



[Review] *Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature and Culture: 1800–Present*
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'THEY'VE A WAY OF WHISPERING TO ME'

Heather Scott

Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature and Culture: 1800-Present.

By Julian Wolfreys. 2018. 270p. £64.99. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-3319980881.

Do you believe in ghosts?

'Non, mais j'en ai peur'.

Marquise du Deffand

It is an ill-fated coincidence that this volume of *Moveable Type* on the theme of 'nostalgia' coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic. A term imbued with a meditation on returning to the way things used to be, 'nostalgia' anticipates the longings of yesteryear when lockdown's loss of pattern and place were not a part of daily routine. Global death rates have become a fixed headline that permeate screens and radios as a static memento of the hold this contagion wields over quotidian existence, whereby isolation is a reminder of the solitary experience of illness and death, a measure documented in Plague histories and on memorial tablets marking these archaic sites. The distance between that time and the present context is punctuated by the most important discoveries and advancements—industrialization, vaccination, and antibiotic therapy—yet these innovations appear vulnerable in the face of such pestilence. Indeed, this is a haunted time.

Julian Wolfreys's monograph *Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature and Culture: 1800-Present* (2018) explores that discordant tension of the past sitting on the edge of experience: the Derridean study 'attempts to grasp self and world, self-in-world, world-in-self, while respecting the singularity of particular representations [with] local explorations of much greater topics, such as vision, representation, and phantasmic and hauntological effect'.¹ Obsolete usage of 'haunt' implies the communication of disease to convey the agency of contagion upon

¹ Julian Wolfreys, *Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature & Culture: 1800-Present* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2. Further references are cited in the main text.

unwitting subjects. Contemporary meaning of the word is tied to emotions of meditative affect—‘memories, cares, feelings, thoughts’—and more negatively to patterns of repetition ‘as causes of distraction or trouble’; further connotations centre on the extremes of violation related to pursuit and psychic abuse. Much culture and literature fixates on this latter definition, with victims ‘subject[ed] to the visits and molestation of disembodied spirits’.² The definitional spectrum that ‘haunt’ lies on has religious connotations, and warranting its own theological study, to which the discipline of pneumatology is dedicated, is the third and most mystical person of the Trinity in Christian doctrine—the Holy Ghost.³ This etymological discussion merits further representation in Wolfreys’s analysis, and its absence is Derridean.

Wolfreys focusses on Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, late Victorian and Edwardian ghost stories, neo-Victorian narrative, popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and the writings of Alice Oswald, John Burnside, and Julian Barnes to negotiate the experience of feeling haunted through poetry, novels, and art via a phenomenological lens.⁴ Part I of *Haunted Selves* begins with ‘English losses’ and the ‘memory of Wessex’ through a selection of novels and poetry by Thomas Hardy to consider the ‘aspects of Englishness, facets of cultural and philosophical selfhood, for which the name of Wessex serves as synecdoche, rather than as material place directly comprehended’ (45). Wolfreys turns to the poetry of Edward Thomas to situate spectrality by exploring ‘poetry as poetry’ and ‘language as language’ (86), questioning the identity of Thomas as the Georgian poet, the bohemian, and the visionary in an effort to recognise how to read a text (88).

Part II of Wolfreys’s study concentrates on texts by Sara Waters, Peter Ackroyd, Peter Carey, Charles Palliser, A.S. Byatt, John Fowles, Iain Sinclair, and others to contemplate echoes of Dickens’s and Wordsworth’s London in neo-Victorian texts. Within this re-imagined urban setting, language ‘seeks to transform the image from within itself; in attempting this, it may be read as attempting to alter modes of perception at a fundamental phenomenological level’ (107). Part III of *Haunted Selves*

² ‘Haunt, v.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/84641>> [accessed 28 July 2020].

³ ‘Pneumatology, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146322>> [accessed 28 July 2020].

