"Fitz-James O'Brien's 'The Lost Room': Not To Have and Not To Be"

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Fitz-James O'Brien was born and lived in Ireland (1828-1852) and emigrated in 1852 to America, where he became the leading writer of horror stories in the decade following the death of Edgar Allen Poe. The year 1858 saw the publication of his best-known stories, “The Diamond Lens,” “From Hand to Mouth” and “The Lost Room,” in the September edition of Harper's New Monthly Magazine.

“The Lost Room” is a first-person narrative in which the unnamed protagonist, sitting in his New-York apartment, makes an inventory of his possessions. His objects (a gothic lithograph, a smoking-cap, a piano, snow-shoes and an old dagger) recall personal memories of his life, friends, love and family. Because the atmosphere is too oppressive, he leaves his room and gets out into the garden. There he meets a strange creature who tells him the other lodgers of the house are "enchanters," "ghouls," "cannibals" and that he is now their enemy because he was "of them once" (62). When the protagonist gets back into his room, he finds it changed and occupied by half a dozen strange men and women indulging in a bacchanalian orgy and his property curiously altered. Unable to prove to them that it is his own apartment, he is challenged into risking it on a throw of the dice. When he loses, he finds his room vanishing out of existence.

The room and the objects obviously play a central role in this fantasy. To understand it requires an exploration of the subject's involvement with objects and place. Starting from the rather sensible hypothesis that not only the protagonist's experience is related to them but that, through description, his subjectivity connects with them, it appears that the aesthetics of fantasy shapes the relations between subject and objects in a new way. So the protagonist’s modes of relating with objects in the context of verisimilitude will be analysed. Then, otherness in the room and the objects, introduced by fantasy, will be examined in its creation of troubling connections and disconnections between subject and object. Finally psychoanalytic theory will be used to explain the uncanny power of objects.
Room, objects and subject: modes of relating in verisimilitude

In this short story the objects are not seen in their utilitarian functions: they first appear to have a purely decorative function. Yet the narration manifests the subject’s involvement with them in several ways. First it is a first-person narration and as such it tends to bring together the narrated agent’s experience and the narrating agent’s representation of objects. Furthermore, strategies of internal focalisation blur the distance between experience and representation. The present tense is even used for over two pages, erasing the time gap between past and present. This strategy suggests the subject’s continuing involvement with his room and possessions. In addition, it is through the descriptions of objects and of what they evoke that meaning is structured throughout the short story. Indeed, the protagonist decides to sit and make an inventory of his possessions, and the logic of enumeration marks not only the first section of the descriptive text but also the representation of the changed room as well as the final glimpse before the room vanishes. The narrator later comments about the organisation of his perceptions and thoughts:

It was somewhat after the foregoing fashion that I dreamily made an inventory of my personal property. As I turned my eyes on each object, one after the other——the places where they lay, for the room was now so dark that it was almost impossible to see with any distinctness—a crowd of memories connected with each rose up before me (...) (59)

If, in the first section, the objects are remembered as much as perceived (“my inner vision scrutinized every detail of the picture.” - 56), they are nevertheless represented as existing through hypotyposis. This figure is notably supported by spatial deictics --“There was, _imprimis_, that ghostly lithograph”; “_Those_ snow-shoes that hang”-- or by the use of the present tense --“Next to the picture comes the round blot that hangs below it”—or again by an exclamative style which forcefully emphasises the presence of an object --“How uncouthly the huge piano that occupies the corner at the left of the door looms out in the uncertain twilight!” (56). In fact the objects and the room are seen as both real things and sites for “the most riotous fancies to play at will” (61).

Objects are related with the subject because they are his possessions. The protagonist is in the mood to make “a languid inventory of the principal articles of furniture in my room” (55). He does so for unexplained reasons, but finds a certain comfort from the oppressive heat in the spectacle of his property. The narration notes his pleasure of watching without an effort, using an isotopy of control: “from the place where I sat I could command a view of all my possessions without even turning my head.” (55) However the pleasure of owning is counterbalanced by the uncanny pleasure of being possessed. The lithograph by Calame “tells no tale, but there is a weird power about it that haunts one, and it was for that I bought it.” (56) Other objects are endowed with seemingly dangerous or uncontrollable power. For instance, his smoking-cap becomes him well, yet for some reason he never wears it. About the piano, he declares, “It is a comfort for me to look at it, and to feel that the music is there (...).” His sense of possession even extends to the music and the composers that he associates with the piano. Although the narrator mentions he was under a spell, fantasy does not step in at that stage, for the objects simply reflect the protagonist’s feelings and impressions. Thus they are objective correlatives of his mood.
The presence of modal expressions (such as the verb ‘to seem’ or the hypothetical comparative ‘as if’) testifies to the predominance of subjectivity in the subject/object relation. So if on the one hand the objects constitute extensions of the self, as possessions, on the other hand they impinge upon the subject’s territory because of their haunting power.

