

## Ghostly Visitations in Contemporary Short Fiction by Women: Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith

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From the late nineteenth century onwards the genre of the ghost short story has served as a vehicle for the exploration of female concerns. Women's ghost narratives feature heroines haunted by spectral apparitions that give expression to the characters' inner tensions with their assumption of socially sanctioned female roles. This essay reads three stories, by Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith, to show how the potential of the genre to question the norm and to give shape to personal, intergenerational and historical conflicts continues to be deployed by contemporary women writers. As in the stories of their female predecessors, the effects of the literary ghost's disturbing liminality vary in each of the cases under consideration here. Thus, the apparition in Weldon's "A Good Sound Marriage" (1991) works as a contested mouthpiece of traditional sexual ideology, the oneiric revenant in Galloway's "it was" (1991) is the figuration of unconscious desire, while the *doppelgänger* in Smith's "The Hanging Girl" (1999), despite her spectrality, inhabits a less empty and more amiable world than that of *real* flesh-and-blood people.

Keywords: ghost story; short story; women's writing; Fay Weldon; Janice Galloway; Ali Smith

## Apariciones fantasmales en el relato breve de escritoras contemporáneas: Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway y Ali Smith

Desde finales del siglo XIX el género del relato breve de fantasmas ha servido de medio para la exploración de inquietudes femeninas. Las historias de fantasmas escritas por mujeres están protagonizadas por heroínas rondadas por espectros que encarnan tensiones internas relacionadas con la asunción de roles femeninos impuestos por la sociedad. El presente artículo analiza tres relatos de Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway y Ali Smith con la intención de

demostrar que las escritoras contemporáneas continúan explotando el potencial del género para cuestionar la norma establecida y para articular conflictos personales, intergeneracionales e históricos. Al igual que en los relatos de sus predecesoras, los efectos de la liminalidad inquietante del fantasma literario varían en cada uno de los casos aquí tratados. Así, el espectro en “A Good Sound Marriage” de Weldon (1991) funciona como una portavoz cuestionada de la ideología sexual tradicional, el fantasma onírico en “it was” de Galloway (1991) es la representación del deseo inconsciente, mientras que el *doppelgänger* en “The Hanging Girl” de Smith (1999), a pesar de su espectralidad, habita un mundo menos vacío y más amable que el de las personas *reales* de carne y hueso.

Palabras clave: relatos de fantasmas; relato breve; escritura de mujeres; Fay Weldon; Janice Galloway; Ali Smith

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since Ellen Moers introduced the notion in her ground-breaking study *Literary Women* ([1976] 1978), “Female Gothic” has been a major object of interest in feminist approaches to literature.<sup>1</sup> Lauren Fitzgerald, among others, has highlighted its importance for second-wave feminist criticism’s project of “uncovering the lost tradition of women’s literature” ([2004] 2009, 14). A thread that runs through much of the criticism produced in the wake of Moers’s work is the idea that Female Gothic, since Ann Radcliffe laid its generic bases at the turn of the eighteenth century, has been a privileged site of women’s struggle for a literature of their own. In the initial stages of its development, this struggle was both a question of property (against male authors’ attempts to appropriate the Gothic form) and of propriety (against dominant models of womanhood).<sup>2</sup> Proprietary claims were in themselves a breach of female propriety, and rather a successful one, as E. J. Clery argues was the case with the tradition of what she prefers to call “women’s Gothic” from Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley: “Gothic literature sees women writers at their most pushy and argumentative” (2004: 3).<sup>3</sup> Juliann Fleenor affirms that “[f]rom the first [the Gothic] has been a ‘feminine form’” (1983, 8), while Fredericke van Leeuwen moves ahead in time to refer to the work of Djuna Barnes and Carson McCullers as “instances of twentieth-century female Gothic used by women writers to articulate the situation of women in a society that denies them the status of subject” (1982, 39). Susanne Becker focuses, instead, on the reformulation and reinvention of female Gothic conventions and themes in late-twentieth century fiction and film in the conviction, she says, “that one of the secrets of the gothic’s persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine” (1999, 2).

Writing in 1999, Becker underlines the continued vitality of the Gothic in the 1990s, precisely the decade in which each of the three stories under discussion in this paper were published. In her seminal essay, Moers puts forth the view that “to give *visual* form to the fear of self, to hold anxiety up to the Gothic mirror of the imagination, may well be more common in the writings of women than of men” ([1976] 1978, 107; italics in the original). Nickianne Moody specifically relates this imaginative

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the Research Project *Women’s Tales*, funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Government of Spain (Ref. FEM2013-41977-P). It was also completed under the auspices of the Research Group *Discourse and Identity*, funded by the Xunta de Galicia (Grupo de Referencia Competitiva: GRC2015/002; GI-1924). The author would also like to thank Dr. Laura M<sup>a</sup> Lojo Rodríguez, Regina Martínez Ponciano, and the referees, proof-readers and copy-editors of *Atlantis* for their invaluable suggestions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> Fitzgerald connects Moers’s definition of Female Gothic to her overall concern with women’s possession of their own literary tradition ([2004] 2009, 17). Kate Ferguson Ellis states that “the earliest male Gothicists undertook to wrest the form from the female hands in which they saw it too firmly grasped” (2000, 257).

