosts from hell, to warn. The help should be granted; the warnings should be heeded."[7] As late as 1727, the author of *The History and Reality of Apparitions*, later discovered to be Daniel Defoe, continues the practice of classifying apparitions according to their mission: "the evil spirit, devil like, comes to deceive, he is the father of lies; and comes to do hurt, he is a lover and the author of mischief. The good spirit is from God, the fountain

4 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

5 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx,* 5.

6 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.

7 Gwenfair Walters Adams, *Visions in Late Medieval England* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 20.

of all good, and appears always for good and merciful purposes."[8] The same rules seem to apply to ghost narratives published throughout eighteenth century. In a 1757 story called "P-b-gh's Ghost: Or a Veteran's Vision, written by himself," published in *Newcastle general magazine*, the ghost of Earl of Peterborough possesses the form, speech and motivations of a living person, telling the protagonist: "you must know that in the other world we retain the same affections with which we depart out of this; we pursue the same amusements and follow the same studies."[9] He explains himself at length and demands specific information necessary for completing his "errand."[10] Another similarly purposeful ghost can be found in "Singular History of a Ghost," published in 1793 in *The Edinburgh magazine*, in which a witness in a court case testifies to being visited by an apparition who he had at first mistaken for his friend until "it told him it was Serjeant Davies, and desired him to go to a place it pointed out to him in the Hill of Christie, where he would find its bones" to be buried.[11] These ghosts not only have a clearly stated mission, but they also look and behave exactly the same as a living person.

Derrida separates a spirit or ghost in general from the spectre, indicating that the difference consists in "a supernatural and paradoxical phenomenality, the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible, or an invisibility of a visible X […] it is also, no doubt, the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of someone as someone other."[12] What stands out is the paradoxicality of the spectre – its refusal to conform to the accepted rules of reality. It is visible but not quite, or invisible when one would expect to see it clearly. It is someone other, but it does not identify itself and the ghost-seer is hesitant – the vision is something "that [he] will not hasten to determine as self, subject, person, consciousness, spirit, and so forth."[13] This definition seems to rule out a ghost that acts consistently as a living person, or one that permits close scrutiny that will fix and explain it. In fact, Derrida emphasises the fact that "this spectral *someone other* looks at us,"[14] presumably while resisting our efforts to look at it, to examine it. Interestingly, long before Jacques Derrida's involvement with these terms, an anonymous story published in 1864 in *All the Year Round* offers its own differentiation between "spectres" and "ghosts." The narrator states that "spectres are the aristocracy of ghosts. If 'Hodge,' passing through the village church-yard late at night, happens to think he sees 'something white' which frightens him out of what he calls his wits, he does not say he has seen a spectre, he speaks and thinks of what he saw as a ghost."[15] It is unclear whether he means that spectres are better than ghosts because they are less easily dismissed, or because they present a clearer visible image, or because the ghost-seer is more intellectually capable. Nevertheless, the apparition that he goes on to describe has much in common with Derrida's spectre. He goes on to relate his own experience of seeing the form of his deceased friend in his accustomed chair while writing letters late at night. His first reaction is

8 Daniel Defoe, *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (Oxford: D.A. Talboys, 1840), 190.

9 "P-b-gh's Ghost: Or a Veteran's Vision, written by himself," *Newcastle general magazine* (Nov 1757): 637.

10 "P-b-gh's Ghost: Or a Veteran's Vision, written by himself", 691.

11 "Singular History of a Ghost," *The Edinburgh magazine, or Literary miscellany* (Jun 1793): 461.

12 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 6.

13 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 6.

14 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 6.

