Mirrors of the Self and the Tradition of the “Female Gothic”: Scenes of Hauntings and Apparitions in Victorian and Modernist Short Fiction

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For about two decades, the literary history of the Gothic has been remapped. A book like Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace’s *Gothic Modernisms*, published in 2001 and building on the thesis that “the connections between modernism and the Gothic have [long] been overlooked” would probably not have been written in the 1990s (1). Defined as a genre, or a “mode that exceeds genres and categories” (Botting 14), “an aesthetic of anxiety and perplexity” (Lloyd-Smith 18), a specific language, or, lately, in Julian Wolfreys’ introduction to *Victorian Hauntings*: “a destabilized” and “destabilizing” category always “other than itself” (xvi), the Gothic has infiltrated the fields of Victorian, modernist, and post-modernist studies, often uncovering new literary genealogies and continuities beyond traditional periodization and categories. Critics have ceased to see it as “an aberrant and marginal form” (Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings* xvii) or an “outmoded embarrassment” (Williams 4); they have come to consider it as “an area of concern, a broad subject matter crossing the genres,” “a discursive site, a carnivalesque mode for the representation of the fragmented subject” (Miles 4). The search for a unifying concept of the Gothic—a primitive dread, the visualization of the Freudian Uncanny, a Lacanian Other ...—is now paralleled by the idea of a continuous transformation and dissemination of the genre—or mode—over the centuries, as if what kept returning in the Gothic no longer depended on the form of its representation.

In parallel, the assumption that the Gothic has always been potentially subversive of patriarchal culture continues to fuel feminist approaches to the genre in the wake of
Ellen Moers’s 1976 Literary Women, a book in which the author coined the expression “female Gothic.” For many feminist critics, the Gothic is still a metaphor for female experience underpinned by a historical and cultural understanding of the reality of women’s position. In Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction, published in 1999, Suzanne Becker explains that “we live again in times that are sensible to gothic forms of emotion and representation. And it is my conviction that one of the secrets of the gothic’s persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine” (2). Becker’s statement certainly echoes both traditional and more recent critical discourses on the Gothic, suggesting, among other things, that the Gothic emerged in specific cultural and political contexts, alongside dominant history, while always manifesting counter-cultural claims. It also raises two important questions: first, Becker’s and other feminist critics’ belief in the existence of a “female gothic” can hardly be reconciled with the recent non-historicist and anti-materialist conceptions of the genre. For Victor Sage and Allen Lloyd-Smith, for example, the Gothic is often “an anti-historicizing language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present” (1). On the other hand, if we uphold the concept of “female Gothic” and its definition as a form of “counter culture,” then we need to return to the historically specific circumstances that it conjures up. The second question has to do with what has already been called the Gothic turn in literary studies: if we cyclically “live in Gothic times,” as Angela Carter suggested in her Afterword to her 1974 novel Fireworks (122), should we still be searching for a unifying myth of the Gothic, or should we rather speak of the Gothic as a constantly deferred or deferring linguistic reference, like the elusive “it-ghost” in Virginia Woolf’s “A Haunted House”? In short, what happens to the key notions of genre, gender, and history (both as context and self-awareness) when Gothic becomes another word for the liminal, the spectral, the uncanny, each of these notions potentially becoming metaphors for our forever haunted selves?

In this essay, I would like to offer a few provisional answers to these questions by reading together heroine-centred narratives by female authors who wrote before and after the 1880s: Elizabeth Gaskell, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and Elizabeth Bowen. The short stories under scrutiny—“The Poor Clare,” “The Lady in the Looking-Glass,” “The Little Governess” and “The Demon Lover”—are often anthologized and have been discussed many times. They seem to have little in common in terms of context, plot and narrative technique. However, they all stage haunted female subjects looking at themselves in a mirror; as such, they unveil a continuum of preoccupations and anxieties that challenge traditional periodization and seem to reiterate a similar fearful scenario of imperiled womanhood and self-reflexivity. By doing so, they question the possibility of a “historicist alternative to the psychological, ontological, and symbolic approaches” that, according to Robert Mighall, dominate recent criticism of the Gothic (xix). Something returns in these scenes, inviting us to reassess and problematize the idea of a female tradition of the Gothic and to reach beyond essentializing comments or sheer historicist readings.

