

## Dead Men Do Tell Tales: English and Hispanic Ghosts Speak Out

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Dead men do tell tales, especially when they are ghosts. Traditionally associated with evil, ghosts are feared as something that may harm us. As “an instrument of the Fates” they have been described as entities that “haunt the living--something of a mixture of the bogey under the bed and the ever-present Eye of Big Brother” (Manguel 204). Ghosts are not just evil--in the way that a violent street gang of thugs that attacks an innocent passerby is evil--but rather über evil, because ghosts represent “*l'accroc inadmissible d'une puissance mystérieuse*” (Caillois *Obliques* 14) and because ghosts are connected to the fantastic or supernatural, that is to say “another order of reality” (Manlove 3).

When confronted with a ghost we are, in fact, facing the fantastic, the term that best exemplifies its presence in Spain. Along with its English counterpart, the Gothic, and its contemporary descendant, the postgothic<sup>1</sup>, the fantastic that in this instance arises out of the ghost story exhibits the presence of the supernatural, the irrational, the conflict between real/unreal and a resulting uncertainty or fear (Weller Diss. 13).

Whether we are dealing with Tzvetan Todorov's doubt or Freud's “*das Unheimliche*”/the uncanny, the English adjective “ghastly” or the Spanish “*sospechoso, de mal agüero, siniestro*,” the ghost story conjures up this uneasy feeling, the “weird” that H.P. Lovecraft characterizes as a “profound sense of dread,” from deep within our universal consciousness.

The ghost story is generally not a fairy tale, it has no rational explanation, it is not nonsense nor surreal, nor in another alternate world ...but rather it invades ours. Paradoxically

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<sup>1</sup> A term I coined in my doctoral dissertation back in 1991.

the ghost needs the real to exist, it feeds on the real, just as evil needs good upon which to feed and the concept of darkness cannot exist without the concept of light.

So what exactly is a ghost? Who are these dead men and women? Why and how do they appear and what do they want? What is their function? What is their message? In order to answer these questions, we must first understand the association with evil. Sieber's *The Mirror of Medusa* begins such an inquiry by asking "when does something familiar, and reassuringly 'homey' turn into something unfamiliar, and threateningly 'haunting'?" (112), transforming into Freud's notion of unholy? An answer is provided in Greene's use of the Manuel Vargas definition in *Dead Serious: Evil and the Ontology of the Undead* where it states that evil is a "disregard for morality, and a special desire to see others injured" and most importantly, "acting on these motives" (47), factors which we will see come into play in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's tale "The Kiss."

The presence of evil strengthens the ghost story: the famous English Henry James tale "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) has been called the greatest ghost story ever written because it portrays the innocence of childhood and key to the feeling of unease that it elicits from the reader is that this childhood is "surrounded by an atmosphere of sinister evil" all the more terrifying to adults, since traditionally we associate childhood not only with innocence, but as a time for freedom and happiness (Edel 256), hence it is particularly heinous to us, if this carefree time of life is marred by evil.

From malevolent evil, however, there is a sliding scale in degrees of evil which parallels our notion of the human psyche. Evil can surface as projections of the 'Other,' that Kristeva explains as "abjection," an ambiguous opposition I-Other, Inside/Outside. In the original Henry James tale as well as in one modern film adaptation *The Others*, this I/Other

opposition causes us to question, are the children in league with the ghosts? (Haggerty 153) Or as in the case of the narrator in Javier Marías' "When I was Mortal" could the ghost evil possibly be an example of "externalized...manifestations of...psychological disturbances" ? (Powell 41). Whichever your belief, it has been suggested that the events in the ghost story lead one to question the boundaries of the self, whether psychoanalytically or nationally (Powell 41).

Nowhere is this self-questioning seen as extended to the probing of our universal sense of the nature of our identity made more manifest than in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century English ghost story "The Turn of the Screw." James' initial reference to his narrative is not a story, nor his or her story but "The story"--denoting a more powerful archetype that we all share, that touches us all. The telling of the story starts on Christmas Eve, in the Western Christian tradition with the celebration of the birth of Christ. The actual story, however, speaks of a visitation on two children, not of Christ but of "an extraordinary sense of evil" that is never quite named, made all the worse as James allows the reader to imagine its scope. The narrator affirms that nothing can touch this story "for dreadful...for general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain." (Edel 258), which gives the effect of another turn of the screw, meaning heightened danger and increasing tension/stress.

