



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Tereza Bambušková Bc "The Transformations of the Gothic in the Victorian Ghost Stories" MA thesis

The relationship between gothic-inflected stories of the supernatural and Victorian attitudes to science and metaphysics is a complex and rewarding field of investigation. As Srdjan Smajic remarks at the beginning of his seminal essay "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story" (2003), it is a field in which there has been a dearth of scholarly research until relatively recently. This may be partially attributable to the "conspicuous omnipresence of the specter in Western literature" (p.1107). The propensity to find ghosts be "everywhere" and "nowhere in particular," (p. 1107) argues Smajic, has tended to produce critical approaches that diminish the significance of cultural and/or historical context in favour of other models. Smajic's book *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (2010) offers a historicist interpretation that has opened fresh interest in nineteenth-century theories of vision, perception and knowledge. Tereza Bambušková's thesis follows this interpretive path with lucidity to present a historically rich, analytically nuanced study of literary representations of the supernatural or inexplicable and the ways they may be understood in relation to contradictory and competing discourses concerning faith, vision and mind in the Victorian period. Given the potentially unmanagable breadth of the corpus, Ms Bambušková wisely limits her investigation to the ghost story genre in particular and has selected productive set of short stories to work with.

Although the title of the thesis suggests a different possible focus (upon the gothic genre and its later incarnations), at the centre of the project is the conviction that "It is [...] worth considering that the main conflict of the story may no longer be between objectively perceived supernatural evil and the characters, but rather between warring notions about vision and reality in the mind itself, the uncertainty of how to react often resulting in attempts to incorporate the unexplainable and the supernatural into the well-known rational framework of medicine or psychology." (p.6-7) Ms Bambušková unfolds this agenda in an engaging and intellectually convincing manner. Her hypothesis is framed in a complex way and demonstrates sophisticated, integrative thought.

The plan of development and key areas to be pursued are communicated clearly and in detail. The proposed structural pattern is logical, headings are convincing and there are no redundancies or tangential interruptions. Chapter 1 maps nineteenth century understandings of ghosts, teasing out different contemporary views about physical and spiritual phenomena. The



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theoretical anchor for the literary analysis is apt – Tzvetan Todorov’s 1975 study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* is concisely introduced here and strategically used throughout the subsequent chapters. Each of the core chapters handles a specific aspect of ghosts as (literary) phenomena. Chapter 2 delves into fascinating nineteenth century sources on the operation of vision and the role of light, as well as more recent scholarship on this topic such as Kate Flint’s *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000). This material is synthesised with the analysis of Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) and J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s “An Account of Some Disturbances in Aungier Street” (1853) in order to explore crucial “moment[s] of hesitation” (see p.35 ff.). Hesitation deriving from doubts about the nature of experienced reality are, therefore, at the crux of the ghost story and its significance in the Victorian era. Chapter 3 explores the tensions between a “critical spirit” of relentless interrogation and submission to authority (p.8-9). The ways in which critical/epistemological enquiry is destabilised in stories like Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” (1869) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Captain of the Pole Star” (1883) are perceptively explained. Chapter 4 considers how the figure of the ghost is depicted in “The House and the Brain” (1859) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt” (1865) and “The Signalman” (1866) by Charles Dickens. Vividly elaborated here is how what is disturbing is not the way a ghost might look, but the very fact that it appears at all. Moreover, Ms Bambušková highlights a key feature of many nineteenth century ghosts (complained of by sceptics like Andrew Lang) – that they seem to have lost their purpose or, worse still, are ineffective communicators. (p.57 ff.) Chapter 5 analyses the ways in which such realms of uncertainty are aesthetically resolved, or at least closed off, in various short stories, but with particular attention to Lanoe Falconer’s “Cecelia de Noël” (1891). Finally, chapter 6 not only provides a detailed and judicious overview of what has been attempted without overstating or simplifying the thesis’s objectives or achievements, but also considers further avenues of research on the topic. There are many fascinating details and resonant insights here making the project a pleasure to read. Indeed, one of the chief merits of the work as a whole is the way in which Ms Bambušková moves between the historical and conceptual material and her selected corpus with a critical confidence rare in MA-level work.

My only enquiry with regard to the project as a whole is the extent to which it stands in the shadow of recent work by Smajic, whom I mentioned at the outset. This is of less crucial significance for an MA thesis, however as I know Ms Bambušková is interested in pursuing her studies in this topic area further (and I would certainly encourage her to do so), it would be wise to think carefully about what original contribution her future work might be make to the discourse. So, given the closeness of their topics, in what ways has Ms Bambušková tried



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to distinguish her investigation from Smajic's scholarship? Also at the defence it would be interesting to hear more about how she arrived at her selection of short stories and which she decided to omit.

With regard to the more practical dimensions of the work: This is an articulate and linguistically nuanced piece of writing. Presentation and format are excellent indicating meticulous attention to detail. Ms Bambušková's research is exemplary, showing both initiative and, more importantly, mature critical judgement. Her sources are not only appropriately cited, but actively engaged and analytically with throughout.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "excellent" / 1.

6.1.2017

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD