Haunted Narratives: Politics, Fiction and Ghostwriting in Robert Harris's *The Ghost*

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Abstract
Taking as case study Robert Harris's *The Ghost*, and focusing on the 'poetics' of ghostwriting and multiple, disseminated authorship, this article aims to highlight the crucial intersections between truth and fiction, authenticity and self-deception and the disembodying of public accountability from both the political subject and the literary author, made possible by the emergence of professional speechwriters and celebrity politicians. Suggestively embedded in this subtly intertextual novel are a number of Gothic narrative structures and generic conventions, which range from the thematisation of ghostwriting as a spectral activity, to the pervasive use of terms and images pertaining to the semantic areas of "haunting" and "the ghostly", to neo-Gothic rewritings of landscapes and social milieus.

Keywords: *ghostwriting, political thriller, Tony Blair, authorship, Gothic remediation*

The ghostly negotiations between personal responsibility and disembodied authorship at the core of current political communication are the main focus of this essay, which sets out to explore the creepy interstitial terrain between truth and fiction on which not only contemporary political consensus, but also its re-mediation through film and literature, increasingly rely.

Taking as a case study Robert Harris's bestselling political thriller *The Ghost* (2008), which inspired the eerie film adaptation in 2010 by director Roman Polanski, himself a celebrated master of contemporary Gothic[1], I shall address this novel's trans-generic re-contextualisation of actual politicians' rhetoric and behaviour within the imaginative and potentially subversive open-endedness

[1] For an inspiring analysis of the differences between the novel and the film, see Paulson (2011).

of its neo-Gothic plot. In the process, I shall highlight the ways in which Harris's disquieting exploration of the ethics and poetics of ghostwriting help to define the political uncanny as a rewarding aesthetic domain.

The Ghost brings to the fore the Faustian embrace[2] between Adam Lang, a former Prime Minister sounding like the ectoplasm of Tony Blair, and the anonymous hack summoned to Martha's Vineyard in deep winter to ghost this politician's memoir after Mike McAra, his long-term assistant and speechwriter, has died under mysterious circumstances. While news arrives that, on the grounds of evidence provided by his former Foreign Minister, Lang will be tried by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for authorising extraterritorial rendition of four British citizens of Islamic descent to Guantanamo, the new ghostwriter becomes increasingly entangled with Lang's personal fascination and ambiguous milieu. Even more incisive is the protagonist's growing obsession with his own self-conscious role as *the one* who can bring back to life a retired politician reduced to ghostly substance for lack of a mediated discursive arena onto which to project his public self. Through an investigative reading of McAra's manuscript and following on his predecessor's trail, the new 'ghost' and narrator of the story (who aptly remains unnamed) uncovers shocking connections between the former Prime Minister, the hawkish American new right and the CIA. The plot reserves tragic ends for Adam Lang – whose memory is first cleansed by his becoming the victim of a terror attack, and then resuscitated through the appearance of his posthumous memoirs – and for the ghostwriter himself.

Harris's own professional experience as a former political editor and columnist renders him uniquely suited to capturing the voices of his fictional PM and the ruthless Anglo-American political background on which this page-turner hinges. But *The Ghost*'s disenchanted satire goes well beyond a mere rehashing of mediatised political currency and journalistic trash. Indeed, crucial

[2] It is certainly not by chance that Lang is reported to have played Dr. Faustus during his university years at Cambridge, and the protagonist's literary agent is described as "Mephistopheles on a fifteen per cent commission", taking leave "in a puff of exhaust fumes" (Harris 2008: 10).

intersections between truth, fiction, authenticity, self-deception and the disembodying of public accountability from the political subject are suggestively embedded across the multiple subplots of this richly intertextual novel, which, against the grain of its prevailing pseudo-factual mode, deploys a number of Gothic narrative structures and generic conventions.