When the ghost of the evil Peter Quint, the redheaded recently deceased valet of the master of the house appears to the governess, his challenge to her authority over the two small children in her care is dramatic: "his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room was...deep and hard...it was not for me he had come. He had come for someone else." (Edel 279). A second apparition, that of the former governess, Miss Jessel, the immoral, illicit lover of Peter Quint and as such likewise an unacceptably corruptive influence on the children, is most

unforgettable at the pond on the grounds, seen as “a figure of quite as unmistakable horror as evil; a woman in black, pale and dreadful” (Edel 290). The governess sees these figures and is convinced the children see them as well, but apparently either no one else does or will confess to same. The tension mounts as jarring incidents increase and no one will acknowledge the elephant in the room, the presence of “the others” invading the house.

The governess is all alone and personifies her and perhaps our own divided selves as she reacts to the phenomenon of these evil, invading ghosts and spells out her own and as we follow her in the story, our own dilemma: “what I had to deal with was, revoltingly, against nature... How could I put even a little...into a suppression of reference to what had occurred? On the other hand could I make reference without a new plunge into the hideous obscure?” (Edel 347).

There is a complicating factor of ambiguity in her actions that brings the reader pause for thought. Despite her righteous battle cry to save the young man Miles from being taken by the ghost of Quint “It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul” (Reader 352), earlier on, in her own words, she has admitted “I had the extraordinary chill of a feeling that it was I who was the intruder.”(Edel 323) She has lingering doubts about the situation as do we when she asks “if he were innocent what then on earth was I?” (Edel 355).

In this battle to save the boy’s soul from evil, the boy ends up dead, and we question if these ghosts were at all real or the hallucinations of a madwoman. During these final moments of the story, the governess realizes the contradictions in her mission. She seeks to conquer by getting at the truth, but the nature of what she seeks or perhaps how she goes about finding it is not to be had: “I was blind with victory though even then the very effect that was to have brought him so much nearer was already that of added separation” (Edel 354).

The last words of the boy “Peter Quint, you devil!” (Edel 348) are open to debate as in, was the devil Quint, or was the boy calling the governess the devil? If we take this argument to question our own natures, is the evil ghost really outside or is it part of us, what we ourselves, suppress or manufacture? James does not answer, but rather leaves it to us the readers to answer these questions for our own selves.

In this question of evil as applied to the Spanish ghost story, unlike the English ghost story, the Spanish ghost or evil arises from war that invades peace. A pattern is set wherein the ghosts are most certainly created out of the evil of war. Bécquer’s 1861 short story “*El beso*” for example, is set in early nineteenth-century Toledo as the French soldiers of Napoléon invade Spain. Similarly, roughly 100 years later, the 1993 Mariás’ “*Cuando fui mortal*” arises out of the aftermath of the brutality of the 1930s Spanish Civil War. Likewise, in our time of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in *The Others*, the 2001 film starring Nicole Kidman, Spanish-Chilean director Alejandro Amenábar’s adaptation of “The Turn of the Screw” retells this ghost story from the perspective of the England of post World War II. By way of contrast then, just as these representative Spanish ghost stories are focused on the consequences that come out of wartime activities, interestingly and noticeably war absent, at least as it pertains to the military arena, is the original Henry James British Empire centered narrative, which is more focused on a personal battle.

The first Spanish ghost story “The Kiss” in this discussion fits into the Gothic “fascination with...chivalry, violence, magical beings and malevolent aristocrats” (Punter 3). As a realistic framing device there are warning signs of things that do not fit dressed in plausible garb (witnessed by no-nonsense soldiers) so as to better shock the senses (Llopis 12) when the anomaly occurs. This is a feudal world, where according to Varma, characters are pitted against

each other as “either somber, diabolic villainy or pure, angelic virtue” and the concept of villain includes “ugly, monstrous foreigners” (Bayer 23). Here the monstrous foreigners come in the form of French soldiers who invade and desecrate the church, taking up residence in its inner sanctum, burning its doors for their own creature comforts. The narrator is clearly displeased with their behavior as he disparagingly describes the misconduct of the officer in charge as “*acostumbrado a ver estos sacrilegios como la cosa más natural del mundo*” and decries “*las blasfemias*” of the men’s cacophonous presence jarring the tranquility of the sanctuary.

The disrespectful soldiers mock the holy place of their current quarters, drinking and tossing empty wine bottles in the church, and singing scandalous songs. The atmosphere rises to a fever pitch when their captain acts mesmerized by the pure, patrician beauty of a medieval stone statue of a noblewoman, Doña Elvira.