On first examination, there is little common ground between the mid-Victorian Gaskell and her modernist followers: modernist writers are rarely compared to their mid-Victorian precursors who, contrary to their late-Victorian successors, seem to belong
to a pre-modern past. And yet, Gaskell wrote in a period when the Gothic had already been “dismembered,” as Julian Wolfreys explains, and “no longer figured [...] as an identifiable corpus” (“Promise,” xiii). Although it was still seen as a “paradoxical and even a parasitic phenomenon,” “laughably conventional,” an “anachronism” “belonging to a bygone era” (Schmitt 305), in the 1850s, the Gothic had infiltrated the works of canonical writers as much as the writings of more marginal ones; its spectral settings were being gradually relocated within domestic spaces, and its ghosts anticipated the post-Freudian era of uncanny visions and hallucinations.

Like Dickens, Gaskell combined parallel careers as realist novelist and Gothic short story writer. Like Charlotte Brontë, she often inserted Gothic ingredients within the familiar structure of the Victorian Bildungsroman. The lineage of her supernatural tales has its source in the eighteenth-century Gothic tradition: it portrays anxieties surrounding class, race, and gender; it often focuses on the construction of female interiority within a narrative insisting on such themes as isolation, claustrophobia, hysteria, the fear of patriarchal power and the resistance to dominant ideology and morality. But those anxieties are typically relocated home in England, rather than in an exotic setting belonging to a bygone past. In her rather long tales, Gaskell uses a refined repertoire of Gothic tropes and scenarios as mechanisms for entertainment and social critique; she “challenges the bourgeois idealization of home as a haven of virtue” (Styler 38), explores female split personalities, and blurs the frontiers between history and fiction, the psychic and the social, female passivity and male violence.

“The Poor Clare,” published in three installments in Dickens’s Christmas number of Household Words (on 13, 20, and 27 December 1856), is a complex tale of curse and redemption in which three generations of eighteenth-century women are shown to suffer the consequences of patriarchal oppression and of the unleashed rage that male violence provokes. Having lost track of her beloved daughter Mary with whom she used to serve at Starkey Manor House, Lancashire, Bridget Fitzgerald, the poor Clare of the story, is leading a wild and isolated life when one day, Squire Gisborne “partly for wantonness, partly to vent his spleen upon some living creature” (58) shoots her dog Mignon, the cherished substitute for her lost daughter. Unaware that the Squire seduced Mary and left her a fallen woman with a child, and suicide as the only outcome, Bridget curses the father of her granddaughter Lucy and triggers off a chain of cause and effects that excludes her from the community. Lucy is thus plagued with an evil doppelgänger whose regular apparitions become her heavy secret, and the reason for her father’s and society’s repudiation. The “sins of the father being visited upon the children” (79; 82), Lucy will only be freed from her curse when her grandmother expiates her sin by doing penance and sacrificing her life, thus redeeming the Squire, herself, and the pure, modest innocent Lucy whom the male narrator has fallen in love with.

A first interpretation of the story brings to the fore the traditional female conflict with regards to the subject of passion: to be able to marry, Lucy must erase the traces of desire and sexuality of her maternal inheritance (both her mother and grandmother were beautiful women having married above station), traces that her own father sees in her when, one morning, he unexpectedly catches sight of her evil double in the mirror: [my father] was about to strike me, and I, all in bewildering tears, was ready to take his stripes as great kindness compared to his harder words, when suddenly he stopped his arm mid-way, gasped and staggered, crying out, “The curse—the curse!” I looked up in terror. In the great mirror opposite I saw myself, and right
behind, another wicked, fearful self, so like me that my soul seemed to quiver within me, as though not knowing to which similitude of body it belonged. (76-77)

Lucy’s “ghastly resemblance” and its “loathsome demon soul looking out of the gray eyes, that were in turns mocking and voluptuous” (78) is then perceived by the narrator who cannot but acknowledge its supernatural dimension.