These “articles of furniture” also reflect his past. With them, he makes inroads into his memory. The smoking-cap, the piano, the snow-shoes and the dagger in turn trigger personal memories in the form of analepses. They metonymically bring scenes from the past, places, and people, all intimately connected with the subject. In a sense, they are tokens of the presence of the self in the past and signs of his continued identity. They also function like space/time interfaces since their --and the subject’s-- temporal continuity takes up its abode in the spatial dimensions of the objects. Yet the objects also impose the memories they evoke on the subject who admits: “and perforce, I had to indulge them.” (59)

The literary conventions of verisimilitude do not preclude any of these interactions between subject and objects. But they never reign supreme in “The Lost Room,” for from the outset --and from the title itself-- the story is fraught with intimations of strangeness. Indeed an isotopy of strangeness, the building up of an oppressively heavy atmosphere, the picture of a gloomy chamber full of shadows, the reference to a “ghostly lithograph” (56), the mention of a “magnetic power” about the piano (57), and the memory of a fire “painting all kinds of demoniac shapes” (57), to name but a few ingredients, pave the way for the introduction of fantasy.

Otherness in the room: troubling connections and disconnections

The shift into fantasy occurs when the protagonist meets an individual “of extremely small stature” (61) in the garden. From then on, the room and its objects are perceived in a completely different way. Fantasy has stepped in, breaking the accepted laws of verisimilitude and leaving the reader wondering about a possible explanation and hesitating between a rational one and a supernatural one.

The narration builds up an isotopy of change the effect of which is supported by an isotopy of wonder and forms of emphasis:

To my utter astonishment the room I had left in profound darkness was now a blaze of light. So intense was the illumination that, for a few seconds while the pupils of my eyes were contracting under the sudden change, I saw absolutely nothing save the dazzling glare. (63)

Otherness has invaded the room in the form of new occupants, Roman couches, “a prodigality of luxuries” (fruits, vases, dishes, bottles, drinking-glasses). People and objects are also endowed with such marks of otherness as orientalism7 (luscious eastern fruits, the Orient sun, Turkish objects), a different civilisation set in the past (the paraphernalia of Roman bacchanals), references to various continental European cultures through objects (Italy, Germany, Holland, Spain and France). What adds to the otherness in objects is their metonymic connections with the strange occupants of the room. Indeed objects and people share the same characteristics of sensuality, luxury, weirdness: “The inhabitants of my room seemed beings well suited to so sensual an atmosphere.” (64)
addition, the room and its objects have undergone a metamorphosis. Familiar objects have been transformed into strange ones. The protagonist's piano has become an organ, his dagger a Turkish yataghan, his smoking-cap a knightly casque, and his snow-shoes strange up-curled Turkish slippers. Orientalism and medievalism mark the metamorphosis. Strange disconnections now separate the room and objects from the protagonist. And disquieting connections with the unknown, the remote, and the past, have set in. Reality (aesthetically represented according to the laws of verisimilitude, and particularly through the assumption of the solidity of objects, one of the most basic tenets of experience) is questioned in its stability. The uncanny destabilises the very essence of things.

More disturbing still is the transformation of the lithograph into a real scene:

That strange lithograph by Calame was no longer a lithograph, but it seemed to me that the portion of the wall which it had covered, of the exact shape and size, had been cut out, and, in place of the picture, a real scene on the same scale, and with real actors, was distinctly visible. (66)