15 "The Ghost of Mr. Senior," *All the Year-Round 11. 252* (20 February 1864): 34.

to be "startled" and to consider the ghost a product of his own mind, saying "as soon as I could collect my thoughts I got up, and feeling that there must be some delusion, went and stirred the fire, hoping to divert my mind from the subject." The apparition indeed disappears temporarily, only to reappear after a few moments: "there he sat again, as distinct as if in bodily presence." The narrator then decides to treat the ghost as the actual person and asks, "Can I do anything for you?"[16] The "spectre" refuses to communicate, remaining an infuriatingly unreadable sign, prompting the narrator to retreat to his bedroom. Later he comes up with a scientific account of the apparition as a result of optical illusion using Dr Samuel Hibbert's theory of "recollected images,"[17] which states that it is possible to remember an image so strongly that it in fact appears on the retina of the eye. The ghost is thus no longer spectral, having been successfully exorcised and banished into the realm of the scientific theory which the narrator decides to credit. Still, the reader may realize that the explanation that the narrator decides to impose on the silent apparition is designed to lend him peace of mind, while during the actual haunting he had unsteadily wavered between "hallucination and perception,"[18] and his efforts to investigate the apparition were hindered by its silence and its "fading away"[19] before he could get to it. One may perhaps sum up the difference between the ghost and spectre as the difference between the ontological conception the ghost in the previous centuries, when the existence, i.e. the *being* of the ghost as such, was not questioned. Thus the focus was on the purpose of the entity as compared to the new nineteenth century conception of a ghost in epistemological terms in which the main question is the nature of the ghost rather than its purpose or actions.

It is in keeping with the epistemological conception of the ghost that the source of fear in Victorian ghost stories is usually not the behaviour of the apparition, which rarely poses a physical threat, but the very existence of something that escapes the characters' accustomed methods of attaining knowledge. Derrida points out that "if there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt [the] reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth."[20] Similar doubts are what torments the characters in Victorian ghost stories, all the more potent for the fact that, although the characters usually choose to adhere to some particular explanation for the ghost (often at the cost of ignoring evidence to the contrary), the endings of the stories often leave room for the reader to doubt the proposed solution. Wolfreys points out that "the condition of haunting and spectrality is such – that one cannot assume coherence of identification or determination. Epistemological modes of enquiry implicitly or explicitly dependent in their trajectories and procedures on the apparent finality and closure of identification cannot

16 "The Ghost of Mr. Senior," 35.

17 Dr Samuel Hibbert, *Sketches of the philosophy of apparitions; or, An attempt to trace such illusions to their physical causes* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1825), 246.

18 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 170.

19 "The Ghost of Mr. Senior," 35.

20 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 48.

account for the idea of the spectral."[21] This holds true for the modes of inquiry that the characters in Victorian ghost stories choose to employ, chief among them being observation.

Observation was key to knowledge for the Victorians and thus the characters in their ghost stories invariably attempt to *see* the ghost, observe it in order to know it. Derrida underscores the importance of a certain materiality of the spectre, emphasizing that unlike the spirit, which can be a mere bodiless idea, the spectre very much appears in a (pseudo)physical form:

> the spectre is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the spectre.[22]

Unlike the ghost in folk tales or legends which usually appears and behaves just like the person it used to be with the same motivations and desires, the ghost in Victorian stories becomes a disquieting, unreadable image, spectral in the sense that although it may resemble a person, it is clearly not the same person it had been in life. Julian Wolfreys argues that

> To 'see' something is, however precariously, to initiate a process of familiarization, of anthropomorphizing domestication. The spectral or haunting movement which opens the 'gap' already there is far more troubling because, despite the apparent fact of perception, the estranging materiality of the spectral persists in its disturbance, even though we can acknowledge its effect at the limit of comprehension.[23]

The ghost is troubling because it is visible but not in the same way as everyday objects are. It plays into the characters' uncertainties by not conforming to the established laws of optics, e.g. appearing in perfectly dark rooms, remaining unseen in full light, and generally subverting the idea that truth can be reached by careful observation. It disrupts the order of things by its presence, by appearing physically there but not there at the same time. It refuses to yield to the supposedly scientific and objective gaze of the observer and engenders doubts about sight as means to knowledge.

Another layer of doubt with regard to seeing the ghost was created with the advent of psychology and various theories about how vision can be influenced by the mental, emotional and even physical state of the observer. Derrida points out that "the subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see."[24] This statement could easily be used as a tagline for the Victorian ghost story genre. The disquieting effect of the ghosts in these tales is compounded by the fact that the characters are aware that they might be victims of hallucinations or of a defect of vision caused by a bodily illness. The protagonists often cite contemporary medical or scientific theories which, instead of throwing light on the issue, only increase the uncertainty.