Gaskell obviously displays here a series of ready-made gothic motifs: an ancestral Manor House, an illegitimate daughter and cursed heroine, a domineering Squire cursed by his Irish-Catholic mother in law, supernatural coincidences, patriarchal violence, the return of a traumatic past notably in the form of Lucy’s ghostly double, and a remarkable Gothic structure of embedded narratives. Virginia Woolf would probably have laughed at this formulaic use of the Gothic that Oscar Wilde already parodied in the 1880s: “we feel a little aggrieved when the writers who are capable of such delicate work [she is referring here to the author of supernatural stories that she is reviewing] resort instead to the methods of a conjuror and ask us to be satisfied with a trick” (“Before Midnight,” 87). And yet, Gaskell’s complex parable of patriarchy is represented here as a climactic moment of apparition that disrupts domestic appearances. As such, it anticipates other scenes of self-exploration within the private sphere, Gothic or uncanny scenes “where woman is examined with a woman’s eye” instead of being objectified by a male standpoint (Moers 109).

In the passage, Lucy has become the narrator of her own embedded narrative. Her first-person retrospective story gives us access to her controlled, rational voice explaining the reasons of her overwhelming emotions: Lucy’s Gothic ‘dread’ is not caused by her image in the mirror—since she recognizes it as herself—but by “another wicked, fearful self” that she calls her double, so “similar” to her body and yet so different. In this particular case, this double is observable by Lucy’s objectifying father and other characters in the room; but when it returns in subsequent passages, it does so without a mirror to frame it—probably because the perspective is then that of the male narrator. More striking still is the way Lucy’s double implies a triple image of Lucy: her real self, her mirror self, and the demonic dopplegänger. Later on, Lucy’s double splits into two: its less terrible reflection remains trapped in the mirror, while the more dreadful self seems to have escaped out of the frame, and cannot be clearly located in the space of the room or in the grammar of the text.

Although it is clearly Victorian in narrative technique, Gaskell’s scene also displays more modern aspects of the Gothic. First, the mirror does not split Lucy’s image into two entities, but three; as such, it challenges the traditional dichotomies that it is meant to explore, notably between the suffering “arising from the outside,” Victorian society, and a more internal, “psychic” suffering, as Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky have shown in their essay on “The Poor Clare” (88). In these pages, then, Gaskell’s writing stages “woman” as textual position: a female subject projects herself through narration within and without the boundaries of her body and mental space. She also learns to watch and be watched. The mirror becomes a frame, a frontier, and a metafictional device; it refers to the well-known trope of the female perceiving subject. It also triggers off an epiphanic moment of self-alienation and provisional self-knowledge which it renders visual and specular at the same time. The scene implies a series of embedded structures: a confession within a framing narrative, a mirror inside a room, inside a home—spatial motifs that Suzanne Becker associates with a Gothic “excess of formal closure” that unsettles the contentment usually associated with
popular “escape” literature (34-35). However, as Miranda Anderson explains in her essay on “Early Modern Mirrors,” “like language, the mirror also acts here as a ‘mind tool’ that enables human subjects to stretch beyond [their] brain and body boundaries” (105). The scene, therefore, appears to be in line with the tradition of the “female Gothic,” or “women’s Gothic,” in the wake of Ellen Moers’ seminal work. For Juliann Fleenor, “the Gothic and [...] female experiences have a common schizophrenia” (28). In *Perils of the Night*, Eugenia Delamotte explains that what she calls the Gothic “myth” has to do with “an anxiety about boundaries: those that shut the protagonist off from the world, those that shut the protagonist in, and those that separate the individual self from something that is Other” (19); she also relates the theme of boundaries to women Gothicists’ central issue in the nineteenth century: “the problem of making oneself known to others through language,” the problem of “saying I” (24): as the narrator of her own story of entrapment and self-division, Lucy has access to forms of self-knowledge and expression that many of her predecessors did not have.

There are mirrors, but no formulaic Gothic repertoire in Katherine Mansfield’s and Virginia Woolf’s modernist short fictions; no intricate plotting, as in Gaskell, no bravura effect or dramatic intensity. The stories do not deal with the return of a traumatic past, nor do they seem to imply any form of historical awareness. In this respect, it is uncertain whether “The Lady in the Looking-Glass” and “The Little Governess” have anything to do with the Gothic as genre, unless we study them—as some critics have—in the context of a certain “Gothic-ising of theory” (Hogle and Smith 2) which generally understands the Gothic’s transmutations from the eighteenth to the twentieth century in terms of dissemination, psychoanalytical spectrality and “the alterity of subjectivity” (Wolfreys, “Promise” xviii). At any rate, the mirror scenes in their stories tell us about split-identities, apparent passivity, and the diffuse fear related to “what distinguishes the ‘me’ from the ‘not-me’” (Delamotte 23). As such, they recall Lucy Gisborne’s story and character.

