The Mirror in the Ghost: Peter Straub’s *Ghost Story* and the Gothic Subtext of Horror

Late that night each of them [...] heard the music playing through the town [...] the arcadian music of the soul’s night, the liquid music of America’s underside.

—*Ghost Story*

I: The Ghost

The current trends in literary theory of the American gothic situate the gothic in terms of its political, racial, or semiotic valences; its aesthetic inheritance from the gothic genre of Walpole, Radcliffe, and subsequent authors tends to be addressed as a manifestation of one of the aforementioned valences if it is addressed at all. The aesthetic and affect of the gothic in both its American and European senses is, after all, reminiscent of horror—horror, which, as a genre, tends to be overlooked in academic studies, perhaps since the goals of the genre are so easily understood in terms of cause and effect and horror texts tend to obviate more sophisticated ideas and concerns in their focus on the representational strategies that produce their chilling affect. However, horror is in a genetic sense a child of the gothic, having grown from it around the beginning of the twentieth century, when stories like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and *The Jewel of Seven Stars* were developing not only an aesthetic of thrills and chills descended from early gothic novels but also the familiar archetypes of the horror genre. While the archetypes of the genre do give it a coherent core, a cluster of figures around which the genre horror can be defined, horror is nevertheless a nebulous category, a definition as much projected as intrinsic. The novelist Peter Straub encountered the flexibility of the genre after he wrote several realistic novels, which he said “were like crime novels, though [...] I just saw them as novels” (“The horror!” 76). The critical reception startled him; his status as a writer of supernatural fiction followed him even as he wrote novels devoid of the supernatural:

in every single review, it was, “In this new horror novel by horror writer Peter Straub, x, y, and z.” At first I thought, “Can’t these people read?” After I got over
feeling annoyed, I began to feel gratified, because if these books were horror, then horror was something completely different than old-fashioned, more crustacean definitions of it. It was open to everything—[…] horror novels can have anything as long as they contain a certain point of view. (76)

The implication of Straub’s observation is that horror, like the gothic, defies definition through straightforward aesthetic effects and that its signifiers lie elsewhere—in particular, in a representational paradigm. An examination of Straub’s novel *Ghost Story*, a near-complete catalogue of the tropes of horror as well as a self-conscious member of the gothic literary tradition, will serve to illustrate this paradigm. Indeed, even as the imagery of the gothic wears the face of its child, horror, horror engages with the instability of identity and the irruption of nameless and virulent forces from the past, the predations of a malevolent or haunting Other. Horror, I argue, is simply a subset of the gothic, and *Ghost Story* is a gothic treatment of modern America’s psychological self, a powerful narrative of the return of the repressed.

To discuss the gothic requires that one at least attempt to define it; the gothic is rather poetically adroit at escaping precise signification, and theoretical constructions vary. Eric Savoy, in his essay “The Face of the Tenant,” identifies it by a number of signposts; significant among these are the familiar psychoanalytic “return of the repressed” (Savoy 4), the oppositional relationship to positivism and Enlightenment notions of rationality (5), and the breakdown or lack of a “coherently meaningful symbolic” (6). It is, Savoy says, because reactions to the limitations and gaps in empirical, positivist systems of thought “required a darkness as the Enlightenment’s other” that the gothic developed (5). It consists in the gaps between signifier and signified, between categories into which it does not wholly fit. Like Kristeva’s concept of abjection it disturbs categories in its failure to cohere fully within them. It “is a fluid tendency rather than a discrete literary ‘mode,’ an impulse rather than a literary artifact” (6). And if the gothic is a response at first to Enlightenment modes of thought and a refuge for paradigms of
knowledge that the Enlightenment marginalized, and in the more general sense is concerned with the “imminent irruption, the proximate quality, of the not-forgotten” (17), then it is the narrative of history, personal and collective, in which the gothic consists, and it is the ways in which history may be understood as a haunting—a ghost story—through which it operates.

A particular haunting in the history of American identity—one laden with the threat of gaps between sign and signified—is that of race. Toni Morrison has observed, between the lines of early and modern American literature, that whiteness tends to be defined against blackness: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent” (Morrison 52). Morrison argues that whiteness depends on blackness to construct itself, that the degraded status of the black in American society arose from a need to create an Other by which the white could know itself. She cogently observes that in Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, the figure of whiteness that appears at the narrative’s end is “closed and unknowable” (32). Whiteness cannot be known by its own attributes; it lacks signification without contrast. There is a gap in the system of signification; what occupies that space, the uninscribed white, is gothic. The idea that the self is framed in relation to an external body is Hegelian—so the construction alone is not Morrison’s innovation. But her notion that this framing leaves vulnerabilities, holes, in identity freight American history with fragility, and reveals the potential of another history, not inscribed but circumscribed, extant in the negative-space where identity at bottom has no signifying terms. The holes in the self hidden by the Other’s having been projected there contain something raw and inarticulate, a glimpse perhaps of the Lacanian Real—the haunting that an inaccessible past
has left behind. *Ghost Story* develops the implications for selfhood of Morrison’s model in a direction that shows concern with the notion of a modern and American selfhood.