<sup>3</sup> For a criticism of female Gothic as the foundation of the ideology of “victim feminism” and “professional femininity” see Hoeveler (1998). Hoeveler argues that in Gothic novels from Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788) to Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) heroines employ an “arsenal of passive-aggressive strategies” that lead, eventually, to their moral and financial triumph, and to the winning “their readers’ sympathies through conforming to the carefully delineated construction of innocent victim, what [she calls] the professionalization or cultivated pose of femininity” (1998, 14).

visualisation of female fears and anxieties to a subtype of Gothic fiction, the ghost short story, which as “an experimental as well as a formulaic narrative framework” provides a suitable vehicle for the expression of women’s conflictual relationship with and contestation of the patriarchal norm (1996, 77). From the late nineteenth century onwards, Moody continues, “the ghost story emerges as a form which has been used consistently to pursue particular public and private debates concerning women’s experience” (78).<sup>4</sup> What triggers the female and, implicitly or explicitly, feminist questioning of and resistance to patriarchal hierarchies and gender roles is the very defining feature of the ghost story as a genre: namely, the experience of “a haunting,” which for Moody is “a return of the dead or the past in some manner” (77).<sup>5</sup> More frequently and systematically than in ghost stories by male writers, haunting visitations in women’s tales have a profound effect upon issues mostly attached to the domestic sphere: marriage, divorce, patriarchal oppression, gender violence, abuse, family ties, mother-daughter relationships, childbearing, housework, sex, desire, etc. This accounts for the fact that the action in women’s ghost stories often takes place in or around the realm of the home.<sup>6</sup> The apparition of the literary ghost in the familial and domestic realm triggers a critique of patriarchal ideology and bourgeois ethics that is best conveyed by the short story. Gender and genre are here intimately combined for, as Moody states, “the ghost story holds a special relevance for women, as the family is foregrounded and women, as the keepers of secrets, are especially empowered—a narrative which questions and establishes mystery around a curious event being ideally suited for the short story form” (1996, 70; my italics). Three stories, by Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith, illustrate how ghostly visitations retain their potential as a narrative strategy in contemporary short fiction by women. The ghost in Weldon’s “A Good Sound Marriage” (1991), an alienating binding force, stands in stark contrast

<sup>4</sup> Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert suggest in passing that women’s conspicuously remarkable production of ghost stories (particularly at the turn of the nineteenth century) could be attributed to either material reasons, to their need to earn a living (1991, xiv), or to more psycho-social causes as “[p]erhaps women, being on the margins of society [...] were especially impelled to write about the margins of the visible, for the ghost story [...] deals with power and thus might be expected to appeal to those who felt the absence of self-determination in their own lives” (1986, xiii). In an argument partly advanced in her book *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Short Story* (1977), Julia Briggs (2012) connects women’s interest in both ghost stories and Gothic narratives to their material needs, to their involvement in spiritualist movements and to “some special affinity with freer and more imaginative modes of expression” (2012, 182-183). Briggs adds: “A taste for romance or a sensitivity to mood and atmosphere may also have contributed, and the ghost story may have offered an imaginative access to some kinds of spiritual power” (183).

<sup>5</sup> Diana Wallace (2009) argues that the Gothic element of the ghostly or the spectral has been appropriated by feminist theory and criticism as a recurrent and powerful discursive trope.

<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Moody, Frances Jane P. Abao states that in the works of male writers of, specifically, the Victorian and Edwardian periods, such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and M. R. James, ghosts “lead them [men] to question their sanity or their beliefs in rationality and science,” rather than triggering their discontent with “the restrictions imposed on them by society” (2013, 91). Susanne Becker states, perhaps too categorically, that, “after all, gothic horror is domestic horror, family horror, and addressed precisely these obvious ‘gendered’ problems of everyday life” (1999, 4).

to the potentially liberating apparition in Smith's "The Hanging Girl" (1999), with the oneiric visitation in Galloway's "it was" (1991) lying somewhere in between in its representation of that which gives shape to the protagonist's somewhat disturbing emotional attachment in early childhood. It is the general aim of this paper to show how undead spectral figures continue to be an index of undying female conflicts and anxieties in contemporary short fiction by women.

## 2. THE ALIENATING GHOST OF TRADITION: FAY WELDON'S "A GOOD SOUND MARRIAGE"

Written by a controversial feminist, at times comic and relatively popular author, Fay Weldon's "A Good Sound Marriage" ([1991] 1995) exhibits many of the generic characteristics attributed to ghost stories by women: the home is "[t]he principal setting," the "main theme is communication, more frequently between family members than strangers," and the "common narrative structure is the experience of a woman in her new home which makes her re-evaluate her marriage or family life" (Moody 1996, 78-79). This story is part of the section "From the Other Side" of the collection *Wicked Women* (1995), which includes just one other piece, "Through a Dustbin, Darkly" (1992). The latter title is a parody of *In a Glass, Darkly* (1872), the famous collection by Sheridan Le Fanu which contributed a great deal to setting the standard of the ghost story as a genre and which included his most popular piece, "Carmilla," in itself a powerful statement on female sexuality and gender. The predicament of Philly, the female protagonist of "Through a Dustbin, Darkly," is similar to that of Carrie, the central character in "A Good Sound Marriage": both are young and have married middle-aged widowers and are now pregnant, live in an oppressive home and are expected to comply with gender prescriptions and thus be "simple and sweet and fertile; up to [their] elbows in soap suds," as Philly's husband's lover says (Weldon [1992] 1995, 192). There are major differences, however, between the two stories, the most important being that there is no ghostly apparition properly speaking in "Through a Dustbin, Darkly," while the action in "A Good Sound Marriage" develops as a conversation between Carrie and the spirit of her dead grandmother, Christabel. Though in "Through a Dustbin, Darkly" there are no supernatural elements that could have a bearing upon married life, it nevertheless reads like a typically Weldonian "uproarious feminist revenge comedy" (Dowling 1998, 14). Despite there being no ghost as such, Philly finally succeeds in breaking free from her oppression encouraged by the memory of her husband's late wife, with whom she establishes some sort of sisterly bond across time.<sup>7</sup> There is, though, no hint of any kind of potentially liberating

<sup>7</sup> Philly's husband, Basil, is a famous painter whose dead wife, Serena, had failed to give him a child. Serena, also a painter, left the house after finding her husband in bed with Ruthy Franklyn, a gallery owner. After an affair with a frame-maker who committed suicide, Serena presumably went insane, broke into Basil's house, burned all her paintings, but failed to burn Basil's because Ruthy stopped her just in time. She spent her last

sisterly bond in “A Good Sound Marriage,” only a passing reference to a friend of the protagonist. What we find instead is a rather gentrified version of the ghostly apparition conjured up by the female protagonist’s weeping. As an instructing spirit, the ghost of Christabel tries hard to talk her granddaughter out of her grief and to be content with what she has: namely, an unhappy marriage.