Published in 1915, “The Little Governess” is a modernist tale of female victim and male victimizer whose plot-line echoes “Little Red Riding Hood”: at first sight, the fairy-tale, more than the Gothic, is the genre that enables Mansfield to perpetuate gender relations and definitions. As the foreign, young and vulnerable protagonist travels at night from France to Germany for a position of governess, she naively accepts the friendship of an old pervert German man whom she takes for a grandfather figure, follows him to his apartment, and discovers that his true motivation is not simply to give her strawberries and show her round Munich. The dark epiphanic moment that follows marks the end of the story and of a rough initiatory journey into the world of adulthood and masculinity. Mansfield’s uncanny mirror scene takes place at the beginning of this journey. The little governess is on board the train to France and falls prey to a porter whom she wishes to tip no more than twenty centimes. Trying to stoically endure his verbal and physical violence as she “fe[els] his sharp eyes pricking her all over,” she “screw[s] herself tight, tight, and put[s] out an icy hand and t[akes] the money—stow[s] it away in her hand,” “trembling with terror.” When the porter disappears into the dark, she is relieved, and stands up, “feel[s] if the dress-basket [is] firm” and catches “sight of herself in the mirror, quite white, with big round eyes. She untie[s] her ‘motor veil’ and unbutton[s] her green cape.” To “the mirror face,” she says “But it’s all over now,” “feeling in some way that it was more frightened than she” (424).
This confrontation of the female character with her image is not dramatized; it is not even a haunting scene. Framed by the mirror, announced by an increase in the tension, the moment does not reveal any evil double or ghostly presence, although the face in the mirror looks autonomous and strangely different. And yet, the story obviously echoes Charlotte Brontë’s famous governess novel *Jane Eyre*: the same allusions to the social and ideological “invisibility” of heroines’ in-between character can be found in both fictions. The elderly gentleman is no Rochester; there is no attic in his apartment with a trapped wife in it; Munich is a foreign town, not the location of a fearful manor house. Nonetheless, the disseminated traces of the Gothic accumulate in Mansfield’s fiction: the “night” and its perils, the enclosed space of “an evening boat” its “corridors” and “door[s] that should remain lock[ed]” to protect women, from the presence of “people with evil intentions” (422), an inexperienced heroine who “trembl[es] with terror,” a strange atmosphere—the adjective is repeated nine times—a “dark passage” leading to the old man’s flat, an almost Richardsonian struggle “out of his hands” (432), and finally, a scene of attempted rape: “He held against her his hard old body and his twitching knee and though she shook her head from side to side, distracted, kissed her on the mouth” (432).

Those traces eventually compose an uncanny backdrop against which the mirror scene can be read differently: as the little governess takes off a “motor veil” that echoes Jane’s wedding veil in *Jane Eyre*, she tries to control her innermost fears and desires by projecting them onto her pale double in the mirror; in doing so, she becomes a modern version of the traditional female gothic heroine, first empowered by the perspective of leaving home and then made vulnerable by a series of perils and obstacles caused by masculine hegemony. Mansfield is obviously playing here less with Gothic clichés than she is revisiting Gothic scenarios transposed into the modern world: in the mirror, female conflicts between passivity and control, repression and self-expression, confusion and order are revisited. These women’s anxieties are perplexities that lead to the “common schizophrenia” evoked by Juliann Fleenor in *The Female Gothic* (28): the heroine is here both traveling and entrapped, an object and the agent, in the scene at least, of her own self-examination. In the looking-glass and beyond, something returns that cannot be entirely accounted for: possibly an unspeakable connection with intergenerational violence. In this respect, the governess’s address to herself—“But it’s all over now”—sounds both like a subdued sign of agency and the voice of dramatic irony: the violence visited upon the female body is not over.