In addition to the thematisation of ghostwriting as a phantom enterprise, these features also include the pervasive lexical colonisation of the story by terms pertaining to the semantic clusters of "ghostly", "spectral", "deadly" and "life-in-death" discourse and representations[3]; effective neo-Gothic rewritings of landscapes and social milieus; characters whose voices literally come back from the grave in order to influence the present, and the vicious reconfiguration of Cherie Blair as a political vampire in the character of Ruth. Finally, as the theme of the Iraq war is made increasingly perspicuous in the course of the narrative by conjuring up the spectres of Guantanamo, also the psychological, moral and aesthetic background to the whole nexus of ghost-writing and narrative authority takes on the monstrous shape of the Gothic uncanny, providing a compelling exploration of the persistence of evil in terms of the political undead[4].

As he attempts to come to terms with Lang's "vanishing" (Harris 2008: 92) persona – dematerialised, as it were, through the new inability *to author* self-defining stories associated with the politician's fall from power – the voluntarily self-effacing ghostwriter is increasingly haunted by his own subject matter, until he succumbs to the pervasive, hegemonic tale of his phantom authorial double.

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[3] While overtly functional along conventional generic lines to the sinister atmosphere of this thriller, these terms are also meant to signal the double bind between "presence" and "absence" which is a recursive feature of this novel's engagement with the ideas of the "death" (and "rebirth") of the author. This double bind is enhanced by the continuous proliferation and mutual entanglement in the story of textual entities and author figures which are co-terminously absent and present.

[4] Comparing the subjects of extra-territorial rendition to ghostly creatures and the living dead is a recurring characteristic of the literature on this topic (see Gordon 2011). It is also worth noting how the issue of British involvement in this practice has come back to haunt Tony Blair's public image both through artistic representations (such as Alistair Beaton's Channel 4 series *The Trial of Tony Blair*, 2007), and, since January 2010, through the actual hearings of the Chilcot Iraq Inquiry.

By the end of the novel, the ghostwriter's deadly relationship with the former PM will be revealed to be a condition that – at both a literal and figurative level – can only be escaped at the cost of the *death of the author(s)* and the coterminous *birth of their texts*: Lang's cosmetic memoirs and their haunting double, the "authentic" story of the ghostwriter-turned-author which is told in *The Ghost*.

The permeability of borders between nominal authorship and the "author function" as defined by Foucault (1970), and the ensuing process of psychological contamination between Lang and his "ghost", are rendered as a vampirisation of sorts, entailing scary oscillations between omnipotence and self-erasure.

"What is the collective noun for a group of ghosts? A train? A town? *A haunt?*" (Harris 2008: 9; emphasis added), the protagonist asks at the beginning of the story. This obsession with the language of the uncanny resonates throughout the novel, and underpins Harris's description of ghostwriters as an infernal race which, moving along "the subterranean tunnels of celebrity", operate the phantom engine that "keep[s] publishing going, like the unseen workers beneath Walt Disney World" (Harris 2008: 9-10). Ghostwriting is rendered also as the two-ways transfer process which enables the ghost to "supply" public figures "with their own memories" and "impart a shape to those lives" (Harris 2008: 7). Such "swapping" of memories ends up in a "pooling" of experiences, and the "concocting" (Harris 2008: 108) of a single life story, blurred and oddly mingled. Within its permeable, uncertain contours, Lang's ghostwriter loses touch with his own role as a "literary *doppelganger*", at the risk of becoming "a *poltergeist*, noisy enough" to pursue extra-contractual "truths" and give them currency through poignant storytelling (Westerfeld 2009).

What is actually at stake in ghostwriting is the way this "subtle […] borrowing and lending of status […] include management of the status of writing as a discrete locus of power" (Brandt 2007: 558). More to the point, this practice implies an understanding of how history is constantly being made and remade by condoning self-serving fabrications and eschewing issues of truth, so that "a private fantasy about our lives" may become "accepted as fact" (Harris 2008: 186). By the end of the story, the protagonist will take issue with his own moral complacency and, to paraphrase Carl Rhodes, will "take responsibility for [his] reflexive position", and admit that

"the ghostwriting leaves an image [both of the spectral author and] of the ghost" (Rhodes 2000: 522, 523).