Through the captain’s alcohol-induced haze, her statue appears to transmute Galatea-like into a woman of flesh and blood. Jealous of the male marble statue at her side, whom he presumes to be her warrior husband, the captain tosses his drink in its face and laughs as the liquid drips onto its beard of stone. As the affair escalates, the captain’s men sense danger and warn their leader to leave the dead alone. When in a final insult, ignoring reason and propriety, the arrogant captain attempts to kiss the female statue, the male statue strikes him dead with a fatal blow of his stone glove.

Clearly, in this instance, the ghost story is a morality tale wherein the ghost is an agent of strict punishment that is swiftly delivered for a major transgression against Nature, as in disturbing the dead. The warrior protects a lady’s honour, which can be extended to mean protecting the history and honor of Spain and the culture for which it stands. The ghost of the

medieval warrior is “evil” that meets evil head on, but it is the lesser evil, only stirring out of outrage.

When order has been violated, the ghost is then the enforcer, very much like the wronged General’s ghost from the Golden Age drama *El burlador de Sevilla* who avenges Don Juan’s insult to his daughter by dragging the unrepentant womanizer into the depths of hell.<sup>2</sup>

Our second Spanish ghost story “When I Was Mortal,” corresponds to yet another evil, not the “unholy” desecration of the sacredness of the church in “The Kiss,” but rather the evil that goes to the additional meaning of *unheimlich* that Freud finds in Schelling, “the name for everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light”(n.p.). In the opening of this story, the ghost narrator protagonist admits to lying: “I used to pretend I believed in ghosts” he says. This hidden/pretense part of his life is followed by the words “but now that I am myself a ghost” (Costa 41), indicating that the hidden will now be revealed. This very modern ghost even gives commentary, in keeping with more modern literature that flirts with metafiction. He continues, with a voice like that of a literary critic--very much like his creator, Mariás--asserting that traditionally ghosts “are depicted as mournful creatures who stubbornly return to the places they knew when they were mortal” (Costa 41).

In a deconstructionist reversal of “The Kiss” whose evil ghost responds to the evil destruction of everything, the evil that the “When I Was Mortal” ghost bemoans is not the act of destroying but ironically the act of remembering: “Everything is concrete” he says “and excessive, and the razor edge of repetition becomes a torment, because the curse consists in

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<sup>2</sup> Also, one cannot but help note in Bécquer’s story a pervasive, cultural evil, with a historic parallel between the foreign French invasion that destroys Toledo and the foreign Spanish invasion that destroys Tenochtitlan. The avenging ghost, however evil in his ruthlessness, is responding to an ideological clash of values and wills. His message is that atrocities will not be tolerated, neither in the course of Spain’s “salvation” of the Americas by bringing in Christianity nor as here the French “salvation” of Spain by bringing in what the foreign invaders perceive as the superior culture of France.

remembering everything, the minutes of each hour of each day lived through...of tedium and work....”(42). This talkative ghost makes an interesting distinction between time and space.

According to him, he was once living, he was once existing in time, in history, where someone’s story lives, history lives--it moves, it passes, it’s erased VS. space, an after-death state that endures, where he now is, where time neither passes, nor elapses nor flows, where it perpetuates itself simultaneously and in every detail” (41).

Ignorance appears to be bliss, as the ghost explains that while living “we know nothing at the events at which we were not present and the conversations we did not hear, those that took place behind our back and mentioned us or criticized us and condemned us” (43). Once again in a reversal of traditional values, this ghost emphasizes that lying as in not knowing everything, is compassionate as opposed to the cruel evil that is not to lie. Here we have a psychoanalysis on the nature of society in direct opposition to the notion of striving for truth.

The pain of this ghost is seen through the memories of his life, as he relives it with us and shares his experience. He now realizes with his new perspective that the man he thought of as the kindly family Dr. Arranz, who would check in on him when he was a child, was actually blackmailing his father, extorting sexual favors from his mother and, if she refused him, threatening to hand his father over to the authorities for both real and fabricated war crimes committed in the course of the Spanish Civil War. He describes “a look of permanent melancholy” in his father’s eyes: “he had lost the war, and that is probably something you never recover from, having lost a war against your compatriots and neighbours” (43).

The infidelities of his parents in his childhood, he revisits in his marriage, unaware except now from his after death vantagepoint that his wife Luisa was also cheating on him. He

speculates that perhaps after she found out about his affair with his mistress María, hurt by this, his wife Luisa plotted his murder.