With Mansfield and Woolf, the Gothic appears to be transformed into the more spiritualized territory of the uncanny. As Vernon Lee explains in her preface to *Hauntings*—a collection of “four little tales” that are “of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense”—the new “specters” of the 1880s and their followers cannot be “caught in definite places and made to dictate judicial evidence”; one can only “affirm one thing” about them: that “they haunted certain brains” (xi). Similarly, Virginia Woolf’s conception of modern ghosts, is that, like Henry James’s “phantoms,” they have “their origins within us”: “they are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange” (“Henry James,” 324). In her essays and reviews on Gothic romance, she explains that the modern ghost story should not be about the disinterring of the past but about the “discovery of some […] uncharted territories of the mind” (“Before Midnight,” 87). Her insights into the genre are often mentioned by Modernist or postmodernist scholars.
interested in the Gothic. For David Seed, for example, the supernatural was central to Woolf’s attempts to “relocate the importance of the mind” and “challenge presumptions about the priority of material circumstances in reality” (44; 49); in the same volume, Judith Wilt evokes her “insistent deployment of a vocabulary of the spiritual, paranormal, even ‘psychical’ terminology about character, which always has an element of the ‘apparitional’ about it” (62). In her experimental and highly metaphorical short fictions such as “The Mysterious Case of Miss V” or “A Haunted House,” Woolf does not naturalize the supernatural—as eighteenth-century gothic usually did—instead, she denaturalizes the familiar. In this respect, her definition of the modern spectral, or ghostly—a sense of “the unseen world […] closely related to what goes in this” (“Henry James” 324)—echoes Freud’s definition of the uncanny as the ambivalent apprehension of the foreign and the familiar (394).

At first sight, however, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” is a different story: no dramatization, visitation by or apparition of a menacing double. Instead, the text proposes a half-fictional, half-essayistic reflection on the relation of appearances and the act of gazing towards truth. The anonymous narrator of the story is first preoccupied by the scene reflected in the hall mirror and cut off by its “gold rim”: “But outside the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sun-flowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held in their reality unescapably” (221). He or she looks for a stable centre, a “truth” beyond the controlling presence of the mirror; he or she also tries to catch “Mrs. Brown,” here Isabella Tyson, over whom “the looking-glass began to pour […] a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth” (225). But instead of catching “Isabella’s profounder state of being” (224), the mirror exposes her emptiness: “Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing” (225). As Nena Skrbic has already suggested, the mirror is here a dangerous medium of self-revelation, an intrusive device of self-objectification, transforming the framed postman who delivers Isabella’s letters into a “looming black form,” deadening what it circumscribes while suggesting how life outside is chaotic, disquietingly alive. A critique of traditional modes of representation, Woolf’s sketch also reveals the inaccessibility of one’s true self, the danger, for women, to be exposed, and the “violation implicit in [her] objectification” (74-77).

Woolf’s mirror scene does not suggest any form of contextualized anxiety; instead, it offers us scattered Gothic “apparitional traces and fragments” (Wolfreys, Victorian Hauntings 7), disseminated uncanny figures and tropes: a rich spinster who used to travel a lot around the world and is now living in an empty house, “obscure flushes and darkenings” in her garden (221), rugs, chairs and cabinets that “now lived their obscure lives before one’s eyes” (222), a room that becomes “more shadowy and symbolic” as the reflection on Isabella goes on, a looking-glass that transforms the pictures it frames into something “unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus” (223), a mirror image of Isabella that “made one start” (225). Those uncanny figures and tropes could easily be interpreted as a mere form of cyclical revenance. However, as they did in Mansfield’s “The Little Governess,” those dispersed ominous hints converge towards a similar moment of intensity during which the female character is scrutinized, wishes she could escape and finally remains inscrutable. In this story, Woolf uses the looking-glass, this otherwise differently gendered object, as a kind of male, threatening censoring eye, and if the scene is not exactly one of schizophrenic doubling, notably because “one,” not “she,” is the neutral gazer, it nonetheless displays a continuum of
female anxieties concerning appearance, control, and containment within power structures. Now and before, the looking-glass cannot be a promise of full knowledge, whether for men or for women, and the moment of illumination will always be deferred: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (Corinthians, I, 12, 13).

