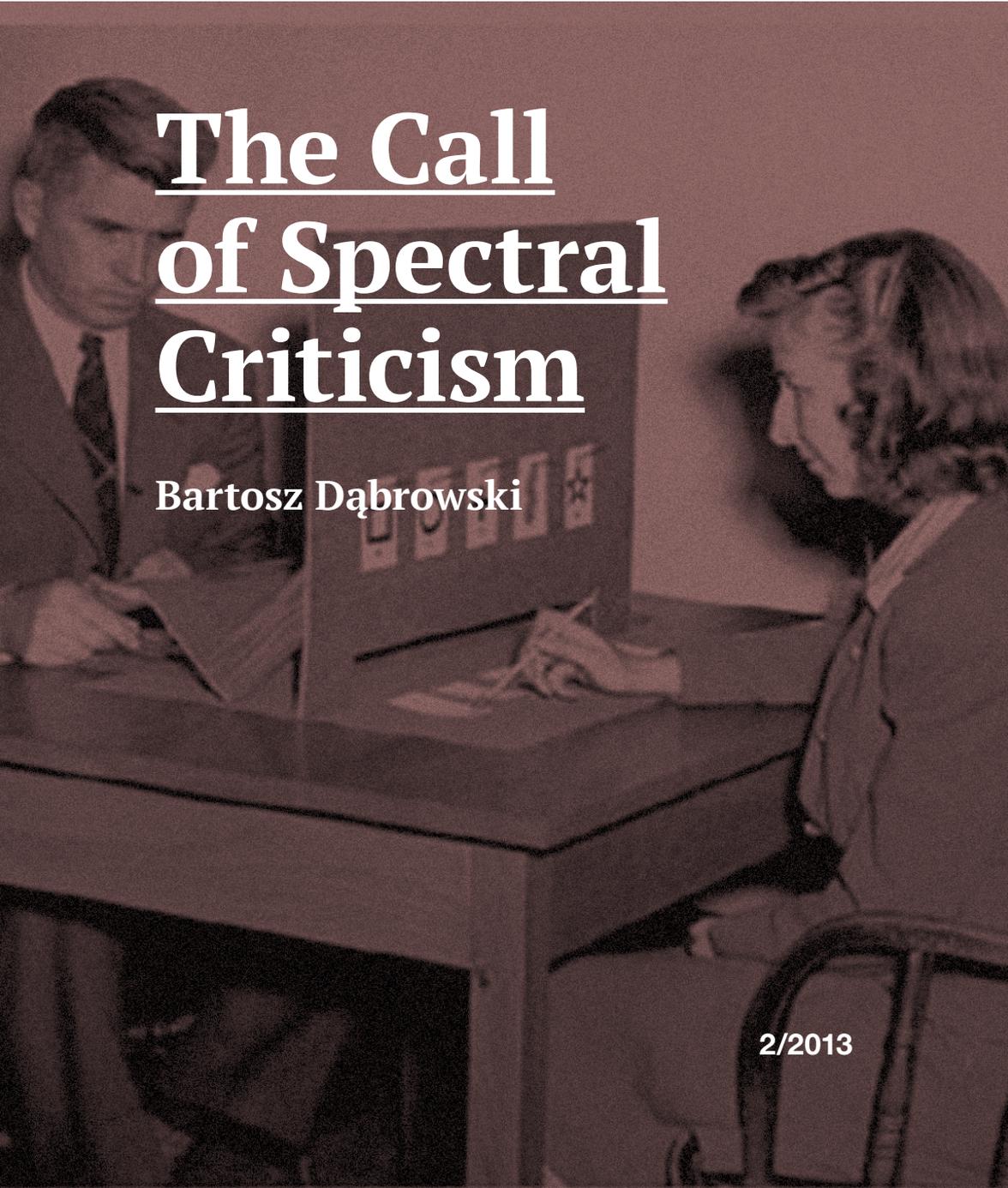


**CzasKultury/English**



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**Bartosz Dąbrowski**

**2/2013**

# The Call of Spectral Criticism

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Imperceptibly, but certainly for good, “spectre” slipped into the vocabulary of contemporary literary theory in the late 1990s. This first became apparent when the entries ghosts and secret appeared in the second edition of *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, edited by Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennet (1999) and following the publication of numerous literary critical texts at that time on Gothic and Victorian literature.<sup>1</sup> Three years later, David Punter considered it apt to introduce spectral criticism as a distinct term describing a certain recognizable way of thinking about literature, interpretation and literary texts in *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century* (2002).<sup>2</sup> The author had no doubt that spectral criticism

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1 A. Bennet, N. Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Edinburgh 2004; J. Castricano, *Cryptomimesis. The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, London – Ithaca 2001; P. Buse, A. Stott (ed.), *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, London 1999; J. Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, London 2001; R. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870–1901*, New York 2002; N. Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester 2003.

2 D. Punter, “Spectral Criticism”, [in:] J. Wolfreys (ed.), *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century*, Edinburgh 2002.

comprised a coherent area of research that employed consistent theoretical assumptions. It was meant to continue the reflections on literature and textuality initiated by the late works of Jacques Derrida (chiefly *Spectres of Marx* from 1993), Nicholas Royle (*Telepathy and Literature*, 1993) and Joseph H. Miller (*On Literature*, 2002). Spectral criticism was also to draw on references to psychoanalytical categories developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in the mid-1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Punter drew attention to the fact that although spectral criticism was heterogeneous in nature, it lent itself to a more consistent formulation through its use of constantly recurring terms (such as *ghosts*, *crypt*, *phantom*, *dead*, *hauntology*, *secret*, *telepathy*...), which served as useful instruments for literary-historical research and theoretical reflection. The author recognised these categories as particularly expressive images and metaphors for use in describing how a literary text exists and for properly understanding the nature of contacts with literature.