In contrast to “The Kiss,” “When I Was Mortal” gives us a story from the viewpoint of the ghost. “When I Was Mortal” does not portray an angry ghost so much as a beaten ghost, a confused “entity that can only exist in terms of our own world” (Jackson 20), but there is poignancy as we feel sorry for the tragic circumstances of this ghost, whose existence is made all the more difficult as our own world is constantly changing. This ghost is defeated, resigned to and exhausted by the legacy of a brutal civil war that, by its very nature, takes a heavier toll both on the individual and the national psyche. Such a war, where your neighbor is the enemy, is much more damaging than some outside foreigner coming to invade your world.

Still, perhaps in an effort to reclaim that state of peace, however artificial, this ghost does not seek revenge or restitution. In a cynical or perhaps pragmatically Buddhist sense, he rationalizes that such pursuits are pointless because in his own words “no one whom I knew or met or pitied or loved remains” (52).

Furthermore, even if he or others return to what they knew “they will see only strangers” and this reader can point out that much like frustrated older adults or history teachers who complain about the new generation of jaded youth, this ghost also alludes to “new men and women who, like children, believe that the world began with their birth and there’s no point asking them about our past, erased existence” (52). In a word, this ghost tells us that apathy has set in, where nobody cares, or perhaps as a protection mechanism and later in a case of mass willful forgetting, an individual or the many that make up a nation, choose oblivion over the constant reliving of a very painful past.

Perhaps this is an antidote to the only evil that matters, the cruelty of when you can no longer tell lies, when you can no longer pretend that all is well, when you are forced to confront the very real pain of your fellow human beings plotting against you, plotting your ruin, plotting to take your property away from you, your dignity, your very life.

The title and concept of the last ghost story under discussion, *The Others* was chosen for study as a Spanish spin on the Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw." The title of the film most likely stems from the final conversation in James' story between the governess and the youth under her supervision. In a tense moment he says "Well, so we're alone!," whereupon she replies "Of course we've the others," referring to the two evil ghosts who have, according to her version of the events, been haunting them and threatening to possess the children in her care. The female main ghost in the film *The Others* has also known the evils of war, a main component in the two previous Spanish stories.

In *The Others*, the woman's English Jersey Island home was invaded by the Nazi soldiers. Her husband has gone off to fight in the war, and she has been left to fend for herself. Alone with her two young children, worried for their safety, lonely for the return of her husband and mad in her isolation, she finds solace in a very strict interpretation of Catholic Doctrine that she forces on her children. The atmosphere is reminiscent of Franco's Spain, where similarly a very strict Catholicism restricted women and made it next to impossible to get a divorce. In her zero tolerance for what she perceives as lies--and this means anything that runs contrary to the narrow world view she holds--she admonishes her children that if they lie they will burn forever.

In this particular woman's world, as in the world of "When I Was Mortal," life is held together through deception. She is all about decency and appearances and makes a point of telling the new servants that she values above all 'honest' help. Like the governess figure in "The

Turn of the Screw” the Nicole Kidman character is a maze of contradictions--both frightened, yet acting as if she were calm and collected in the face of danger to the children. Her care seems to alternate between tyranny and abandon.

In the same way that we can interpret the previous stories on an individual level and national level, her behavior is like the microcosm of a mother country and its treatment of her subject children colonies in the colonial empire, where all manner of strange, evil practices are justified as “for the good of the children.” Her children are photosensitive, hence they must not see the light, both figuratively and here literally they must not be allowed to know the truth she warns, as this could kill them.

In fact, she is correct in that in the same way that the world of the male ghost in “When I Was Mortal” collapses when the web of lies contrived to allow him to exist is lifted, this woman’s world also collapses, when after much denial, she is confronted with a different kind of inconvenient truth. Like another modern film, *Sixth Sense*, most famous for its similarly shocking scene of self-discovery when Bruce Willis playing a very active psychiatrist throughout the movie is told that, in fact, he is dead, she too learns and must admit that she, as well as her children are not alive as she pretends but all dead and ghosts themselves. The pivotal point of the story is the moment she discovers a death picture, a photograph of the dead before they are buried but placed in lifelike poses, macabre to our present day sensibilities but a common practice of old, in yet another attempt to create the illusion that the dead are not dead but still with us. This particular photograph is the method through which the dead speak to her and to us. Since the year is 1945, the 1800s date on the photograph and the content, the image of the three servants currently under her employ confirm that they are also dead, passed on from a tuberculosis epidemic. The three graves that the servants, Mr. Tuttle, Mrs. Mills and Lydia

have managed to keep hidden are on the grounds of the property that they continue to haunt as ghosts.