“A Good Sound Marriage” is exemplary of the type of ghost story carried by women’s magazines from the post-war period onwards, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, where the Weldon story was first published in October 1991 (*Internet Speculative Fiction Database*).<sup>8</sup> As Moody points out, “[t]he telling of tales and family histories is recognisable as an exploration of intergenerational communication and experience, which explains the regularity of ghost stories in women’s magazines” (1996, 85). Carrie complains to the ghost of her grandmother that she feels trapped in her marriage to Clive, who on the evening of the story had left her in the company of his two unfriendly teenage sons to go to a party. She is pregnant, feels lonely and misses her mother, Kate, even though they are not on speaking terms after her decision to marry Clive. Kate had also opposed Carrie’s decision to become a costume designer instead of doing something related to sport because, as Carrie tells her grandmother, “she wanted a sporty, woolly-hat sort of daughter with no soul” (Weldon [1991] 1995, 198). Kate had divorced Carrie’s father, Jim, to marry another man, Jonathan, much to her own mother’s dismay. Hence, rather than seeking out the presence of her modern, progressive, assertive absent mother to help her break free from her oppression, Carrie’s grief invokes the ghost of her old-fashioned, conventional grandmother, long dead: “you cried so long and hard, you forced me out of my grave to rise and speak to you myself,” Christabel’s phantom tells Carrie (197). The story’s title is, precisely, the refrain that punctuates ghostly Christabel’s attempt to make her granddaughter stop regretting her marriage to Clive and accept the traditional division of gender roles and what it entails. From the ghost’s perspective, Carrie’s expression of grief is an undesirable, unbecoming attitude in a wife and soon-to-be mother: “I was careful not to let David, [...] your grandfather, know that I was crying, or why, because some things, even in a good, sound marriage, are better kept private. Your generation does too much sharing. To share grief is to double

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days in the alley at the back of the house, doing heroin and selling her body till “[s]he fell headfirst into a dustbin from whence she was carted off to the booby hatch, where she died” (Weldon [1992] 1995, 184). Basil’s circle of indistinguishable and undistinguished admirers insults the memory of Serena repeatedly. The story hinges on Philly’s transformation of the memory of the despised woman into an enabling force, such that she eventually identifies with her unfortunate predecessor and succeeds in avenging their shared oppression. Philly sets the house, impregnated as it is with female suffering, on fire while crying “Okay, Serena? [...] ‘Okay now?’” (Weldon [1992] 1995, 194). Sisterhood as liberating bond is an important theme in Fay Weldon. Thus, a novel such as *Female Friends* (1975), Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues, “considers [...] the possibility of enabling connections to same-sex peers rather than to mother, child, or heterosexual mate” (1997, 194).

<sup>8</sup> “A Good Sound Marriage” was also anthologised in *The Mammoth Book of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghost Stories*, edited by Peter Heining (1998). Apart from *The Times* or *The Observer*, Fay Weldon often chose women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Options* as outlets for her short fiction. “Through a Dustbin, Darkly,” for instance, first appeared in *Options* in 1992.

grief, not to halve it” (196). Carrie must, then, bear her grief alone as Christabel did in her day—“I felt like you do now at least once a week, but on average I reckon twice a week for forty-five years” (199)—since husbands have enough worries of their own—exemplified by David’s “worrying because when he combed his hair that morning there was more hair left on his comb than on his head” (197). Christabel is thus the mouthpiece of traditional sexual ideology that dictates self-denial and responsibility to women, while supporting *in practice* childish, whimsical attitudes in men: “Men are given to wishful thinking, it’s true [...] Your grandfather believed our troubles would be solved when his uncle died and left him his fortune [...] I believed with him, though two minutes’ thought would have told me the prospect of sudden riches was highly unlikely. We had a good, strong marriage” (198). The story bears witness to the continuity of patriarchal models into the present of the narrative, models that Christabel wants to enforce as desirable, universal, natural and eternal, which is the way ideology works.<sup>9</sup> Once Carrie states her plan to divorce Clive, the spectral mouthpiece of patriarchal ideology disappears, but not before pouring out her frustration. The story ends thus:

“You’re not listening to what I’m saying,” said the apparition. “I suppose you will have to start from the beginning and work it all out for yourself, like everyone else. I’m wasting my time. *I am your future as well as your past*, and available for inspection, but try telling any young woman that. They would rather weep, and shriek, and squirm in the present.” And she vanished, the semi-circle outline of her meagre breasts fading last, and Carrie went back to sleep, or had never woken up. (Weldon [1991] 1995, 203-204; my italics)

Unlike the imposing yet unsubstantial presence of Christabel, Carrie’s mother is more solidly real and alive as a model, albeit an absent one. In her rendering of a century-long intergenerational conflict concerning gender roles, Weldon not only expands the potential of the form for temporal compression,<sup>10</sup> but could also be said to condense the different responses to motherhood prevalent in each of the three periods into which Elaine Tuttle Hansen distributes the Weldonian corpus: (1) the 1970s, repudiation—in this case, Christabel’s past relationship with her mother, Kate; (2) the 1980s, recuperation—hinted at in Carrie’s desire to have her mother back by her side; (3) and the 1990s, confusion, impasse—Carrie’s current state (1997, 184-185). Taking a broader perspective, we could go as far as to say that, on the basis of the radical ambiguity of the status of the ghost, “A Good Sound Marriage” encompasses two different literary movements: like Carrie, the reader does not know, nor can he/