21 Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, x.

22 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 5.

23 Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, 6.

24 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 169–170.

Broadly speaking, some sort of science or accepted knowledge of the world needs to exist for people to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Several authors make this point, for example José Monleon states that "not until nature became objectified, and not until the supernatural was equated with the unnatural, could fantastic literature emerge."[25] A similar argument could be made about the advent of a ghost that is spectral in Derrida's sense. For there to be the possibility of this deep questioning of the nature of reality, the hesitation between hallucination and perception and the uncertainty that comes with it, the mind had to be described in terms of the newly emerging discipline of psychology. The mind had to be found to have the potential to deceive the observer, as is described by Terry Castle.

> The rationalists did not so much negate the traditional spirit world as displace it into the realm of psychology. Ghosts were not exorcised – only internalized and reinterpreted as hallucinatory thoughts. Yet this internalization of apparitions introduced a latent irrationalism into the realm of mental experience. If ghosts were thoughts, then thoughts themselves took on – at least notionally – the haunting reality of ghosts. The mind became subject to spectral presences […] by relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalising the mind itself.[26]

The spectral ghosts are impossible to contain, and instead of becoming neutralized, spectralize the space to which they were meant to be banished. In connection to this, it is worth considering Derrida's assertion that man is "the most 'unheimlich' of all ghosts,"[27] referring to Freud's concept of the uncanny: "It is the word of irreducible haunting or obsession. The most familiar becomes the most disquieting. The economic or egological home of the oikos, the nearby, the familiar, the domestic or even the national (Heimlich) frightens itself. It feels itself occupied, in the proper secret (Geheimnis) of its inside, by what is most strange, distant, threatening."[28] In many Victorian ghost stories, the characters indeed frighten themselves. Their mind becomes haunted by the very idea of the existence of a ghost, and it becomes *unheimlich* because of the possibility that it is the mind itself that is producing the apparition. I would argue that for the Victorians, the spectral haunted not only the mind through psychology but also the body through medicine and rational scientific discourse as a whole. This made it entirely possible for Dr Hesselius of J.S. Le Fanu's story "Green Tea" (1872) to decide that his patient, Reverend Jennings, is being haunted by a vision of a blasphemous monkey due to his excessive consumption of something as seemingly innocent as green tea.[29] Perhaps this kind of pervasiveness could be considered one of the key features of this specific ghost. Unlike legends, fairy tales or folklore, where the ghosts appear only to play the role delineated by their purpose for the story and are often anthropomorphized to the point of being indistinguishable from actual living characters, nineteenth-century ghost stories make the presence of the ghost fully occupy the mind of the protagonist, cause anxiety and doubt, and prevent easy dismissal.

25 Monleon, *A Spectre is Haunting Europe,* 8.

26 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 161.

27 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 181.

28 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 181.

29 Sheridan Le Fanu, "Green Tea," *Great Irish Short Stories* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2004).

William Moy Thomas's ironically named "A True Account of an Apparition" (1852) is an example of a story that produces this kind of spectral effect even though in the end the ghost is discovered to have a rational (although rather far-fetched) explanation. The protagonist, a student in Paris at the wintery time of carnival preceding Lent, decides to seclude himself in his room in order to apply himself to his studies. Despite his best efforts to concentrate, he becomes distracted by an odd unidentifiable sound which takes over his thoughts as he attempts to analyse it into something recognizable. This shows the kind of mindset that is disturbed by the idea of something inexplicable, spectral in the sense of disrupting the narrator's sense of the normal, i.e. a sound must have a discernible origin. He is paralyzed by his speculations to the point of letting the fire die down and not lighting a lamp, sitting in the darkening room, watching objects become indistinct as the evening comes on. Straining and failing to pinpoint the origin of the mysterious sound, the narrator is mesmerized by it and unable to ignore it to the point that he worries about "some injury to [his] mind."[30]