In response to questions about what literature has to do with spectres and the dead, Punter raised the example of Maurice Blanchot's metaliterary reflection. For Blanchot, contact with literature was inseparably associated with a unique kind of impossible encounter with someone who, while being dead, continues to be, in a way, alive. According to the author of *L'Espace litteraire* (1955), entering into

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3 N. Abraham, M. Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel. Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1, Chicago & London 1994.

a relation with literature presupposes contact with something which lasts in a particular form of suspension, in a shape that does not directly refer to a clearly defined condition, assuming an intermediary form of existence in the space between death, spectral presence and resurrection. It is for this reason that Blanchot compared the experience of contact with a literary work to continually repeated attempts at dialogue with Lazarus in the grave. The work is neither dead nor alive; it appears as a semblance of presence, but simultaneously, because of its disguise and the place it occupies, it assumes the shape of a clothed void, absent and inaccessible, covered with a rock and wrapped in bandages.

Reading, and thus contact with a literary work, as Punter concludes in his comment on Blanchot, resembles the endeavours we undertake to establish a relation with a phantom or to come into agreement with a spectre of one who is deceased. This way of acting may seem to be doomed to failure, but it seems to work in a way which is difficult to define. By reading we come into contact with something that sends us relentlessly to an absence and a void, while opening us up to a peculiar kind of experience which for Blanchot is the opening of a particular kind of space, an area marked by a retreat from being and close to death, described as literary space, while at the same time, in the act of reading we become witnesses to the impact of a form of presence of whose survival and resurrection we take note. In the experience of coming into contact with a text, which exists simultaneously as

something both dead and immortal, which through its own death opens a space with the capacity for continuing after death, that is, for surviving death, we are close to communing with the dead.