What used to be artistic representation receives the attributes of actual existence. This process reverses the accepted notion of mimesis: art no longer imitates life; it becomes life, crossing the forbidden frontier between representation and existence. What used to be ekphrasis (the description of a painting) is turned into hypotyposis (a description producing a reality effect). The real is under scrutiny. The subject no longer relates in the same way to the objects. They do not recall the individual's past in the same way, which means that memory cannot rely safely on them. The mode of possession cannot function as it used to, either, destabilised as it is by the intrusion of the strange. The stylistic form expressing destabilisation is a paradox which concludes and sums up the description of altered objects: “So in all things the room was, yet was not, mine (…)” (66). The sentence includes two contradictory statements with the same degree of truth. The apparent impossibility of there being two contradictory truths forbids the recourse to usual norms of representation. It calls into question the principle of identity, which founds rational logic. It also widens the possibilities of truth. If the utterance is impossible, its utterer might be wrong or a victim of illusion -- but then, his reliability should be questioned, which does not tally with the strategies of fantasy based on the reliability of the narrator-protagonist about a strange experience. Or the incompatibility of the contradictory statements is only apparent (as in all paradoxes) and call for another explanation allowing the existence of two planes of reality or two modes of existence. The verb “be” would then have two acceptations.

Related to paradox is the stylistic figure of the oxymoron, which combines apparently contradictory words. In “The Lost Room” the narrator makes a portrait of the organ-player, commenting on his beard and hair: “But there was something in the air of the peaked beard, a familiar mystery in the wild mass of raven hair that fell as if wind-blown
over his shoulders which riveted my memory." (67) The oxymoron “familiar mystery” applies to Alf’s hair, not to an object in the room, nevertheless it typifies the general atmosphere of the place and the protagonist’s impression about the metamorphosed objects. The apparent contradiction inherent in the oxymoron also calls for an explanation that suggests the co-existence of two types or fields of reality.

If the modes of relation between subject and object are perturbed in this fantasy tale, the positions they respectively hold are also questioned. The subject’s initial immobility as he watches his articles of furniture compared with the change and even the life of objects suggests a reversal in their attributes. If he subsequently walks out of the house and comes back in, he is overwhelmed, as though petrified by what he sees: “I stood, I suppose, for some three minutes, with my back against the wall, staring vacantly at the bacchanal vision (...)” (64). Most of the time, he is fascinated to the point of physical and mental stasis. Verbs of perception and the descriptive quality of the text emphasise his position as a passive witness. A form of reification is used to describe his attitude when the women take him by the hand and lead him to the table: “I obeyed their motions mechanically. I sat on a couch between them as they indicated. I unresistingly permitted them to wind their arms about my neck.” (64) Conversely, objects --and particularly the lithograph-- actually come to life.

Thus, the conventional modes of relation between subject and object, based on verisimilitude are questioned by the mode of fantasy. Fantasy disconnects subject and objects on the plane of verisimilitude and introduces other connections. Subject and objects relate in a mode which posits the strange as unexplainable even in a metaphorical way.

Objects as symptoms of the subject

Metamorphosis in fantasy reveals the collapse of the metaphorical process. In the mode of verisimilitude the metaphorical process maintains a difference between representation, endowed with the quality of actuality, and what it stands for. In fantasy this difference collapses since the very notion of actuality is questioned. The figurative distance is abolished and meaning is taken literally. As Rosemary Jackson puts it, “one object does not stand for (her emphasis) another, but it literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability.”

In “The Lost Room,” the collapse of the metaphor turns the objects into symptoms of the subject. In other words the subject’s desire is projected in an uncanny manner onto the real. The real is the site in which meaning is actually encoded, while neither the narrated agent nor the narrating agent are able to account for it. Thus the real (and objects in particular) can be seen as a place for the subject’s symptoms, a site for the return of the repressed. A psychoanalytic reading of the narrative discourse will be used to try and decode the objects as symptoms.

What “The Lost Room” first reveals is the subject’s anxiety about loss. The fear of dispossession is illustrated by the theme of the short story, its title, and its structure marked by the emphasis on the presence, the transformation and the final disappearance of the protagonist’s property. In addition, the continuous focus on objects, the comments on the house, the room and the articles of furniture, the intense emotional charge attached to them —notably emphasised by exclamative forms—, the dramatised argument about the room being his or not, to name the main devices used, all underline the
subject’s personal involvement, which culminates in the expression of his anxiety as he loses everything. The closing of the door finally throws him into despair: "(...) and I was left standing in the corridor stunned and despairing."(70) In the narrator’s words the profound disturbance even climaxes in madness: “I rushed madly to the door (...); “I rushed downstairs shouting madly.”; “The lonely garden resounded with my cries as I strode madly through the dark walks (...)” (70) Losing his place seems to equate with a loss in the self. Not to have is not to be, or at least not to be complete. Indeed when the protagonist finds his belongings drastically altered, the narrative voice brings together the loss of possessions and the loss of self-possession:

But when my eyes turned to the corner where I had left a huge and cumbrous piano, and beheld a vast and sombre organ lifting its fluted front to the very ceiling, and convinced myself, by a hurried process of memory, that it occupied the very spot in which I had left my own instrument, the little self-possession that I had left forsook me. I gazed around me bewildered. (65-6)

What the passage suggests is more than a mere feeling of loss of property. It is, through the polysemous potentials of the word “self-possession” and on account of the connection between property and self, the sense of a loss of self. Thus the object metaphorically stands for the self or part of it. What remains to be seen is what exactly in the self is represented.