<sup>9</sup> In Terry Eagleton’s words, “[i]deologies are commonly felt to be both *naturalising* and *universalising*. By a set of complex discursive devices, they project what are in fact partisan, controversial, historically specific values as true of all times and all places, and so as natural, inevitable and unchangeable” (1994, 9; italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> “[T]he ghost story allows the experience of a lifetime to be contained within the short story” (Moody 1996, 88).

she decide, whether Christabel's ghost is a dream or mental projection—more in tune with modernist subjective poetics—or real—part of the ontological expansion that postmodernism operates, according to Brian McHale's powerful thesis (1987). The unequivocal beginning of the story, "Carrie cried herself to sleep, and her grandmother appeared to her in a dream and spoke to her" (Weldon [1991] 1995, 195), is qualified not only by the ending of the story quoted above, but by other passages in the text like "[s]he [Carrie] sat up abruptly in bed and the apparition, instead of vanishing, as Carrie had rather hoped it would, sat down in the wicker chair as if to keep things in balance" (198). Whether imaginary or real, modernist or postmodernist, Weldon's revenant is a conspicuous embodiment of the gender values of the past which it is the task of present-day women to exorcise. In the stories by Galloway and Smith considered later in this essay, the past likewise returns in the shape of a ghost, but its message is neither as obvious (unconscious desire in Galloway's "it was"), nor as unacceptable (suppressed emancipatory forces in Smith's "The Hanging Girl") as here.

### 3. THE UNCANNY GHOST OF DESIRE: JANICE GALLOWAY'S "IT WAS"

To include Scottish author Janice Galloway in a discussion of ghost fiction by contemporary women writers may seem rather odd if one takes into account the virtual absence of spectral figures in her short stories. Though the label Gothic is often attached to her work on account of its scatological, visceral, carnal, gruesome, dark and, even, monstrous elements (Sage 2011, 63–68), the fact is that seldom do we come across ghostly apparitions in her stories. To the best of my knowledge, there are just two clear instances of spectrality in Galloway's short fiction, both from her first collection *Blood* (1991): namely, "Scenes from the Life No. 27: Living In" and "it was." As is the case of the other four pieces of the "Scenes from the Life" series, "No. 27: Living In" reads like a dramatic script, a dumb show in this case. It tells the story of a day in the life of a neat and handsome man, Tony, rendered through a series of stage directions organised in three acts: Tony wakes up, gets ready for work and leaves (Act I), the house is left empty, with no human presence, just sounds coming from the street of an unnamed city (Act II), and finally Tony returns home, relaxes after "a hard day" (Galloway [1991b] 2009, 120), goes to bed and falls asleep. While he is asleep, an unnamed naked woman gets up from the bed where he is lying, walks "soundlessly" (122) to the mirror, begins to touch her body and ends up masturbating while she stares fixedly at the specular "white contours of her body curving out of the darkness" (123). The last stage direction, a "Note to the ACTRESS," ends thus: "*The audience must never be sure whether she is substantial or not*" (123). If 'substantial,' that is, a real woman, then we could interpret the story as another example of the lack of communication between couples, which is a recurrent theme in Galloway's stories—for instance, "Need for Restraint" in *Blood* (1991) or "peeping tom" in *Where You Find It* (1996). If not 'substantial,' she could be taken as a figuration of woman as an oneiric projection of



man's desire, a modern version of Adam's dream in line with the traditional polarity of ethereal/carnal which denies women the status of full human subjectivity. In either case, the story underscores, maybe even denounces, woman's social invisibility.

As in the case of "A Good Sound Marriage" and, most likely, of "Scenes from the Life No. 27: Living In," the spectral figure in Galloway's "it was"—her literary debut—haunts the realm of the dream. Though there is really no textual evidence to prove this, we can safely rely on the author's own account of the genesis of the story, which dispels all doubts. Interviewed by *The Short Review* in 2010, Galloway stated: "The impulse [to write the story] arrived following a very vivid and disturbing dream which I chose to write out, then rewrite and rewrite till I got the texture of dreaming right. It was called *it was*." "it was" is, thus, the author's much-revised fictional rendition of her own oneiric experience, "till I got the texture of dreaming right," as she insists. Because of its stylistic density and opacity, its narrative discontinuity and fragmentariness, and its formal and typographical experimentation, Galloway's prose is more demanding than Weldon's, though the latter only seems simple on the surface. The indeterminacy of the "it" and the truncated title sentence, "it was," are initial indices of a lack, of the failure of language to trap reality in a net of signifiers which is full of holes, such that the story may be read as staging the effects of what Jacques Lacan called the Real, as was done by Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, who goes straight to the point:

The absurdist fantasy of "it was" should be read as an attempt, both in the language and in the representation, to give shape to that which exceeds symbolisation, i.e., the Lacanian Real that by definition recedes into formlessness as soon as it is "named"—hence the textual resistance, the blanks and fractures in the text [...] [T]he narrator sets herself the task of re-opening the cracks and digging out "it," a buried face revived from the dead [...] The figure raised from the dead, therefore, is literally the object of its creator's desire [...] What the fantasy represents is that the existence of 'it' is authored by narrative desire—a desire for mastery/authority over a lost object that eludes one's grasp in indefinite metonymy. (2004, 66-67)