He then hears a noise in an empty room connected to his own, which leads him to further speculation; he recollects having heard from the Concierge "that Danton, memorable among the tyrants of the Revolution – had lived in a room in that house." From here, it is a small step for the narrator to assume "that it was in that very room that Danton (affecting, as was common with the revolutionary leaders, an appearance of poverty) had dwelt." A male figure indeed appears in the door, "deadly pale" with "fixed and sunken" eyes, however, it defies expectation since it "bears no resemblance to the portraits of Danton" and instead is the very image of "the great fanatical Jacobin, Maximillian Robespierre." The figure is only visible for a moment before the candle is extinguished. Then the narrator hears footsteps going to the landing but no further, leaving him to wonder "was I to believe my senses?"[31] The boundary between asleep and awake, seeing and imagining, real and unreal becomes dangerously blurred as the narrator considers explanations ranging from dreaming to hallucination to a practical joke played by his fellow students. Finally, he shakes off his paralysis and decides to face the apparition head on, at which point he discovers the improbable explanation for his ghost – a new tenant has been given the room without his knowledge; a fellow student who, incidentally, bears a striking resemblance to Robespierre, and is preparing for a costumed ball. The natural explanation of the ghost (notwithstanding the fact that the original source of the narrator's unease, the "murmuring noise" is not in fact explained) does not detract from the spectral effect that prevails throughout the most part of the story – the narrator is made to doubt his reality and to question the soundness of his own mind by something (at least at the time) inexplicable. The "ghost" defies his explanations, not even having the decency to appear in the form of the Revolutionary who had actually lived in the house and thus invest itself with some logic or potential purpose. Its uncanny effect prevails for a moment even after it turns out to be flesh and blood, when the narrator is "struck so forcibly" with the "unaccountable resemblance"[32] to Robespierre that he cannot help but start back. Thus, I would argue that the

30 William Moy Thomas, "A True Account of an Apparition," *Household Words 5.105* (27 March 1852): 29.

31 Thomas, "A True Account of an Apparition," 30.

32 Thomas, "A True Account of an Apparition," 32.

story features a spectre or perhaps several in the Derridean sense, even though it does not present a supernatural entity.

Therefore, when considering a definition of the Victorian ghost story as a genre, it seems appropriate to ascribe to it a specific kind of ghost, one that is spectral in Derrida's sense, even though it may not be a ghost in the traditional sense of an apparition of a deceased person among the living. It may be said that the "ghost" of Victorian ghost stories is spectral in that it makes the characters doubt their reality; it disrupts their assumptions about the nature of life and death, presence and absence and so on. Another feature connected to this is the ghost's lack of clear purpose or motivation – instead of returning from beyond to fulfil a specific mission, the ghost remains an ambiguous sign. Furthermore, the ghost is presented as uncanny – both in the sense that it appears human but at the same time not quite in the form of a real person ("the estranging materiality"[33] in Julian Wolfreys' terms) and in the sense that it haunts the mind of the protagonist with the possibility that it may only exist in his or her mind. Whether the apparition is in the end revealed to be truly supernatural, or a product of human agency or an optical illusion is irrelevant – as long as it produces the spectral effect, it fits the definition. It is necessary to note that the traditional ghost figure, i.e. one that retains the same characteristics, wishes and motivations as in life and does not induce uncertainty regarding its identity, has not disappeared from Victorian fiction. However, this type of ghost predominantly appears in stories which lean more towards the genre of legend, fairy tale or morality tale and in which the ghost is not the main point of the story but rather a device that moves the plot forward. For example, in "The Ghost of a Love Story" (1854) by Louisa Stuart Costello, accounts of ghost sightings serve merely as an introduction to a romantic legend about two thwarted lovers, while in "The King of the Hearth" (1850) by Henry Morley the spirit serves as a mouthpiece for a philosophical debate about human nature. Therefore using the Derridean spectre rather than the traditional ghost as part of the definition of Victorian ghost story is doubly useful, since it allows the inclusion of stories with non-supernatural elements that produce the spectral effect as well as the exclusion of those in which the ghost is used merely as a plot device.

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