It is no surprise, therefore, that Harris's plot should be interspersed throughout with spectral narrative threads, to the point that it seems literally to consist, at times, of the conjuring up of ghosts. By the end of the novel, Lang, McAra, and the ghostwriter himself, will be revealed to have already died, their words and writings being often described as a "voice" or a "message" (Harris 2008: 361, 371) from the grave. These phantom traces manifest themselves across multiple genres (autobiography, fiction, press releases, interviews), and a variety of media (newspapers, television, photographs, tape-recorders, cell phones, and the internet, which all entail disembodying the message from its source).

Furthermore, ghostwriting itself as a literary practice is rendered even more evanescent by blurring, multiplying and disseminating the sources of textual authorship which vie to control the "truth" embedded in the novel: next to Lang himself, his team of insiders, his ur-ghost and the incumbent (each of them producing a distinct manuscript or story), *The Ghost* deploys judicial evidence from the archives, news reports, secret transactions and, more importantly, Google with its disembodied, unaccountable news, and the counter-discourse of wikis.

It must be noted, too, that the whole process leading to McAra's death and the tragic denouement of the story is said to have begun just before Christmas, a temporal detail which inscribes *The Ghost* within the Dickensian tradition of conjuring up phantoms and ghosts at Christmastime (Fruhauff 2008: 1).

In addition to literal ghosts, the novel raises the spectres of Guantanamo, the Iraq war and the underground manoeuvring of the CIA and its mercenary private armies, all of which contribute a brutally mundane interpretation of the uncanny to the story. Playing on Freud's description of the *Unheimlich* as a "special shade of anxiety [...] caused by the return of the repressed" and as "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Masschelein 2002: 4), *The Ghost* persuasively foregrounds the way in which control over secrets and/or revelations is the paradigmatic site of a never-ending struggle for power. While no individual culprit for the deaths of McAra and possibly an unnamed witness in Martha's Vineyard may be found, the CIA is

construed as a disembodied and almighty spectral entity whose defining characteristic is its ability to penetrate bodies, defences and borders. Similar to an omniscient narrator, it exists everywhere and nowhere at the same time, infiltrating even the minds of the subjects it plans to control, manipulating and changing the very meaning of the words "memory", "memoirs" and "memorandum".

This is nowhere more apparent than in the episode in which the ghostwriter finds he is unable to retrieve the attachment containing McAra's first draft of Lang's memoirs which, in breach of his contract, he has surreptitiously sent to his own mailbox and which now seems to have not only "vanished", but even "never hav[e] existed" (Harris 2008: 145). The ghostwriter's initial sense of being in narrative control of his medium and his story is ironically dismantled by the vanishing act put in place by the invisible spectre of surveillance which has apparently pre-empted his authorial remit: a spectre which is perceived as haunting his text so purposefully and powerfully as to be ascribed a 'will' of its own[5].

Another feature which conspicuously inscribes Harris's novel within the field of Gothic pastiche and remediation is the overwhelming presence of metaphors, expressions and puns evoking liminality, in-betweenness and the whole imaginative domain of the uncanny. This penetration extends well beyond the conventionally sinister atmosphere of a thriller, and is significantly mirrored in the remarkable use of terms such as *ectoplasm*, *spectre*, *disembodied*, *ghost*, *ghostly*, *ghostwriting*, *vanishing*, *intertextuality*, *raising spectres*, *professional non-entity*, *go-between* by most reviewers of *The Ghost*. This scary atmosphere is set firmly from the beginning of the novel ("The moment I heard how McAra had died I should have walked away" [Harris 2008: 1]), and opens up a discursive space characterised by constant slippage between literal and figurative uses of "ghostly" language.

Some occurrences obviously aim to enhance the ambiguous relationship between "spectral" author and self-effacing, but all too "present" ghostwriter. This is the case when Lang is imagined in the act of "staring down at his own ghost" as he identifies

[5] At a deeper level, this episode also symbolises the elusive quality of literary inspiration, the continuing struggle with one's own subject matter in order to pinpoint and redeem signification.

McAra's corpse in the morgue (Harris 2008: 7), or when the new ghostwriter, worried because "the *first appearance of a ghost* is important", introduces himself through the exchange: "'Hello', he said. 'Who are you?' 'I'm your ghost', I said. […] He flinched" (81; emphasis added).