The mother's clinging to her Catholic rosary beads to help her through the ordeal of others invading her home and her passing this coping skill to her children have been to no avail. Throughout the house, all the curtains that she has insisted remain closed in order to shield the children from light and we may read into this, truth, have been taken down and the servants will not help her put them back up. Mrs. Mills, the ghost housekeeper tries to talk about the situation to her and in the same vein to us the viewers. The housekeeper admits that strange things happen, that it is not easy to explain what is happening in the house, what they are all sensing, except that sometimes as she so mystically puts it "the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living." The initial response of the mother, slow to come round to this way of thinking, is to quote the bible that she says calls it an abomination to mix God and the end of the world. Nevertheless, at last the mother learns that the evil invading ghosts that have been haunting the house and disturbing her children and her peace, are in fact the living, a little boy named Victor and his parents. Reality is turned--where the living become the evil intruders terrorizing the world of the ghosts in a surprising role reversal or twist to the usual ghost story. It is now the living who threaten the dead, who manifest "*un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite*" (Caillois *Images* 14).

The living, through the help of a spirit medium are trying to contact these ghosts in order to buy and occupy the same space, her home, where she and her family are no longer welcome because they are dead and as such they must make room for the living. Much like the suspicions that grow when we observe the governess in "The Turn of the Screw" we also learn the Nicole Kidman character's full story and it is one of extreme violence. Due to an episode of trauma-

induced madness, she killed her own children, smothering them to death with a pillow and then killed herself, shooting herself through a fatal rifle blast to the forehead. The charade of the good, doting mother in which the servant ghosts have been humouring her to maintain for a time in order to ease her into the truth, is now gone. As an evil entity, she does seem to care about her children, however, and is horribly griefstricken, utterly unable to deal with areas of grey, when certainty is so much more comforting.

The ghosts in *The Others* are not the white sheets that carry chains at which the little girl Anne, the daughter pokes fun. They are wondering about life, about this good-evil dichotomy of nature as they ask their mother “When people die in war, where do they go?” The mother tries to simplify the answer saying, “That depends on if they are goodies or baddies;” but even to their innocent ears this answer rings hollow, insufficient to cover the children’s next probing question to which there is no answer: “How can you know the difference?” Are the intruders themselves evil or good and what about “the others?” This is now a very confused and mixed up world, not as clearcut as the world depicted in “The Kiss” and even more grey than the world in “When I Was Mortal.”

To the probing question of the medium “Why do you remain in this house” the children insist “We’re not dead.” Anne in particular refuses to accept that they are in a kind of limbo and the searching for answers expands to the plight of their father, who apparently is not coming back. He was with them briefly but then disappeared in a fog. Their mother blasted him for going to “that stupid war that had nothing to do with us” and reproached him with “what were you trying to prove by going to war when your place was here with us with your family?” In her emotional breaking point her laments being abandoned to a prison of darkness. She accuses him of leaving her of not just the war but leaving her. The father asks for forgiveness as he is also

traumatized both by the war in which he has fought and the warzone he has seen in his home, a place he does not seem to think he can consider his home any longer since he says he is going “out there looking for my home” to which he adds, “sometimes I bleed-I have seen lots of dead men.”

The particular battle that remains on the home front in the wake of the father’s leaving is now won by the mother and the other spirits who have frightened the living enough to make them leave, but Mrs. Mills cautions it is a temporary victory: “the intruders are leaving. Others will come. Sometimes we sense them, other times not” in the new situation “the living and the dead-we must all learn to live together.”

The mother interprets this as another chance to start over with her children intact, but perhaps it is more accurate to use Robert Miles’ term of existing as a “fragmented subject” (Powell 65). This time she does not refute the children who guess “Daddy died in the war, didn’t he?” To their question “If we’re dead, is this limbo?” she rallies to the answer that reassures her more in the new situation she has been forced to accept “I don’t even know if there is a limbo.” The light no longer harms anyone but to be safe she reasserts and clings to the words “This house is ours...No one can make us leave this house.” In other words, the message is that ghosts have a right to exist as well and though evil, they should not be eradicated just because they are no longer defined as the living.

Definitely both the Spanish and the English ghost story represent a sort of reality crisis, hi-lighting that we do not know everything about the universe or the state of affairs in our world, that at least some of the time “the reality of life is chaos: the fantasy of man is order” (Rabkin 213). Instead, it is postulated that “what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more...the only ‘true’ or ‘another and equally valid’ reality” (Brooke-Rose 4).

In closing, in the words of Oscar Wilde , which I believe appropriate for the celebrated theme of ghosts, the related Western Christian and Spanish “All Saints Day” , the Pagan “Hallowe’en” and the Mexican Aztec “Día de los Muertos” “I shall never make a new friend in life, though I rather hope to make a few in death” (Wilde 123).

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