Strikingly enough, this promise of a long-wished-for access to truth, once the glass of the old brass mirror is polished, gave its title to Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 collection In a Glass Darkly, Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural. The Irish master of Victorian mystery and horror fiction happened to be one of Elizabeth Bowen’s literary inspirations. In The Demon Lover, a volume published in 1945 and written just after the bombing of her house in the Blitz, Bowen explores the uncanniness of wartime life. More than in her novels, the short story genre allows here “for what is crazy about humanity: obstinacies, inordinate heroisms, immortal longings” (Bowen, “Preface,” Stories 130). In “The Demon Lover,” the eponymous character resurfaces from the past in the life of Kathleen Drover, a middle-aged married and dutiful woman who comes back to her London house during the blitz. Her journey into a bombed city of “unfamiliar streets,” “broken chimneys and parapets” and empty houses takes her finally to her own property “to look for several things she wanted to take away” with her to the countryside (661). As she wanders around the house and thinks of the past, she finally discovers a letter deposited on the hall table by some unknown person. It is signed “K,” is dated the present day with no address or postage, and finally reminds her of a long repressed memory: twenty-five years earlier, a pledge had been made between her and her lover, but never fulfilled and he was since missing in action. She had pledged to meet her beloved, a young soldier supposed to have been killed during the war, for their anniversary. Filled with remorse, guilt, and feeling “so much change in her own face,” Kathleen Drover drops the letter and goes to her dusty mirror, “polishe[s] a clear patch in it, and look[es] at once urgently and stealthily in”: She was confronted by a woman of forty-four, with eyes starting out under a hat brim that had been rather carelessly pulled down. She had not put on any more powder since she left the shop where she ate her solitary tea. The pearls her husband had given her on their marriage hung loose round her now rather thinner throat, slipping in the V of the pink wool jumper her sister knitted last autumn as they sat round the fire. Mrs. Drover’s most normal expression was one of controlled worry, but of assent. Since the birth of the third of her little boys, attended by a quite serious illness, she had had an intermittent muscular flicker to the left of her mouth, but in spite of this she could always sustain a manner that was at once energetic and calm.

Turning from her own face as precipitately as she had gone to meet it, she went to the chest where the things were, unlocked it, threw up the lid, and knelt to search.

As Adam Piette convincingly explains, what the character sees in the mirror is not an evil double but “the unflattering likeness of the dowdy, middle-aged society matron she thought she would never become [...]. And like the fairytale queen whose honest mirror offended her pride, the awful truth stuns this middle-aged wife and mother, rocks her back on her aristocratic heels” (7).

The story nonetheless bears the literary traces of past traditions: in the anonymous popular Scottish ballad “The Daemon Lover” (1882-98), a man seduces a married woman away from her home and family by luring her with promises of riches. His promise of escape and love ends in a ship wreckage and the woman’s death. Bowen’s
own “Demon Lover” does not get rid of romance, but moves spectrality effects away
from the spectacular into the realm of a quotidian haunted by war. As in a traditional
gothic tale, the author stages a series of embedded spaces: the city, the house, the
room, a locked closet, a mirror and a letter. Trapped within these hollowed confining
structures, haunted by the past, Mrs Drover scrutinizes her image in the looking-glass,
at first aloof and controlled, then seized by a fit of panic. Before and after she gets into
a cab and screams on discovering the identity of the driver, she will remain one among
a long tradition of petrified female characters whose passivity and sense of guilt expose
them to demonic influence, curses, dopplegängers or nightmares. Something returns
here, that the character cannot retrieve: her guilt, her youth, her lost passion and
romantic dreams. As to the mirror, it reiterates the metaphor of “women’s fears of
entrapment within the domestic sphere and the female body” (Smith and Wallace, “The
Female Gothic” 1).

Bowen’s version of the gothic is both formulaic—the story is a well-plotted thrillers—
and modernist in its use of a suspensive ending, free indirect speech, patterns of
metaphorical meaning. As Luke Thurston explains, Bowen’s short fiction often resorts
to an “uncanny collusion of ultra-modernity and traditional life-worlds” (149). As such,
“The Demon Lover” seems to be representative of Modernist Women’s Ghost Stories as
analyzed by Emma Liggins in a recent article: “Disrupted temporal sequences, ghosts
who never materialise, unspectral settings, and a troubled disjunction between past
and future all characterise uncanny modernist short fiction by women, showing how
notions of apparitionality have shifted from the Victorian period to reflect anxieties
about modernity, suburbia and the frontiers of memory” (47). But in the same brilliant
essay, Liggins suggests that “the over-emphasis on the Freudian uncanny and the
familiar/unfamiliar distinction in readings of the modernist ghost story has perhaps
diverted our attention away from alternative readings of spectrality centred on issues
around modernity, nostalgia and the shock of the new” (35).