Other examples function simply as a disquieting veneer seeping through the texture of the story. Under this heading fall atmospheric descriptions and similes, such as the comparison of the London sky to "a grey tombstone" (5), or the description of a retired actor as "made up to act the role of his own corpse" (8). A taxi-driver is connoted by "disembodied eyes in the rear-view mirror" (52-3), and even the news story about Lang's possible indictment is "entombed deep", at first, in the foreign news page of *The New York Times*. Only once "the pack is on the move" (127)[6] and journalists have arrived on the spot "as though they were going to a funeral", and "look[ing] like gravediggers", does Lang no longer appear to be "buried in the international section", but "right up there on the front page" (149), resuscitated like a zombie.

The description of Martha's Vineyard in winter and of the holiday compound in which Lang's court in exile resides is also consonant with the generic conventions of Gothic settings. In an interview with Ramona Koval in November 2007, Harris draws attention to the reasons for his choice: "the Atlantic rolling in, the mist, the cold, the empty shops, the lights in the gloom at night, it was perfect. […] It's a famous place for ghosts, Martha's Vineyard" (Koval 2007).

This scary atmosphere begins to develop almost from the start of the novel, when McAra is said to have disappeared from the only ferry allowed to leave between two extended periods of cancellations, due to extreme weather conditions. His death by drowning, therefore, allegedly takes place during the liminal, "exceptional" time-space which is thus determined. The ferry itself is rendered as a paradigmatic non-place, where "stairwells, bar, toilets, even the lifeboats – nothing" (Harris 2008: 2), are searched in vain for McAra's body. Such eeriness is thrown into sharper relief when the new ghostwriter, during a trip of his own to the island, cannot resist

[6] An overt reference to Blair's definition of the press as "a feral beast" which "hunt[s] in a pack" (Blair 2007).

imagining the actions and feelings of his predecessor, to the point where his "teeth were chattering like some fairground clockwork novelty" (51). After the ferry docks "with a rattle of chains and a jump" (51), the ghostwriter is carried to a "big old wooden hotel" that "creaked and banged in the wind like a sailing boat stuck on a reef" (53). It is not surprising, therefore, that he spends his first night on Martha's Vineyard with "eyes wide open, fully awake and yet disembodied" (55).

It is, however, the Rhinehart Compound, where the Langs and their whole company are lodging, that deserves pride of place as the perfect reworking of a Gothic setting:

> It was only two storeys high, but as wide as a stately home, with a long, low roof and a pair of big square brick chimneys of the sort you might see in a crematorium. […] The windows on this side were as tall and thin as gun-slits**,** and what with these, and the greyness, and the blockhouses further back, and the encircling forest, and the sentry at the gate**,** it all somehow resembled a holiday home designed by Albert Speer, the *Wolf's Lair* came to mind. (62-3)[7]

With its multilayered symbolic values, the house, which the sentry at the gate calls "the madhouse" (69), carries with it a cluster of meanings and functions which far from simply marking out a haunted environment, transform it into an active frame, involving plural identities and multiple spectral negotiations among self and space. At the same time, in "drawing attention to the dual meaning of the word *heimlich*" as "domestic, familiar, intimate", but also "secret, furtive, clandestine", the house conspicuously embeds, in Masschelein's words, the Freudian shift "from the intimacy inside the house to the position of an outsider, who may associate the closeness of the house with secrecy and conspiracies" (Masschelein 2002: 4).

Through the estranged gaze of the ghostwriter, readers are made to perceive the corrupting impact of the house on its inhabitants, its disorienting atmosphere which challenges and questions the very ideas of shelter and home. This is apparent in the first appearance of Lang's wife, Ruth, "her short dark hair stuck up in Medusa's

[7] The reference is to Hitler's first military headquarters on the Eastern Front, designed by his chief architect and Minister of Armaments Albert Speer.

spikes" (Harris 2008: 72), and underpins the narrator's sense of undergoing a "genuine out-of-body experience" in dealing "face to face" (89) with the former Prime Minister. Even more telling is the ghostwriter's heightened awareness, on looking at his own reflection in a mirror, of the metamorphosis that his job is wreaking on him:

> The face that stared back at me from the mirror was *a deterioration even on the spectre of the previous evening*. […] Martha's Vineyard in midwinter seemed to be ageing me. *It was Shangri-la in reverse.* (144; emphasis added)

If the ghostwriter's task consists in "fleshing out" (108) the memories of a man who is said *not* to be "a psychologically credible character" (192), and whose personality seems to depend exclusively on the performance of authority, it is only too fitting that the transfer of authorship implicit in ghostwriting should be described as a process which literally depletes the hack, leaving him "unfleshed" in turn.