If the protagonist never wears a smoking-cap that becomes him well, it is because the object recalls its embroiderer’s death: “Ah! The cap is there, but the embroiderer has fled; for Atropos was severing the web of life above her head while she was weaving that silken shelter for mine.” (56) Further on, the “cherished cap” is called “memorial of a buried love” (66), which suggests that this object has acquired the value of a symbol of mourning. The music played by Alf on the organ paints a picture of death in the protagonist’s imagination:

It seemed as if a lonely pair were on the reef, one living, the other dead; one clasping his arms around the tender neck and naked bosom of the other, striving to warm her into life, when his own vitality was being each moment sucked from him by the icy breath of the storm. (67)

This imaginary picture, which is part of what seemed to be “a symphony of recollections” (67), illustrates the displacement of the anxiety of death from the woman to the man, and suggests that the work of mourning has not been completed and that the sense of loss affects the subject in his self. This anxiety pervades the narration through the consistent use of the lexical field of death, which often applies to the subject himself, and notably at the end, when he has lost his room and the door has vanished: “(...) the tall funereal cypresses seemed to bury me beneath their heavy shadows.” (70)

The room, which the protagonist thought was his, and which was eventually estranged, to become a place for bacchanals and “unnatural orgies” (65) can be seen as an image of his unconscious, this unknown part of the self, which is his and yet not his, the place of otherness, the site of desire. Indeed, in the changed room, the protagonist obeys women “mechanically,” and “unresistingly” permits them to wind their arms about his neck (64), overwhelmed by the sensuality of the place. Yet he finally thrusts the women away from him. The loss of the room appears to be the price to pay for his refusal to be with them. Thus the self-imposed prohibition precludes access to the subconscious. The lost room also figures the denial of sexuality. In other words the repressed fears of the subject have been displaced onto the room and objects, which can thus be decoded as symptoms. One might wonder about the discrepancy between the symptoms of the work of mourning and
those of a repression of sexuality. A return to the smoking-cap will provide an insight into the relation between these two seemingly disconnected fields.

If the protagonist’s inability to wear his smoking-cap has been traced to its symptomatic link with the work of mourning, the reason explicitly mentioned is different: “It has my coat of arms embroidered on the front, and for that reason I never wear it (…)” A very curious reason indeed! The reference to ancestry is subsequently used about another object, the dagger. One of his maternal ancestors—Sir Florence O’Driscoll—was an “old sea-king” and the story of his “stormy life” takes up a whole page. It tells how he left his estate to plead his own cause in London before Queen Bess, and “the English Queen evinced a preference for the Irish chieftain, of other nature than that usually shown by monarch to subject.” When Sir O’Driscoll returned to his island he found that Hull, the man whom he had entrusted with his vast estates during his absence, refused to yield them. Eventually the sea-king had to “content himself with his castle by the sea and the island of Inniskeiran.” The remembrance of this story about a loss of property functions like a comment on the protagonist’s sense of loss, especially because of the similarities between the ancestor and his descendant. Indeed, the narration recalls the first and only time the protagonist wore his smoking-cap in the following words: “(...) and I, king-like, immediately assumed my royal prerogative after the coronation and instantly levied a tax on my only subject, which was, however, not paid unwillingly.” The parallel between the protagonist and his ancestor brought about by the lexical field of monarchy highlights a fantasised similarity of situations: if Sir O’Driscoll appears to have lost his estates because of sexuality, the protagonist’s anxiety bears on the fantasised risk of losing his place and identity, and displaces the anxiety onto the smoking-cap, a subconscious emblem of his similarity with his ancestor’s crown. His inability to wear it is symptomatic of a subconscious fear of punishment by loss of property. Ironically, it is his denial of sexuality that brings about the loss of the room and objects, and results in frustration to the point of near-madness. What has been repressed returns, not in explicit discourse, but in objects which thus can be seen as symptoms of the subject’s subconscious frustrations and anxieties. In the mode of fantasy used in this short story, the sense of loss is not in fine symbolised by the lost room, it returns really as “a cold and solid wall” in the place of the door. What the play of associations suggests (through the juxtaposition of apparently separate objects and underlying connections) is that it is Thanatos (through the work of mourning) which represses Eros. In other words, mourning and the sense of loss impose a prohibition on the subject’s drives.