⁴ In philosophy, the term ‘phenomenology’ can be traced to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Present usage describes various philosophical methods which analyse the structure of conscious subjective experience. See ‘Phenomenology, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/142351>> [accessed 28 July 2020].

moves from the urban to the rural through John Cowper Powys, Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts, amongst others, returning again to Hardy, and broadening out to include English progressive rock music from the 1960s and 70s to articulate how ‘narrative, poetry, and song construct images of pasts that have never been present as such, but demand in their projection of images for our consciousness that we bear witness to’ (146). Wolfreys’s study concludes (Part IV) by examining tropes of voice, landscape, place, displacement, and memory in the writings of Alice Oswald, John Burnside, and Julian Barnes to appraise the self-referentiality of ‘writing the landscape [...] *feeling* that place, transmitting and translating that place, becoming the place, [and] reading become writing’ (197, original emphasis).

Haunting is not a new field of study for Wolfreys, and in many ways, this book is a sequel to his monograph entitled *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002), which questions how ‘ideas of haunting and spectrality change our understanding of particular texts’, presenting Derridean and historically unanchored readings of writings by Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy.⁵ *Victorian Hauntings* and *Haunted Selves* may be differentiated by the two-hundred-year date parameters of the latter, as the former study concludes by discussing Hardy, and the other begins with him. For Wolfreys, Hardy can be categorised as a transitional writer to conceptualise the passing of Victorianism to Modernism.

In *Haunted Selves* Wolfreys returns once again to Hardy with particular strength, and his analysis is well placed as the prolific author of several relevant studies: *Dickens to Hardy, 1837 – 1884: The Novel, the Past and Cultural Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (2007) and *Thomas Hardy* (2009). His monograph *Writing London: Volume 2: Materiality, Memory, Spectrality* (2004) explores twentieth-century films and texts to consider the relationship between the city, urban text, and the individual perspective of these experiences, with readings situated in the theoretical contexts of Benjamin, Debord, and Derrida. Wolfreys’s other strength lies in critical theory, and most specifically in the work of Derrida. He has published widely on the subject with influential volumes including *Deconstruction: Derrida* (1998), *Readings: Acts of Close Reading in Literary Theory* (2000), *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2002), *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (2004), *Derrida:*

⁵ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. ix.

A Guide for the Perplexed (2007), *The Derrida Wordbook* (2013), and *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century* (2015).

The Derridean reading of ‘haunting, hauntology, [and] spectrality’ (2) presented in *Haunted Selves* is thus characteristic of Wolfreys, and in this approach lies the strength of his reading and its density. A whole chapter on Martin Heidegger and ‘notions of dwelling and the uncanny’ foregrounds the work to contemplate the relationship between the ‘self as haunted and the haunting role of place’ (21); this could be abbreviated and more economically placed within the Introduction. This is also where Wolfreys reveals a nuanced interpretation of Heidegger’s concept of *alatheia* (disclosedness of truth) to consider how one might perceive the ‘truth of some thing’ (29, original emphasis). Language, according to Wolfreys, through poetic and indirect means, ‘seeks to put truth to work, and so, in inviting our attention to it, to reveal truth [...]. Language thus expresses that which remains otherwise inaccessible’ (29). Because hauntings present themselves as elusive enigmas articulated through language, these memory traces permeate the mind, a character’s actions, and ‘determine their dwelling’ (34). Disturbed ghosts are the most inaccessible.

The breadth of Wolfreys’s critical foundation is staggering in *Haunted Selves*: he contextualises his readings within the phenomenological theories of Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Patočka, with other critical views informed by Hegel, Kant, Freud, Lacan, Benjamin, Cixous, de Man, and Deleuze, to name a few. Wolfreys’s encyclopaedic sweep across Western philosophy and postmodern theory impressively lends conviction to his hermetic analyses; conversely, this method is unpalatable because of the diverse philosophic positions he draws upon, as stable readings struggle to emerge from shifting frameworks. *Haunted Selves* is ambitiously crowded with lore, meditations, and tautologies, and Wolfreys showcases agility across an exemplary range of literature, music, criticism, and philosophy. His treatment of Hardy is particularly nuanced and discloses a compelling analytical assessment of the writer’s poems and novels.

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