

Embodying The Spectral Self: The Ghost Motif in Scottish Women's Writing

By **Monica Germanà**

Was it a hallucination? Was it the fever of the brain? Was it the disordered fancy caused by great bodily weakness? How could I tell?

Margaret Oliphant, 'The Open Door'¹

Spectral apparitions possess Scottish ballads and folk-tales in large numbers. Colin Manlove has suggested that, akin to Scandinavian lore, the Scottish supernatural shares a close kinship with the hardship of its land: 'the tales in such northern traditions are created out of a sense of the inhospitability and the omnipresence of the land'.² That the geological shape of Scotland holds a symbiotic relationship with its folk-lore and fairy belief is also apparent in the pervasive reference to the natural features of its landscape as a location of the otherworld: as noted by Lowry Wimberley, in the ballad tradition the world of fairies is firmly rooted in the geography of the land and belongs in forests, mountains, underwater or underground caves.³ A specific kind of landscape will, as John Berger has argued, 'address' its native population and culture with latent meaning: 'The address of western Ireland or Scotland is tidal, recurring, ghost-filled'.⁴

While spectrality appears 'naturally' embedded in Scottish culture, ghostly appearances are rarely unproblematic. In a [letter to J. G. Lockhart](#), Sir Walter Scott argued that revenants could be projections of the mind: 'Who shall doubt that imagination, favoured by circumstances, has power to summon up to the organ of sight, spectres which only exist in the mind of those by whom their apparition seems to be witnessed?'⁵ The notions of indeterminacy and hesitation between a psychological or supernatural reading of paranormal events, identified by Tzvetan Todorov as the principal quality of the literary fantastic, may, for instance, be applied to the demonic apparitions in the ballad of ['Sweet William's](#)

[Ghost](#)', James Hogg's popular tale ['Mary Burnet'](#) (1830) and George McKay Brown's *'Andrina'*⁶ (1983): the revenants, who hauntingly return in these stories, could be authentic apparitions, but the possibility that a combination of repressed guilt and desire is the catalyst of such apparitions is retained in the ambiguous tension generated by the ghost trope.

A psychoanalytical reading of spectrality in contemporary women's fantasy writing supports the traditional ambivalence of the ghost motif, whilst, as Lucie Armitt proposes, offering 'a way of exploring female subjectivity'.⁷ In my analysis of Elspeth Barker's *O Caledonia* (1991), [A. L. Kennedy's](#) *So I Am Glad* (1995) and Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) I propose that the texts' engagement with a distinctly Scottish treatment of the ghost motif allows them simultaneously to articulate specific gender preoccupations: in the three stories the oxymoronic bodiless corporeality of ghosts subversively exposes the instability of gendered subjectivity and female sexuality.⁸

The problematic embodiment of spectrality is articulated in Barker's *O Caledonia* from the beginning, when the corpse of Janet, the novel's main character and point of view, is found 'oddly attired in her mother's black lace evening dress, twisted and slumped in bloody, murderous death':⁹ in a strange narrative inversion, the knowledge of Janet's death haunts the flashback narrative of her life. While the ghost of Baudelaire appears in the character's death fantasies, it is Janet's own spirit, arguably, that possesses the text, challenging the marginal status her living self had occupied. Significantly, however, the emphasis is placed on Janet's subversion of her adolescent corporeality: since the apparition of 'knobby protrusions [...] on Janet's chest' (p. 59) threatens to determine Janet's predicament of a strictly-coded femininity, the world of ethereal shadows becomes the object of Janet's longing: 'a bookish spinster attended by cats and parrots, until that time when she might become ethereal, pure spirit untainted by the woes of flesh, a phantom drifting with the winds. What fun she would have as a ghost' (p. 60). Set against the pressures to embody the constrictive model of her mother's notion of Scottish femininity, Janet's progressively more intense longing for the non-corporeality of ghosts, which culminates in the Gothic parody of her murder, articulates her resistance to the biological and cultural essentialisms of gender conventions.

In *So I Am Glad* (1995) the disturbed psyche of Kennedy's first-person narrator is presented through a fragmented narrative of alienated emotions and self-

with Janet and Jennifer, even before her death, Sara is, in a sense, a ghost: 'Falling for her had made me invisible',¹² she recalls after meeting a girl at the watch repair shop. Apparently, it is the object of her desire that makes Sara 'invisible': as Terry Castle has argued, the ghost of lesbian love has haunted English literature for centuries.¹³ In *Hotel World*, however, spectrality operates a subversive inversion: ironically, as an immaterial body '[Sara] passed through her' (29). Though admittedly she feels 'nothing', Sara's 'passing' is, in more than one sense, a 'petite mors', the climactic end of her corporeal life which coincides with the untimely awakening of her desire.

The Folklore Society, 2001) p. 11.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970) translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

⁷ Lucie Armitt, [*Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*](#) (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 102.

⁸ For a more extensive analysis of these texts please refer to my forthcoming monograph, *Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing: Fiction Since 1978* (Edinburgh University Press).

⁹ Elspeth Barker, *O Caledonia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 61. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, p. 1.

¹⁰ A.L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 174. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the main text.

¹¹ See Hélène Cixous 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's 'Das Unheimliche' ('The Uncanny'), *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), pp. 525-48 (543).

¹² Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 23. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 30.