The central role played by the room and the objects in this fantasy tale is due to the complexity of the way subject and objects interrelate. Thus each object constitutes a nodal point of modes of relation with the subject. It mainly relates as metonymy, objective correlative, through hypotyposis and ekphrasis, and as symptom. In addition each object connects with the others to form a network of signification which mainly bears upon the subject. Not to have is not to be in many ways and the loss of possessions serves as a way to reveal a subject’s profound involvement with place and objects. The interpretative hesitation which characterises fantasy suggests all the potentials of the subject/object relation as much as its undecidability.
NOTES

1. Fitz-James O’Brien, “The Lost Room” (1858), The Mammoth Book of Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories, Richard Dalby (ed.), London, Robinson, 1995, 55-70. All references to “The Lost Room” will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

2. To the concept of “mimesis” used for instance by Rosemary Jackson in her book Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (London & New-York, Routledge, 1981, ed. used 1986) to contrast it with fantasy, the concept of “verisimilitude” will be preferred as it is more appropriate to emphasise the literary conventions pertaining to a mode of representation aiming at a reality effect. Such literary conventions as metonymy (accepted as true-to-life) can hardly be called mimetic. The concept of “verisimilitude” puts the emphasis on the notion of accepted literary conventions of representation rather than on art as an imitation of life.

3. From p. 56 to p. 58

4. My emphases

5. The term “objective correlative” was apparently first used by the American painter Washington Allston (c. 1840) and subsequently revived by T. S. Eliot in his essay on Hamlet (1919). T. S. Eliot defines it as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” (Selected Essays (1932), Faber & Faber, 1976, 145.)

6. In Introduction à la littérature fantastique (Paris, Seuil, Points, 1970, 29), Tzvetan Todorov declares: “Le fantastique, c’est l’hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel.”

7. On this question see Edward Saïd, Orientalism, (1979), Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1995

8. See Rosemary Jackson, op. cit., 19

9. My emphasis


11. My emphasis.


13. My emphasis

14. My emphasis.

15. My emphases

16. O’Brien is reported to be prone to suicide and to have declared: “With such a fascinating problem as that of death before us, I cannot imagine how anybody can be satisfied to go on with the monotonous stupidity of living.” See “Fitz-James O’Brien, Irish Bohemian, American Fantasist,” http://www.creative.net/~alang/lit/horror/fob.sht consulted on Jan. 5th, 2000.
ABSTRACTS

Fitz-James O'Brien was born and lived in Ireland (1828-1852) and emigrated in 1852 to America, where he became the leading writer of horror stories in the decade following the death of Edgar Allen Poe. “The Lost Room” was published in 1858.

The paper aims at studying the role that the room and the objects play in this fantasy. Starting from the hypothesis that not only the protagonist’s experience is related to them but that, through description, his subjectivity connects with them, it appears that the aesthetics of fantasy shapes the relations between subject and objects in a particular way. After analysing the protagonist’s modes of relating with objects in the context of verisimilitude, the troubling connections and disconnections between subject and object introduced by fantasy are examined and psychoanalytic theory is used to explain the uncanny power of objects.

Fitz-James O’Brien naquit et vécut en Irlande (1828-1852) et émigra en 1852 en Amérique où il devint l’auteur d’histoires d’horreur le plus important de la décennie qui suivit la mort d’Edgar Allen Poe. “ La Chambre perdue ” fut publiée en 1858.

L’article est une étude du rôle joué par la chambre et les objets dans cette nouvelle fantastique. A partir de l’hypothèse selon laquelle non seulement l’expérience du protagoniste mais aussi, par la description, sa subjectivité, sont reliées aux objets, il apparaît que l’esthétique du fantastique façonne les relations entre sujet et objets d’une manière particulière. Après une analyse des modes de relation du protagoniste avec les objets dans un contexte de vraisemblance, les ruptures et liens troublants introduits par le mode fantastique sont examinés et la théorie psychanalytique convoquée pour expliquer le pouvoir étrange des objets.

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