Spectral criticism is for Punter a way of considering literature as a particular anthropological place for encounters between the dead and the living. Its reflections represent a continuous awareness of the unconditional impossibility of the task which it has undertaken and in pointing to the paradoxically impossible nature of literature as a peculiar kind of medium for this encounter. Yet, it is exactly this mediation which permits us to experience something that remains (alive) after life, and that by the same token is capable of surviving death in the form of spectral excess – being a trace of life after life, its remnant, literature. Spectrality embodies literature also for other reasons. Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennet, authors who directly refer to Jacques Derrida and his way of thinking about literature, believe that a literary text is characterised by a peculiar modality of existence – it is a form of being devoid of both an unequivocally defined essence and of clearly determined properties. A literary text does not exist as a work in a concrete space, if we understand this as having a presence in a present moment, nor can it be conceived of in the form of an actualised sense which would be fully present and would lend itself to being located in a spatial or temporal structure. The text is its own phantom and the site of an amplified split or visitation; therefore, it is not its own self but is continually

becoming “this particular something” which accommodates within itself a certain strangeness and a complete otherness. It does not so much conceal in itself a direct presence of the sense or of the author as it constantly retrieves their spectres which refuse to be tamed and which leave us in a space free of distinctions between truth and falsehood, certainty and doubt, ourselves and the other, being and non-being.

Literature imparts the intoxicating flavour of a certain kind of ontological disappropriation by confronting us with the area of a certain way of being *outside*, in the territory of an unfathomable secret which is inaccessible and, like Lazarus in his grave, “does not exist” because it remains hidden and in a suspended deferral of presence while it makes its presence felt in its own eerie way. The non-Euclidean space of a literary work thereby resembles a haunted house in which we simultaneously wish to stay and fear to stay. Its secret haunts us and awakens our desire while remaining elusive and unsettling us like something that lurks around the corner, within us and everywhere. At a haunted site, the spatial and temporal logic is susceptible to disfiguring complications, and what has remained the same thus far suddenly becomes alien, uncanny in the Freudian sense of the word, and marked by an aura of incalculability.

Royle and Bennet, in a continuation of Derrida’s observations, to which spectral criticism is greatly indebted, emphasise that spectrality, concealed in the experience

of literature, transcends the ontological framework of philosophical thought. The “density” of literature itself also documents a particular failure of logic characteristic of philosophical reasoning while the questions arising from the fact of its existence resemble those which Tiberius asks philologists to answer (what songs did the sirens sing?) or deliberations on questions that lead classical logic to experience a Hitchcockian sense of vertigo.

Spectral criticism, however, does not so much pose traditional questions about the mode of existence of a literary work, as it strives to arrive at the theoretical and anthropological consequences deriving from the spectral mode of being of a literary work, accommodating within it a whole series of multi-directed displacements. The authors are interested in questions of the kinds of activity performed by a reader and the operations of the text itself, which is haunted, as Julien Wolfreys observes, by the spectres of other texts (or citations), or in the search of analogies for a peculiar form of literary reception and for communication with the non-obvious content of a text (telepathy and the category of the uncanny).<sup>4</sup> Similar questions arise in relation to the problems of spectral persistence and the durability of certain experiences, for example, of the colonial heritage and of diverse manifestations of postmemory trauma (in research on the Shoah and on memory). Spectral criticism is also intrigued by questions about the impact of literature and the paradoxical nature of writing

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4 J. Wolfreys, *Occasional Deconstructions*, New York 2004; J. Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, London 2001; N. Royle, *Uncanny*, Manchester 2011.

and authorship itself. Writers find themselves in a situation in which during the process of creating a work they must incessantly confront themselves with the spectral presence of their precursors, Bloomian *aphophrades* – the return of the dead striving to exert their impact and gain power over them.<sup>5</sup> The most significant area of spectral criticism is the problem of the ethics of reading derived from Derrida's reflections and affecting nearly all the aforementioned questions. In *Spectres of Marx* (1993), the text that re-introduced the subject of the spectre into the canon of humanist research, the ethical aspect of the spectre is related to the messianic expectation of its ever deferred and impossible arrival.

