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Romantic Necromancy: Reading and Writing as Ghost-Seeing in Susan J. Wolfson's *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018)

Dale Townshend

To read Romanticism is inevitably to engage with the world of spirits. As our mechanisms of sense-making and interpretation plot their course over the moribund surfaces of words on the page, so we revivify and activate their latent potential, initiating language into a complex yet subtle dance of spectral signification as we do so. Such, as least, is the opening and underlying claim of Susan J. Wolfson's *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (2018), a brilliant and engaging critical "performance" of ghostliness as it manifests itself across a broad range of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry and prose. Although, by dint of its title alone, one might have expected of this book a contribution to the long-standing debate concerning the relationship between Romanticism and the Gothic, this is not the well-trodden path that Wolfson chooses to follow here. Instead, *Romantic Shades and Shadows* refreshingly turns away from the ghouls that gibber and rattle their chains through the works of Horace Walpole, Matthew Gregory Lewis, and their contemporaries in order to set its sights upon an altogether different spectral realm, one that resides not so much in representations or textual figurings of "actual" ghosts as in the ghostly workings of literary language itself. For, as Wolfson in her introductory first chapter points out, this is a book that is primarily concerned with "spectral linguistic agencies" (2), with the "apparitional presences in the finely grained textures of writing" (4), with the shadows that are conjured up in and by words but which are often rendered legible only through careful and attentive acts of reading.

Nonetheless, the more familiar shades of the Gothic return early on in the study when, in a moment of particularly arresting analysis, Wolfson locates the precedents for her own reading practice in Gothic fiction's most primal of scenes: Emily St Aubert's illicit perusal of her late father's letters in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Here, and as both refracted and amplified in Jane Austen's semi-parodic *Northanger Abbey* (written 1798–99; published late 1817; dated 1818), it is not a menacing ghoul from the past that so haunts the heroine but the ghostly words that appear on the page before her very eyes (in the case of Radcliffe) or the “ghost stories” that crowd in upon the heroine's mind (in Austen). The hauntings in and of Romanticism, Wolfson thus persuasively demonstrates, are primarily the functions of language, and inhere in those fleeting linguistic presences—echoes, parallels, homonyms, repetitions, homophones, allusions, litotes, buried etymologies—that are all too often elided when Romantic-era literature is pressed into the service of crude historicist criticism. This is to say that, though she is certainly inspired by Jerome J. McGann's influential *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) and the ghostly deconstructive turns of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993) and other later works, Wolfson is duty-bound by neither. Instead, she sensitively takes her cue from the ways in which such Romantic writers as Radcliffe, William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and John Keats themselves read, and were haunted by, the work of Shakespeare, identifying in their perusal of *Hamlet* the practice of “literary reading” that, as she describes it, is “close, slow, careful, and open to various, not necessarily reconcilable, energies in the movements of language” (3). If this is a critical methodology that recalls that of the often unfairly maligned Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), it is an inevitability of which a rightly unapologetic Wolfson is all too aware. Here, though, the new critical practice

of close reading, far from being forever doomed to ineffectual prattle about irony, paradox, and ambiguity, emerges as a powerful technique of necromancy and conjuration, a critical strategy that remains finely attuned to Romanticism's "strange byways of writing," to "haunted recalls and recognitions," to "phantasms of a future," and to "spectral presences as shapes of composition" (4).

Having provided in the opening chapter an illuminating account of the "Ghost-Theory" of S. T. Coleridge, as well as a poignant reading Mary Shelley's haunting by the specters of both Wordsworth and Percy Shelley in her essay "On Ghosts" (1824), Wolfson refines her focus for the argument to follow: though specters are, indeed, omnipresent in early nineteenth-century writing, the bulk of *Romantic Shades and Shadows* enacts the potential for ghost-reading and writing in a closely delineated corpus: the work of Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and the "long Romanticism" of W. B. Yeats. Chapter Two, the most theoretically challenging section of the study, proceeds from Wordsworth's account of the dream in "Book Fifth: Books" in the 1850 *Prelude*. Defamiliarizing its well-known lines so as to show up their easily overlooked references to the poet's name, Wolfson spins out an exhilarating reading of the ways in which what she, following the poetic dream's invocation of Euclid, calls "Wordsworth's Elements"—the words *will + words + worth*—inscribe their spectral presence throughout *The Prelude* and other poems. If, *pace* Mary Jacobus, autobiography marks the site of death, it also, following Paul de Man, opens up the infinite field of the spectral. Indeed, in both their French and American varieties, deconstructive modes of reading in this chapter, as elsewhere in the study, are never far away, and the argument at this point convincingly draws out the correspondences between Wordsworth's preoccupations with the problem of names, naming, and signatures and Derrida's later accounts of the same. Irrespective