Just as unsettling is the ghostwriter's reaction to his surroundings after being required to leave the hotel and reside in McAra's former room in the compound. In examining McAra's clothes, in particular, with their disturbing associations of bodily secretions and proximity, their transgressive conflation of tactility and absence, the protagonist comes to dread

> the feel of the unfamiliar fabric, even the clatter of the metal hangers on their crome-plated rail […]. It's the possession of the dead that always get to me. (184)

McAra's relentless metamorphosis from ghostwriter into ghost is especially apparent when the protagonist admits that, on "head[ing] back towards his-my-our-room, I could sense his presence, loping along clumsily at my heels" (191).

But it is the description of the bunker residence belonging to the embedded CIA agent and Harvard Professor Paul Emmett that stands out as the ultimate location of the uncanny. The whole scene is rendered even more scary by the fact that the protagonist is led there by the disembodied voice of McAra's car GPS, which still keeps trace of his "PREVIOUS DESTINATION" (253). For the first time in his life, the narrator is "confronted with the true meaning of the word PREDESTINATION" (253) and with the feeling that

the dead man's "dogged, leaden obsessions now seemed to have become mine" (258). After yet another infernal passage on the ferry, the ghostwriter at last reaches a place where even the cosiest creatures seem to be hosting evil intents. As a squirrel watches him and then "streak[s] up into a nearby tree, flicking its tail at me like a swollen middle finger" (263), staring at him "malevolently from the roadside" (264), the protagonist gets a glimpse of the ghostly location where, to borrow Freud's words, "everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden" (Freud [1919] 1964: 224) – the whole devilish plot embedded in the novel – had been planned and conceived.

> Demurely set back from the road, a five-barred electric gate blocked access to a private drive, which turned sharply after a few yards and disappeared behind trees. I couldn't see the house. Beside the gate was a grey metal mailbox with no name on it, just a number – 3551 – and a stone pillar with an intercom and a code pad. A sign said: "THESE PREMISES ARE PROTECTED BY CYCLOPS SECURITY"; a toll free number was printed across an eyeball. (Harris 2008: 266)

Pivotal to narrative constructions of the Gothic is, also, the inscription of a female Other who, bearing out Kristevan issues of abjection, haunts the male imaginary as a terrifying, but fascinating and inspiring ghost, a kind of active principle even, whose function is to trigger action and narrative by subverting the *status quo.* This role, in *The Ghost*, is performed by Ruth, a character who viciously exudes Harris's avowed dislike of Cherie Blair. Compared to Medusa on her first appearance, Ruth is described as a proactive, interstitial character: dismissed as "a phantom presence" in McAra's version of the memoirs (Harris 2008: 218), she projects her looming personality over the Lang court in exile, being capable of a sudden metamorphosis into "Lady Macbeth […], off on yet another of her ceaseless walks, […] in the middle of an Atlantic storm" (237). Some reviewers have read the episode in which Ruth seduces the ghostwriter[8] merely as an expression of Harris's ghoulish malevolence towards the Blairs. There can be little doubt, however, that it is also functional to framing Ruth

[8] "She […] pressed her lips very hard against mine, *as if she were trying to give me the kiss of life*" (Harris 2008: 241; emphasis added).

as a creature from hell. "[A]s keen as a *vampire* to avoid the unforgiving rays of dawn" (242; emphasis added), it was she who expressly selected the protagonist in order to make him restyle her husband's memoirs. It is she, again who, after receiving the published text of the memoirs, draws attention to the way in which it has become almost impossible to decouple Lang's thoughts from the voice and memories of his ghostwriter, who has himself been transformed, in turn, into a haunted 'double'.