The fidelity which connects us to the spectre is thus comprehended, paradoxically, as being more powerful than death, and in a way, prevents us from living, just like the memory of a deceased loved one, persistently summoned and lamented, who in their life had become a part of us and still endures in the form of a phantom pain and spectral chasm, makes it impossible to go on living. This peculiar presence opens us, however, to a kind of radical otherness, creating the possibility of experiencing absence. In the expectation of the deferred encounter the passage of time becomes suspended – what has not happened, Derrida says, has not fully arrived, therefore it has not definitively elapsed; therefore, it is still possible. Meanwhile, all that has appeared on the horizon has already passed and for this reason can no longer occur. What may occur, as

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5 N. Royle, *Telepathy and Literature. Essays on the Reading Mind*, London 1991.

the author of *Demeure* argues, is “the non-possible”, since it has not arrived yet, and this is exactly why it remains possible.

In relation to a literary text, which according to Derrida is a privileged space of this kind of deferment and suspension of presence, this reasoning signifies a fidelity to a spectral otherness which cannot be appropriated and whose summoning entails the risk of assuming responsibility comparable to the obligations imposed upon us by the dead. The message of the dead motivates us to undertake real action provided that it remains vague, haunts us, dispossesses and displaces us, just like the secret of a text which absorbs us and instigates our actions although, if it is to be comprehended as a presence, it does not exist despite the fact that it obliges us to respond to a certain kind of impossible exhortation.

Action directed toward a spectre (and towards literature) becomes in this way the reverse of cultural actions, in which the message of a phantom may be formulated in a clear and comprehensible form, and refer to identifiable content. Therefore, it is far removed from the approach which assumes the possibility of satisfying the entreaties of the spectre and of settling a symbolical debt via ritual – according to Derrida, this kind of a debt can never be repaid.

Ghosts then demand justice and only because of the fact that, as we suppose, they are absent, the justice which we

owe them can become the target of their actions.<sup>6</sup> According to Derrida, the spectre, indefinite though it is, due to its relation to the idea of justice, wields a certain authority resembling Benjamin's understanding of the law as being in force without significance (*Geltung ohne Bedeutung*). In *Spectres of Marx* an attribute of such authority is the slit in the visor of the father's ghost who haunts Hamlet. It corresponds to the paradoxical logic of the spectre as the site of the appearance of an ethical injunction, and the manifestation of the effects of a dark, gravitational "field" belonging to the order of its secret. The spectre, as Derrida says, looks at us but we cannot and are unable to see it. Its sight and its injunction come almost literally from out of nowhere (they emerge directly from a void), which invariably prevents us from locating them, and being unable to see or hear them, we cannot fully comprehend them, and by the same token, we cannot live up to them (of which the character of Hamlet is an apt illustration).

Derrida appears to intertwine two affiliated motifs in this way – that of the unconditional responsibility for and towards the Other, derived from Levinas' philosophy, and the Freudian inexplicable responsibility towards the dead, manifesting itself in fear and the experience of the uncanny. As he says in a different place, "the dead can be more powerful than the living".

It seems that the power of the dead emphasised by Derrida conceals something that associates reflection on their overwhelming presence in our life with the experience of

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6 That is why the justice itself, as we know, is not there yet – and for this reason it still remains an impossibility which demands actualisation.

literature and is related to the question about the secret of their unyielding influence on our life. In his collection *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (2003), Derrida seems to claim that literary texts, the dead and spectres all carry a secret which we are not able to retrieve despite the fact that all our efforts are concentrated on endeavours to retrieve, appropriate and reveal it. The secret remains inaccessible to use just like part of the lives of the departed whom we loved remains unknown and lost to us. All our endeavours remain under the power of this mysterious part, and their trajectory is shaped by the idiomatic impingement of *this* place, and by this secret of the departed; via *this* particular no-place (*non-lieu*) there arises a community which relates us to them, in which the part of the deceased absorbing us, which is still inaccessible and closed to us, becomes a part of the deceased within us.

**translated by Joanna Maciulewicz**