As a matter of fact, whether we read the four mirror scenes evoked in this paper as a
recycling of ready-made motifs or as metaphors of a decontextualized female ontology,
the risk is to lose sense of historical awareness, cultural context and genre. On the one
hand, the interpretation may coincide with a post-modernist retrospective vision of the
gothic as centrally psychological and anti-historicizing: in their 1996 preface to Modern
Gothic: A Reader, for example, Lloyd-Smith and Sage explain that “reiteration is the
modern form of haunting” (4). In this scenario, the female characters in the mirror are
mere images, and never subjects in construction. On the other hand, the temptation is
to see these images and apparitions as referring to a female essence, whether the
associated myth is submission, passivity, masochism, or painful resistance to male
norms, to name but a few. I would suggest an investigation beyond this clear-cut
dichotomy, that sees the mirror in the stories by Gaskell, Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf,
as the place where Gothic connections between history, genre and gender can be
reassessed.

When Mighall explains that “the spectres which the Gothic conjures up are shaped by
historically specific circumstances,” he proposes a critique of the psychoanalytical turn
in Gothic Studies. In the case of “The Poor Clare” and “The Demon Lover,” those
circumstances are easy to retrieve. In the case of Mansfield’s and Woolf’s short fictions, our conception of the Gothic’s historical awareness, I suggest, should be enlarged to the appropriation of cultural contexts and literary genealogies. As the other two, Mansfield’s and Woolf’s stories should be first read against the context of the evolution of the science and philosophies of the self over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, most Gothic scholars know that Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” was inspired by his reading of Hoffman’s 1817 short story “The Sandman,” and see a clear continuity between his “account of fear and desire” in his essay and the theories of nineteenth-century “scientists of mind” such as Johann Herbart, William McDougall or Frederic William Meyers. In other words, the modernist divided self was foreshadowed by romantic and Victorian visions of the unconscious, of desire and transgression: “Psychoanalysis,” Wolfreys explains, “has the aura of the Gothic about it.” In this respect, and in the wake of recent research in Trauma studies, “The Little Governess” should perhaps be examined in the light of its publication date: during the First World War, and twelve days exactly (for the first installment of the story in the Signature) after Mansfield’s brother Leslie Beauchamp was killed in France in a grenade accident. Behind any “mirror scene,” then, lurks the cultural history of mirrors: their magic function in prehistoric times; their scientific and anthropological value in the seventeenth century; their later use in developmental psychology. From primitive fears to more psychological obsessions, “our relation to the mirror as tool” has always been formed in correlation to the technological, sociocultural and psychophysiological context of any particular time and place, as Miranda Anderson explains (105). Last but not least, what these scenes display, is a tribute to past literary history, and as such, a fictional mode of historiography based on continuities and returns: even modernity cannot rid us of the past. Thus, Bowen rewrites the “demon lover” motif of the seventeenth-century Scottish ballad, Woolf’s Lady could be a modernist version of Tennyson’s The Lady of Shalott condemned to weave images in her loom without looking outside, Mansfield is inspired by Charlotte Brontë.

25 In this perspective, a new, or several new, genealogie(s) of female writers might emerge, a “symbolic community,” to take up Susan Wolstenholme’s idea in Gothic (Re)Visions: Writing Women as Readers—a community characterized not by a position of marginality, […] nor by a common bond of directly accessible experience, but rather by the symbolic exchange among the group itself” (xiii). To understand Gaskell, Mansfield, Woolf, Bowen and others as partaking in the construction of cultural exchanges across periodization and individual differences enables us to understand their work in a way that is neither ahistorical nor essentialist, but combines feminist narratology with a vision of language and writing that is entangled with history. As Angela Carter’s narrator says in “The Flesh and the Mirror”: “Women and mirrors are in complicity with one another to evade the action I/she performs that she/I cannot watch, the action with which I break out of the mirror, with which I assume my appearance” (65).