of whether they are intentional or not, the effects of Wordsworth's encrypted signings are profoundly and uncannily spectral, and as the chapter concludes, "apparitional naming sidesteps the fictional constitution of self, to plant identity in the chance collisions of immediate writing, alive to, and vitally alive in, the accidents of words" (67). In Chapter Three, Wolfson turns to consider the functions of "quaint allusion" in the work of William Hazlitt. Darting indefatigably between Hazlitt's "My First Acquaintance with Poets" (1823), *Liber Amoris* (1823), and a number of other essays and reviews, she notes the play of what we might call allusion in its ordinary or commonplace sense—Hazlitt's self-conscious citation of figures such as Thomas Gray, Alexander Pope, John Milton, P. B. Shelley, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Keats, Shakespeare, and others—while gesturing throughout to the trope's more spectral qualities: the "elegiac allusion" (87), for instance, that is faintly perceivable in Hazlitt's mournful invocation of the ghost of the once-radical Coleridge. This chapter draws to a breathtaking crescendo when Wolfson ingeniously tracks down the shade of none other than Robert Bloomfield in Hazlitt's misquotation of lines from Coleridge's drama *Remorse* (1813). Literary detection has become a form of ghost-hunting. This "Spectral Romanticism" (97), the chapter concludes, resides in something more than careful orchestration, and is unwittingly called up instead in acts of misremembering and oversight, accident, and error. The poetry that P. B. Shelley wrote in 1819 is the focus of Chapter Four, and here, through reference to *The Cenci* (1819), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *The Mask of Anarchy* (1832), and "England in 1819" (1839), the argument explores what the penultimate poem described as "unwritten story": the phantom of a glorious future that remains in that year, as now, forever yet to come. As Wolfson's deft negotiation of theory and close reading in this chapter shows, Shelley's ghosts are largely invoked in the subjunctive mood or

figured through the cautious formulations of linguistic negation, yet effectively accrete nonetheless into powerful and positive visions of future justice. The specters that populate Byron's works, by contrast, appear to be considerably less charged with ethical and political import, and in Chapter Five, Wolfson, in a discussion that remains delightfully responsive to the Byronic spirit of levity, humor, and farce, charts the poet's preoccupations with ghosts across such works as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), *Manfred* (1817), *The Vision of Judgement* (1822), and the Norman cantos of *Don Juan* (published in 1824). Here, even more so than in other sections of the book, Wolfson's engaged critical ear is especially attuned to the ghostly functions of poetic language: rhyme, rhythm, and meter, she shows, summon up the shadows of other words, and as she at one moment puts it, "Byron's sound-play is a witty phono-politics of spectral presence" (150). Even before his death, of course, Byron's presence in England after his self-imposed exile in 1816 was no less spectral, and as the chapter reveals, much of the "Byromania" of the nineteenth century involved a half-serious, half tongue-in-cheek conjuring of the poet's shade. The emphasis upon poetic afterlife in this chapter prepares the way for the reading of W. B. Yeats in Chapter Six, an account of the return of the obdurate shade of John Keats in Yeats's work even as the modernism of former poet depended upon the willed exorcism of his Romantic forebears.

For Romantic poets and essayists, then, to conceptualize, to think, and to write is always to engage with the shadowy realms of the spectral. To read and interpret Romanticism, consequently, to make proper sense of these writers in the here and now, is ideally to commit oneself to the uncanny and invariably surprising terms of a spectral conjuration. Usefully recapitulating the key claims of the argument, Wolfson's brief afterword to her study is also a valiant *cri de coeur* for the practice of

reading that she has enacted throughout: when we read “distantly,” as practitioners of the digital humanities are wont to do, we impoverish our experience through our cold insensitivity to poetic language’s spectral glimmers. Equally, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s programme of “Surface Reading” fails adequately to appreciate that, as Wolfson’s book has so persuasively shown, the shades of Romanticism are not always generated at the level of representation and are seldom symptoms of a deeper, more pressing cause; instead, they emerge from a linguistic realm of error and play that is not always superficiality’s opposite. Indeed, though *Romantic Shades and Shadows* is an elegant account of the hauntings of and by Romanticism in their own right, it is also a generous and invaluable schooling on the author’s behalf in a necromantic approach to reading poetry and prose more generally. We surely derive as much pleasure from this book in the access that it affords us into the creative yet rigorous turns of Wolfson’s own mind as we do from the critical insights into Romanticism that it yields. The result is nothing less than paradigm-shifting. Enjoined, along Coleridgean lines, to suspend our disbelief and to join Wolfson in her startling necromantic pursuits, we as readers and critics might only emerge from *Romantic Shades and Shadows* suitably changed, humbled, haunted.

Biography:

Dale Townshend is Professor of Gothic Literature in the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University. His most recent publications include *Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance, and the Architectural Imagination, 1760–1840* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and, with Angela Wright, *The Cambridge History of the Gothic, Volumes I and II* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