In the story, an unnamed woman or girl—though if girl, an older girl since "she was too old for this kind of thing [kneeling on grass in a public space]," (Galloway [1991] 2009, 33)—finds herself "toward evening" standing on "the grass verge" (32).<sup>11</sup> She appears to be in the midst of what seems a suburban space, just looking around, touching plants, smelling flowers till it gets "blue-dark" and "then the glitter of it caught her eye," a phrase repeated, twice like an echo (33). She found out that this glittering "it" was a face, so she proceeds to dig out the rest of the body, which happens to be her deceased Uncle George, a kind, smiling, bald little man who invites her home "for a cup of tea" and "a beat" (34-35). Her encounter with this ghost, who "had no awareness that he was dead and she would not let him know" (35), triggers childhood

<sup>11</sup>Paccaud-Huguet does not fail to stress the spatio-temporal liminality of the action (2004, 60).

memories permeated with strong and ambiguous tactile sensations, particularly attached to the touch of the man's stubbly face, and supplemented by her own infant vocal and facial reactions:

The still lamplight outlined his bald head and traced the grey nightcolour of his cheek where it moved to prepare another sentence of encouragement for her to come. *It was a rough cheek, hairily whitened with stubble that had alternately fascinated and horrified her as a child; she felt its jaggy trail scratch a skirl of wild shrieking from an infant mouth, her eyes stretched golly-wide in excitement. Too much excitement for the wean.* (Galloway [1991] 2009, 35; my italics except 'the wean', presumably the words spoken by her uncle)

The sensual, sexual overtones of this passage lead us into the complex sphere of infantile sexuality theorised by Freud in, among other places, *Three Contributions of the Theory of Sex* (1903). Though this is not the place to go into much detail about the ways psychoanalysis approaches child sexuality, we may recall Freud's stress on its fragmentary nature, on the fact that children derive pleasure from the excitation of specific bodily zones. "The sexual aim of the infantile impulse consists in the production of gratification through the proper excitation of this or that selected erogenous zone," Freud writes at the beginning of the section titled "*The Infantile Sexual Aim*," of his second essay, singling out "the lip-zone" as the primary erotic area because of its connection to the satisfaction derived from nourishment (Freud [1903] 1995b, 556). In view of the infant's strong sensual impressions, and of Galloway's insistence that the story is the relation of a dream (narrated in the third person, as is frequent in Freud's work), the thesis that the story gives shape to the experience of the Lacanian Real can be further developed.

The ghost plays a central role in the experience of the Real according to what Lacan says in session 5 of *Seminar XI* on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. There Lacan develops his notion of the "*encounter with the real*" as an encounter with what is "*unassimilable*" ([1964] 1998, 53, 55), with what cannot be symbolised, trapped by "the insistence of the signs," that is, by language (53-54). The subject's desire, Lacan further argues, "manifests itself in the dream" and "[i]t is only in the dream"—he leaves little place for doubt—"that this truly unique encounter can occur" (59). The girl's (unconscious) desire articulated in Galloway's text finds its origin in the repressed erotic gratification attached to fragmentary bodily parts, and the traumatic real at the core of the dream exerts its pressure in the guise of the ghost.<sup>12</sup> For, in Lacan's view, the ghost is a "screen" produced by the dream "that shows us that *it* [the Real] is still there behind" ([1964] 1998, 55; my italics).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>As Lacan argues elsewhere, "it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable" ([1966] 2006, 681).

<sup>13</sup>Later on in the same session of *Seminar IX*, Lacan speaks about "[t]he place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy—in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition" ([1964] 1998, 60).

The unsymbolisable, unassimilable *it* (the Real) in the story acquires the ghostly semblance of a *he*: “it was” becomes, towards the end of the story, “he was,” the transgenerational ghost of Uncle George (Galloway [1991] 2009, 35). Furthermore, Paccaud-Huguet’s insightful observation that “Uncle George’s ghost will live as long as she wills it” (2004, 60), linking the ghost to the girl’s desire, could be interpreted within the framework of Freud’s dream theory, specifically by way of contrast with the guilty father’s dream of his deceased son’s protest “*Father, don’t you see that I am burning?*” ([1899] 1995a, 436), or the guilty son’s dream in which he sees his dead father alive and, Freud reports, “*conversing with him as usual, but* (and this was the remarkable thing) *he had nevertheless died, though he did not know it*” (380). Galloway’s girl’s dream is about an uncle who does not know he is dead, yet rather than the guilt felt by the son in Freud due to the relief he feels about his father’s death, the girl wishes to prolong the existence of her uncle’s ghost, being as it is both an object of her desire and a source of pleasure beyond its pacifying limit, a pleasure that “becomes pain, and this ‘painful pleasure’ is what Lacan calls *jouissance*” (Evans 1996, 93). The *jouissance* experienced in her early attachment to her uncle (fascination, horror, scratchiness, shrieking, excitement) is transposed (*displaced* in the terminology of dream theory) retroactively, as it were, to her tactile experience of the vegetable world in the dream. The feel of the uncle’s ‘stubble’ (one should not miss the vegetal, agrarian, horticultural connotations of the word *stubble*) is reflected in the grass of the verge bordering the tarmac, or the hedge around the houses nearby, from which she derives tactile impressions that are painfully pleasurable: “she knelt to feel the cling of the cool blades wrap the bare skin of her knees, exposed between long socks and dark grey skirt. Her eyes closed, near to weeping with the pleasure of it,” or, “[she] found herself standing at the now-grey privet hedge of one of the smarter pebble-dashes on the corner, her hands resting on the stubby hardness of cropped branches [...] Gradually aware of their dull ache, she lifted her palms” (Galloway [1991] 2009, 33). Moreover, the uncanny mixture of the uncle as protective avuncular figure and horrifying menacing presence is somewhat advanced by the description of space itself early in the story, the at once familiar and unfamiliar domestic realm inhabited by old people sitting on sofas with floral patterns which likewise cause uncomfortable tactile impressions: “[o]lder couples [...] sitting in the *scratchy roses* of their ancient settees inside watching slot telly [...] She wasn’t sure if she knew this place or not. *Something was homely about it*, something that though not kent [known] was not strange.” (32; my italics).<sup>14</sup> The terrifying underside of the uncle’s dear memory, however, has nothing to do with traumatic adult obscenity, but, rather, with the girl’s earliest affections permeated by disturbing sexuality which, as Freud showed us, is a universal experience.

