

MA thesis

Opponent's Review

The genre of the nineteenth-century ghost story has received increasing critical attention in the recent decades as a type of literature symbolically expressing various anxieties of the age, and studying its specific forms of dislocation has proved fruitful. One of the central issues is the way in which spectrality relates to visuality, i.e. to sensual perception and the working of the human mind under certain conditions. Inspired by two studies of Srdjan Smajic, "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story" (2003) and *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (2010), Tereza Bambušková also puts this issue to the centre of her critical concern in the present thesis. This seems historically relevant: the Victorian Age was a period in which the problems of seeing and visual perception were dealt with by intellectuals such as John Ruskin (cf. the insistence on the "innocent eye" and unbiased, "true-to-nature" vision in his aesthetic debates) as well as scientists (cf. discoveries and inventions in optics) and psychologists, and these issues were frequently reflected in literature and art.

To approach the vast field of the Victorian ghost story, from whose rich harvest she selected ten representative tales, T. Bambušková decided to work with two basic guide lines, Tzvetan Todorov's famous definition of the fantastic as a genre characterised by hesitation, of both the character and reader, and Walter E. Houghton's discussion of the Victorian frame of mind with its unshaken optimistic belief in the possibility of arriving at truth. As her research presented in the opening part of Chapters 2 shows, however, the Victorians were more and more aware of the fact that the path towards truth could not depend solely on the evidence of senses and that they found themselves trapped in a contradictory situation: on the one hand, the sight was regarded as the most perfect of the five senses, on the other, its reliability was doubted by the medical cases which proved that seeing depended on the general condition of the whole organism. Todorov's concept of hesitation is thus rooted in the period's epistemological uncertainties; this fact then provides a useful critical tool with which the ghost stories can be read as historically conditioned texts. T. Bambušková thus, in my view, succeeded in finding a very efficient interpretive clue to this popular genre.

The following chapter discusses how the Victorians and also their antecedents tended to explain supernatural phenomena, depending more on scientific theories than traditional religious accounts, and how this produced typical characters of investigators in ghost stories. In Chapter 4 the emphasis is shifted to apparitions and their roles in the narratives; because the behaviour of the Victorian ghosts is often enigmatic, the semantic ambiguity of such encounters is implicated, which also determines the prevailing denouements of ghost fiction. T. Bambušková's argument in this way progresses from the conditions that determined the specific character of the genre to its aesthetic. All these aspects are very closely demonstrated on the selected texts.

The concluding part of the thesis suggests the ways in which this research might continue, as the student is indeed prepared to go on working in this field during her postgraduate study. I don't think, however, that it is necessary to extend the scope of the Victorian fantastic by, say, vampire fiction, an area very vehemently explored by scholars all over the world. What I would encourage T. Bambušková to do instead is to attempt a typological classification of the Victorian ghost story, which would indeed require a systematic analysis of a larger number of texts and employment of other views as well. I believe such recent sources as Andrew Smith's *The Ghost Story 1840-1920: A Cultural*

*History* (2010), which interprets the genre rather as a product of the economic conditions of Victorian capitalism, might supply an invaluable alternative perspective for ghost story reading. And because T. Bambušková included primary texts of three national literatures, English, Scottish and Irish, it may also be inspiring to look at these texts as dislocated narratives of nationalist issues (such as can be found in some vampire stories). And finally, it may be of interest to find out how and if this genre transforms in time, a question which is mostly ignored in the present thesis.

In conclusion I would like to stress that T. Bambušková's thesis provides a very insightful interpretation of one particular form of Victorian fiction, that it is very well researched and the background information is convincingly connected with the way the primary texts are examined and that the student proved to be able of an independent critical approach to the studied material.

I am pleased to recommend the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary grade "excellent" (výborně).

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