But at the end of the story, against a phantasmagoria of deaths, dramatic turns, revelations and half-truths, it is the meta-narrative aspects of ghostwriting – the deadly clash over authorship and authority, and the relentless challenge laid down by the instability of texts – that are revealed to bear the most similarities with the ethical and aesthetic undercurrents which intersect and define the Gothic as an imaginative domain.

As the protagonist realises he has been possessed by Lang's personality to such an extent that "[i]f my fingers typed out a sentence that sounded wrong, I could almost physically feel them *being drawn to the DELETE key*" (371; emphasis added), the politician's memoirs are brought to life posthumously. They become in this way not only one more emblem of "life in death" within the novel, but also a manifestation of the ceaseless power contest over the possible return – or continued suppression – of the "politically repressed".

After a visit to McAra's tomb (a rite of pacification of sorts), the narrator finally works out the meaning of his predecessor's last words from the grave. An encrypted message encoded in the opening sentence of each chapter sheds light on the real, fiendish ghost in the machine and obliges the ghostwriter to confront his own self-delusionary belief in the omnipotence of his writing[9].

Looking in vain for interpretive keys in his own polished version of Lang's life, he is confronted with the fact that his "professional prose, typeset and bound, had rendered the roughness of a human life as smooth as a plastered wall. Nothing. […] a soulless commercial exercise" (392). Turning for truth to McAra's original manuscript which he had so vocally despised, for the first time in his

[9] "[S]ometimes", the protagonist boasts, "I give them lives they never even realised they had. If that isn't art, what is?" (Harris 2008: 7-8).

life the ghostwriter has to come to terms with the full, disquieting power of reading, in the sense highlighted by Brad Fruhauff, that "all texts […] are haunted, because all reading opens the self to the disturbance of the other" (Fruhauff 2008: 2).

This disturbance leads the protagonist, at last, to commit an act of imaginative trespassing and produce a narrative of his own in order to challenge that same official version of history he himself has authored and fleshed out, and would be expected to uphold. It is only too apt, therefore, that the pithy sentence pronounced by the narrator's agent at the beginning of the story about McAra's death ("Accident? Suicide? […] What does it matter? It was the book that killed him" [Harris 2008: 7]), should be mirrored, at the end, by the murder of the protagonist, brought about, again, in order to prevent the "birth" of an unauthorised text.

As he finally finds his "own voice" (400) in death, the protagonist seems not only to endorse Benjamin Hagen's view that

> Novel writing […] is – like the act of writing an 'autobiography' for someone else – an act of ghostwriting, an act of doublewriting performed yet never quite completed by a cast of ghost-doubles: text-reader, author-character, author-text, and character-reader. (Hagen 2009: 86)

He seems to uphold Cixous's view, as well, that

> Fiction is connected to life's economy by a link as undeniable and ambiguous as that which passes from the Unheimliche to the Heimliche: it is not unreal; it is the 'fictional reality' and the vibration of reality. (Cixous 1976: 546)

Harris's meta-narrative turn succeeds in rounding off a plot that, while sustaining the pace of a page-turner throughout, appears to be, in the end, the story of an author and its (ghost)writer who must both *die* so that their work may be born. This choice, ultimately, questions and brings to the fore the proliferation of meanings implicit in the phrase "death of the author" (Barthes 1977), destabilising both the terms "death" and "author" along their various layers of signification, and opening up a discursive space characterised by constant slippage between literal and figurative examples of "ghostly" authorship and authorial haunting. For the ending of the novel throws into sharp relief the Foucauldian notion

that "the 'author' is the product, or function of writing, of the text" (Klages 1997), and bears testimony to Roland Barthes's thesis that "As soon as a fact is *narrated*, […], the author enters his own death, writing begins" (1977: 142), and "the birth of the reader" (1977: 148) takes place. This concept has been compellingly re-written in Polanski's (re)visionary last cut of *The Ghost Writer*: a scene which, representing one of the major departures from Harris's original plot, chooses to stage the murder of the ghostwriter and disperse *both* the resistant *poltergeist* text and its author in a final conflagration of body and sheets that ultimately empowers the viewer to unravel the uncanny mysteries of storytelling, politics and art.

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