<sup>14</sup> A slot telly is a coin-operated TV set.

#### 4. THE LIBERATING GHOST OF LOVE: ALI SMITH'S "THE HANGING GIRL"

Ghosts, apparitions, spectres and strange presences figure largely in Ali Smith's fiction. On account of this, the label "Scottish Gothic" is attached to her work more often than to Janice Galloway's (Germanà and Hornton 2013, 3). Agnieszka Sienkiewicz-Charlish indeed chooses Smith's "The Hanging Girl"—from *Other Stories and other stories* (1999)—as an example of the continuity of the Scottish Gothic tradition and its preoccupation with national identity: "within contemporary Scottish Literature one can also find a number of texts that use the motif of the double as a way of articulating what is absent: a unified identity of the Scottish nation" (2011, 80). Though she does not explore the ways in which "The Hanging Girl" articulates nationalist concerns, Sienkiewicz-Charlish does relate the story to the recurrent motif of the double in Scottish literature. Indeed, the ghost that haunts the main character in the story is not the intergenerational oneiric familial revenant found in Weldon's and Galloway's pieces, but, rather, belongs to the *doppelgänger* or *doppel*hanging type. Through this ghostly visitation, Smith's story stages a critique of contemporary society and, so, may be said to address the issue of national identity, if at all, only obliquely.

"The Hanging Girl" is divided into nine sections that consistently alternate first-person and third-person narrative, beginning with a sharp one-sentence paragraph: "They're going to hang me" (Smith 1999, 15). A connection is therefore established already at the narratological level between the hanging girl who narrates the first section and Pauline, the I-narrator of the remaining sections in first-person voice. The "I" is thus split, doubled in the same way that the role of protagonist is divided between Pauline, the haunted girl, and the unnamed hanging girl of the title who plays the role of the haunting revenant.

Stephen M. Levin's analysis of the pervasiveness of the spectral in Smith's work draws attention to her "shifts in point of view" as a recurrent element that registers "the intrusion of a spectral presence by breaking the continuity of narrative form" (2013, 38). Spectrality in Smith is persistently and consistently used to give shape to that which is repressed in the lifeless world of bourgeois routine, and which returns bearing the promise of healthier interhuman bonds. "[T]he spectre," Levin writes, "intrudes upon the tradition-steeped living, creating significant struggles that nonetheless hold the potential to restore life to the living" (2013, 38). Ghosts, therefore, undermine the alienating solidity of a *status quo* whose preservation, we are made to understand, is undesirable.<sup>15</sup> Revealingly, the spectre's reinvigorating potential is akin to that of the short story as a literary genre, for Smith conceives "the story form as a force and source of life" (2009). Furthermore, for Smith, the short story, like a ghost, always remains alive, goes on living after the end: "An end, when it comes, should always send you back to the beginning, a good short story, like any real art, demands revisitation. A

<sup>15</sup>In this, Smith resembles Muriel Spark, another outstanding figure of the Scottish Gothic tradition whose work is permeated with elements of the spectral and the fantastic. See Germanà and Hornton (2013) and Gardiner (2010).

good short story is lifelong” (2009). “The Hanging Girl” does indeed prompt this revisitiation, and at the structural level too as the end of the story sends us literally back to the beginning: “God, though, what a beautiful day,” Pauline’s last words at the story’s close after her fall from a high place, are an echo of the unnamed hanging girl’s initial comment, “What a day, a beautiful spring day” (Smith 1999, 35, 15). The identification between Pauline and the girl’s ghost is thus reinforced.

The story’s revitalising thrust is concomitant to its indictment of the banalisation and insensitivity to human suffering in globalised contemporary society. Crucial in this connection is the fact that there is a most serious candidate for the historical counterpart of the anonymous hanging girl in Smith’s story: Masha Bruskina, an active member of the Minsk Resistance against the Nazis, hanged by the German authorities in October 1941. As Tracy Maylath points out, “[l]ike the hanging girl in the story, [Masha] is told she is being made an example of, she wears a placard in two languages (Russian and German) proclaiming that she is a partisan [...] There are photographs of the real hanging. In the story, the hangings are being filmed” (2014, n.p.). According to the website *Capital Punishment U. K.* (Clark 2015) the hangings (Bruskina was hanged with two other of her fellow-members of the underground cell) were actually “meticulously filmed,” though no footage seems to have reached us. The fictional girl about to be hanged explains in a casual tone: “A man is pulling pointed legs out from beneath a camera. I don’t know what type of camera it is. It’s a film camera. This will be filmed. People have sat down on the chairs to watch. Something is going to start soon. A man just got up and gave his chair to a lady” (Smith 1999, 15-16). The murderous act, which is presented as a wartime public show attended by people and filmed by its barbaric perpetrators, is gradually transmuted into a farcical TV performance, a show called *This Is My Death* hosted by the girl: “thank you thank you ladiesandgentlemen I’m a little hoarse forgive me my throat’s a little tight for it today but a very warm welcome to the show I’m your (g)host for this evening morning afternoon evening morning afternoon” (Smith 1999, 16). The story establishes a historical connection between the destructive advance of the Nazi army in the eastern front (Belarus, in this case) and the progress of late capitalism, in which a mortifying and unstoppable process of production (“evening morning afternoon evening morning afternoon”) transforms everything, even the most painful experiences, into Baudrillardian simulacra ready for consumers. Two death-dealing powers are, therefore, identified across historical time: the Nazi army and the derealising, commodifying logic of late capitalism as theorised by, among others, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard (Bertens 1996).