26 There is apparently no reason for this strange and paradoxical complicity between women and mirrors to be found in short stories only. Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights are perfect examples. However, my recent, though incomplete, investigations suggest that they are more frequent in short fictions. No mirror scenes in Radcliffe’s A Sicilian Romance, and The Mysteries of Udolpho, or Clara Reeve’s The Old English Baron, but then there were few personal mirrors in homes at the time. No mirror scenes either in Gaskell’s realist novels such as North and South, Cranford and Wives and Daughters, or in the more sensationalist novel Ruth. This might be explained by the well-known...
argument of the position of the short story in the hierarchy of genres, by the other well-known argument of its specificities as a form rooted in the oral tale, the fairy tale and fantasy, a form that has always easily accepted supernatural elements within its confines, contrary to the novel with its “calmer, stricter, more orthodox demands”—to quote from Elizabeth Bowen’s preface to *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* (158). In his 1988 study of *The Short Story: Henry James to Elizabeth Bowen*, John Bayley wrote that “Short stories are defined by something withheld and mysterious” (8); more recently, Fred Botting explains, in “Stories, Spectres, Screens,” that “as an interplay between convention and disruption, the modernist short story has much in common with the ghost-story and the uncanny” (103). Besides, as Nena Skrbic explains in her analysis of the less uncanny mirror scene of Woolf’s “The New Dress,” the “mirror’s delimiting frame figures as an image of the short story itself, since, like the mirror, it holds nothing lasting in its frame” (64). This metaphor could obviously be applied to the other texts studied here. In fact, if we accept Robert Miles’s definition of the Gothic as “discourse,” in Foucault’s sense, and not as genre, or style, a discourse that is “disjunctive, fragmentary and inchoate,” and represents “the subject in a state of deracination, [...] in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation” (3), then there must be affinities between the Gothic and modern short fiction in general.

More than a metafictional image of evanescence, however, the examined mirror scenes stage moments of intensity steeped in historical awareness. Mirrors used by women have been at the centre of a continuum of anxieties resulting from the cultural impositions that their very frame (echoed here by the constraints of the short story form) symbolizes. Producing petrified images, offering a smooth surface of appearances as they freeze the moment and the subject’s gaze, they can also be conceived, in their more Gothic version, as a counter site: the place where an effraction can take place, where a becoming female subject might appear. Something is entrapped in the framed glass that finally exceeds its structure. In *Les Excès du genre*, a book on gender, stereotypes and the political use of female nudity, the French feminist philosopher Geneviève Fraisse explains the major difference that she sees between the world of representation, appearances and stereotypes—a world where women are always victims of prejudices—and a world of “apparitions” (in French), meaning the emergence of women as groups and communities in the public sphere, their entering into history and inscription in history books as exceptional, and more ordinary, subjects. I would like to argue that Gaskell’s, Mansfield’s, Woolf’s and Bowen’s mirrors, and many others after these, are the conflicting sites of appearances and “apparitions,” this last term being understood as referring to the moments and places where and when women appear as subjects: haunted by the history of what has prevented them from doing so.
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ABSTRACTS

Cet article a pour objet d’interroger le consensus théorique actuel sur l’histoire littéraire du gothique entre les XIXe et XXe siècles à partir d’un corpus de nouvelles victoriennes et modernistes qui mettent en scène, au tournant épiphanique de leur récit, le trope inquiétant et familier de la femme devant son miroir. À partir de cette lecture comparée de scènes d’apparitions et de division du moi provenant de textes écrits avant et après 1880 par Elizabeth Gaskell, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield et Elizabeth Bowen, on mettra ici en évidence la continuité et la persistance des préoccupations et des anxiétés représentées par ces personnages féminins, continuité à la fois ancrée dans un contexte, et liée à la construction du sujet féminin dans la fiction en général et dans la nouvelle en particulier. La récurrence de ces scènes de miroir gothiques dans le roman et la nouvelle des XIXe et XXe siècles soulève non seulement la question du genre — au double sens de « genre » et « gender » — et de ses liens singuliers avec le gothique, mais aussi celle du retour troublant, voire du recyclage, des ingrédients du gothique d’un siècle à l’autre : faut-il voir, dans ce retour, l’expression d’un lien brisé entre le gothique et son rapport à l’histoire — ici l’histoire des femmes et de leur représentation — ou bien, au contraire, la trace d’une généalogie littéraire à retrouver, et d’une mémoire collective à retracer.

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