Monica Germanà and Emily Hornton underscore Ali Smith’s “ambivalence towards the simulacral order of postmodern culture” (2013, 5). Indeed, “The Hanging Girl” is a perfect example of Smith’s ambivalence concerning ghostly simulacra as both alienating—swallowed by a stultified and cynical TV audience of consumers impervious to human suffering—and liberating—a spectre from the past as the bearer of, as Levin points out following Derrida, “suppressed, historical agencies” (2013, 36), which elicits

an emancipatory response in those ready to acknowledge its presence, Pauline in this case. Pauline, a name that connects the character's attitude in the story to St Paul and his doctrine of global Christian love against oppressive power, is a young suburban wife who designs artificial flavours for a company making mint sweets and who experiences a painful awakening after a night in which she and her partner, Mike, have friends over to celebrate the stupid, petty-bourgeois novelty of their "new polished wood floor" (Smith 1999, 21). After dinner, she and her friends react in the most scornful and inhumane manner conceivable to the casual sight of universal human suffering and death on TV:

Someone had left the television on in the adjoining room, a programme where some elderly people were talking about their lives, and every so often, I remember, there would be film of mounds of dead bodies from all over the world over the century, over the lifetimes of the old people. The thing I remember is that every time any of us caught sight of these dead bodies in the other room we would end up destroyed, in helpless laughter. (Smith 1999, 21)

Prompted by Mike's reference to an article in the Sunday paper (another mass medium) on the recorded last words of pilots about to crash, they begin a game of "making up people's famous last words" (21) which Pauline wins by acclamation by cracking a joke about helpless victims on TV: "There were people lining up in black and white on television, about to be shot or *hung*. I pretended to be one of them. I said: I really wish this was just a game of famous last wo--. I got the biggest laugh. We were laughing our heads off" (22; my italics). Pauline's crudely sardonic comment prompts the visitation of the ghost of the hanging girl, the first time being just a hint of what later will become a full-fledged haunting presence: "The next was the first day I had an inkling that something might actually be wrong" (22). Pauline visits a doctor complaining about paranoid delusions and the doctor, at her request, prescribes antibiotics for her "unspecific aches" (18) and refers her to a counsellor for a professional opinion on her delusions. Three months pass before her meeting with the counsellor, by which time the apparition has acquired a more or less definite shape: "It's a woman, [...] a woman or a girl, I can't tell which [...] I'm pretty sure she's here now" (19). Disappointed with the counsellor's absolute disregard for her symptoms, with her standard conclusion that her delusions are infantile in origin, and her only concern being with organising their schedule of future appointments, Pauline gives up therapy a week later after passing by the counsellor's office to cancel all her appointments. Outside the building, she starts to address the girl in the street in order to discover the latter's intentions: "What do you want from me[?]" (23). She then decides to enter a church and stops before a carving of St Thomas, the apostle who demanded evidence of the truth of Christ's return after death, the Resurrection being the epitome of the ghostly message of the triumph of love as the saving power, which reduplicates *in nuce* the story's moral. Afterwards, Pauline plays around with the echo of her own voice, which is an aural prefiguration of her visual redoubling. She leaves the church, buys

some things in a shop and, on coming out, the ghost comes finally into full view: “she saw the girl hanging from a lamppost. She watched her, cut down, fall through the air and crumple on the ground [...] She draped the hanged girl’s arms round her shoulders, hoisted her on to her back” and takes her home (24-25).

Pauline spends her days in the company of the girl, who takes every opportunity to hang herself. She is nameless and speechless, yet capable of transmitting a revivifying moral message through her acts and expressions. For instance, she can discriminate fact from fiction and react accordingly, unlike the living who populate the story, for whom real death and real suffering are laughable spectacles: “She has an endless appetite for television [...] She particularly seems to love old musicals. She watched the whole of *Oliver!* and I could tell, she was moved, especially when Nancy gets killed” (25), although the girl cannot bear to see real suffering and true destruction on screen—“She becomes quite agitated if anything serious is on [...] [A] documentary film of some Canadian loggers taking chainsaws to trees [...] [S]he didn’t want to see it and I will not have her suffer” (26). The distress and anguish the hanging girl feels at the sight of trees being cut down in Canada also extends to humans whose life-course no destructive power should ever cut short. When Pauline tries to comfort her saying “that it is the same for everyone; every one of us falling through air with one end of the rope attached to our birthdates till the rope pulls tight,” the hanging girl’s mute reply is that “[s]ome people are pushed. Some people aren’t given enough rope” (27).

Here, and elsewhere, Smith exhibits an environmental sensitivity that complements or, perhaps even qualifies, her postmodernist poetics.<sup>16</sup> Connected with this is the hanging girl’s lack of interest in language, in words, and her contrasting responsiveness to the immediacy of sounds and, particularly, of natural images. She enjoys music and, Pauline tells us, “[w]e have a book of photographs of wild flowers [...] [and s]he is always signalling to me to find pictures of the small pink ones, field bindweed, and the small blue ones, forget-me-not,” yet “looks bored” when “I show her words in the paper and try to explain them” (26). Language is under suspicion as a totalising tool: it is too abstract, too detached from the reality it is presumed capable of representing, yet cannot help but distort and falsify. Thus, words themselves can multiply, double, split into different meanings, a limitation which Pauline parodies by playing with the disparate acceptations of the word “hang” themselves (31-32). Discourses of power and the roles and categories they enforce are debunked. Pauline neglects her domestic, professional and social duties and commitments, and rejects every explanation in support of the ghost’s non-existence. The spectral presence of the hanging girl does not have anything to do with either “childhood” (20) or “displaced guilt” (29), Pauline contends, consciously exposing the lies that legitimate the power/knowledge of the mental health expert. The real world and the real people around her are discredited and found to be worthy of blame. Her partner’s and her friends’ bewilderment concerning

<sup>16</sup>See Sánchez García (2012) and Kostkowska (2013).

her stubbornness gives way to some obscene reactions. Thus, for instance, Mike, after asking Pauline if the hanging girl is pretty, gets an erection calling to mind the beautiful girls in an American sitcom and thinking about the prettier girls at work. Or Roger and Liz, her friends, who got very excited at the suggestion that Pauline might be having an affair, became “exceptionally close and [...] had some very good sex” (30).

The disavowal of spectrality in Smith becomes the necessary condition for preserving the *status quo* or, as Levin states, to sustain “the ontological stability of the bourgeois subject” (2013, 46). In connection with this it is crucial to point out how Pauline’s strong attachment to the spectre of an unknown girl stands in radical contrast with Mike’s reaction to the ghostly visitation of his parents. Thus, after Roger’s reference to Liz’s father’s obscenely morbid personality (he used to take pictures of Liz and her mother and sisters in cemeteries) Mike begins to sweat when recalling a terrifying dream: “Last night he had woken in the middle of the night from the same dream, the recurring dream, where his parents appeared to him smiling, vibrantly alive” (31). Far from being terrified, Pauline actually welcomes her ghost, takes care of her—keeps her company, bathes her, puts her to bed, etc.—and tries to empathise with her: “I touch my neck, apply different pressures to the cords of my muscles. It amazes me how tough and sensitive they are” (32). While Mike is away at their friend Dave’s house starting what seems to be an affair with his wife (Maggie), Pauline steps fully into the realm of fantasy and is taken by the hanging girl “to a slightly higher place so we could see better” (Smith 1999, 34). In the final section, a multitude of ghosts attend Pauline’s fall in silence, which she lives (or is it dreams?) as if it were a beatific experience: “For a moment she held me, lightened, delighted. Then she hovered above me like a piece of litter caught up in a crosswind” (35). The prolepsis in the preceding section, narrated in the third person, advances an interpretation of this episode framed within the coordinates of the ordinary world: “Pauline jumped off a garage roof and broke a leg” (33). The stark contrast between both perspectives is further enhanced by the sheer compartmentalisation of labour that regulates social relations in the ordinary world and which reaches, at once very realistic and absolutely ridiculous, functionalist extremes in the figure of the policeman who arrives on the scene of the fall before the paramedics:

I can’t help you, love, he told Pauline. I’m the reporting officer. Even if you were on fire, even if you were bleeding to death right here in front of me on the lawn, I’d not be able to do anything. It’s my duty only to report what happens here until the emergency services come [...] He turned his back, one foot swivelling in the flowerbed, opened his book and wrote it down. Upon my arrival the young woman was hysterical, and was quite unable to assess her own position. (Smith 1999, 33)

Both perspectives, inflected (respectively) in the first and the third person, are incompatible, and the reader is forced to adopt or reject one or the other. One either reads the story as a case of psychotic hallucination and mental derangement which



ends up in a ludicrous fall from a low roof, or one responds to the ghost of the past that calls for an ethical transformation of the world inhabited by those who deny its existence to preserve a cynically inhumane, ludicrously rigid, and secretly obscene social functioning.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The modern ghost story, an outcrop of the centuries-old tradition of the female Gothic, continues to be an apt medium for woman's critical interrogation of reality and her place in it. The genre, like the undying spectre itself, continues to provide strategies to tackle public and private issues which pertain to women's experience and their received assumptions about gender and identity.

Louise Welsh, the editor of a recent anthology titled *Ghost: 100 Stories to Read with the Lights On* (2015), finds it "notable how many of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century writers included in *Ghost* were supporters of the women's suffrage movement and other feminists and equal rights campaigns" (2015, iii). Detecting echoes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) in Jackie Kay's "The White Cot" (2009), Welsh underlines the fact that contemporary women's greater "freedoms do not banish ghosts" (2015, iii). As I have shown in this paper, Fay Weldon's "A Good Sound Marriage," Janice Galloway's "it was" and Ali Smith's "The Hanging Girl" are three examples of just how alive ghosts are in contemporary British short fiction by women. In all three, spectral apparitions unsettle the homely domain and serve to articulate women's anxieties, conflicts, desires and aspirations outside the norm in the 1990s, a decade that according to Susanne Becker "exhibit[ed] the ongoing dynamics of the gothic" (1999, 2). Yet the trope of the ghost functions differently in each of the three cases. Thus Weldon's narrative, exhibiting the potential of the short story for temporal compression, condenses varied responses to motherhood and questions particular ideas concerning gender values of the past which present day women must come to terms with and exorcise. While in Weldon's piece the ghost is not completely successful in enforcing traditional ideas about woman's ancillary position in relation to man, the spectre in Galloway's story stands for the unconscious desire announced in a dream which the female protagonist has not yet come to terms with. The girl in the Galloway story confronts the repressed dimension of an otherwise dear memory to which disturbing unconscious fantasies are attached. Finally, Smith's hanging girl is a rewriting of the figure of the *doppelgänger* as a liberating spectral force and links two historical periods in which the demand for justice is suppressed through directly repressive or more subtly oppressive means. Smith's short story, which, like the ghost itself, remains alive after its closure by virtue of its circularity, is an indictment of the banalisation of and indifference towards human suffering in a globalised society, and calls for an urgent ethical transformation. That the ghost serves to give shape to women's preoccupations has been, at once, an evident and an intriguing fact of British

literary history. In their struggle for social change in the modern period, women are accompanied by the, sometimes empowering, other times thwarting, and frequently elusive, presence of the literary ghost.

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Received 21 November 2015

Revised version accepted 5 May 2016

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