Of course no modern self could exist without the ghost of the premodern self wreathing its limbs; and in *Ghost Story* the premodern past is everywhere, from the folktales of the Native Americans who recorded encounters with the eponymous ghosts, the feeders on human life who “are behind every ghost story and supernatural tale ever written [...] the originals of everything that frightens us in the supernatural” (*Ghost Story* 422), to Dr. Gruber’s “little collection of Lully, Fludd, Bruno, what you could call the occult studies of the Renaissance” (67). A protagonist’s father, a Presbyterian minister of a sternness to do Johnathan Edwards proud, tells his son to abandon two close friends, because “they are Episcopalians, just one step from popery” (385)—in Milburn, New York, an everyman’s town, European feuds to settle religious identity, disputes that originated far from American soil, are alive in the cultural history. And the reverend Gruber’s collection of hermetic magical writings recalls the esoteric tradition of Europe, a tradition of mysticism that explored the relationship between self and other, once the practice of the finest scientists of the age, including Newton—a tradition that was a casualty of Enlightenment positivism. Though it exceeds the scope of my argument, it bears noting that throughout his works Straub has not ignored the Hermetics; Bernadette Bosky observes that Straub’s first five novels trace an arc of horror, growing self-discovery, and triumphant resolution that is heavily influenced by hermetic notions of the development of self (Bosky 11). This tradition, discredited in the rise of positivism, fell into the gaps, and it stands to reason that when the gothic has connections to time and history (and when does it not?) the gaps will contain such castaways. Finally, it bears mentioning that Morrison’s concept of self as defined against other is presented in *Ghost Story* in racial terms, though reframed from tones of black and white:
in that town so bluntly European in ancestral character, the enemy—the ghost—is identified with the Manitou, a deadly, category-defying because shapeshifting, Native American spirit.

Interestingly, there is another instance of racial projection in the novel; the primary protagonist, Don Wanderley, is writing a novel in an attempt to reconcile himself to his first encounter with the haunting spirit he knew as Alma Mobley. He creates the character of Dr. Rabbitfoot, “black, definitely [...] spats, big rings, a cane, a flashy waistcoat. He’s chirpy, showbizzy, a marathon talker, slightly ominous—he’s the bogeyman. He’ll own you if you don’t watch out” (Ghost Story 156). Dr. Rabbitfoot is a saxophonist in minstrel garb, a devil-at-the-crossroads whose charisma makes him dangerous. And yet, Don knows, “he’s no more than Alma in blackface, Alma with horns, tail and a soundtrack” (204). He is aware that Dr. Rabbitfoot is no more than a projection, a different face, easier somehow to otherize than the white Alma, whose “ghostly” pallor Don notes at their very first meeting (206). Yet this self-defensive fiction haunts him—and Milburn—in a very literal sense, Dr. Rabbitfoot prowling the town in a collapse between layers of narrative that has significance for the construction of the Other that the “ghosts” of the story have knowingly complicated.

The narrative of Ghost Story consists in its early pages almost entirely of self-defensive fictions. Left unspoken, a haunting shadow, through most of the book is the mystery of what happened to the woman Eva Galli, and why this event haunts the members of the informal club that calls itself the Chowder Society. Eventually that story is confessed, when it is discovered that it relates to the haunting—the haunting that manifests as the deaths, one after the other, of the Chowder Society. After the first member, Don’s uncle, dies, one member of the society asks another: “‘What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?’” and the reply comes, “‘I won’t tell you that, but I’ll tell you the worst thing that ever happened to me—the most dreadful thing’” (38).
The members of the Chowder Society spend the next year telling ghost stories that may or may not be true, spinning fictions that seem a safe layer away from reality and allow them to ignore uncomfortable truths about themselves. And yet the stories of the Chowder Society begin to irrupt into their reality; the ghosts from Sears James’s narrative begin to appear to him and eventually to all the protagonists. Moreover, Don’s (separate) fiction intrudes into reality, as Dr. Rabbitfoot begins to make first auditory and then physical appearances. The fictions that the characters created as a mechanism of repression, prevarication and illumination begin to call attention to themselves as haunts in their own right, undercutting the enterprise of repression and highlighting the gaps in the incomplete history Ghost Story presents to us at first. Repression, in this articulation of its outcomes, is a self-defeating endeavor. The haunting will always haunt.

The stories of the Chowder Society create another important irruption: that of the literary canon into Straub’s horror novel. Sears James’s tale, set in a shoddy backwoods schoolhouse, is a condensed retelling of the most famous ghost story of James’s namesake: The Turn of the Screw. The elegant manor of Henry James’s story has been replaced with a succession of backwoods hovels, and the sympathy of Mrs. Grose has no analogue; here there is the Lutheran hermetic and the brutal small-town Protestantism of the postmaster, Charlie Mather. This is a consciously American gothic story; the puritanical religious overtones, the frontier wildness of Gregory Bate—the Peter Quint of this New England hamlet—and the schoolhouse evocative of a benighted version of the schoolhouse in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer locate the story as effectively as the replacement of its author’s genteel Tudor name, Henry, with the name of Sears, the department store.

Stephen King, in Danse Macabre, his survey of the horror genre, examines this Americanizing element of Ghost Story in an interview with Peter Straub. He quotes Straub as
saying, “[Ghost Story] started as a result of having read all the American supernatural fiction I could find. […] I reread Hawthorne and James […] I also read Bierce, Edith Wharton’s ghost stories, and a lot of Europeans. […] After that I thought of cannibalizing certain old classic stories, and plugging them into the Chowder society” (King 255). Straub later dropped the other stories—tales by Poe and Hawthorne among them—though we can safely assume that his proposed rendition of “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux” would have been told by the character Ricky Hawthorne. King moreover identifies Ghost Story as gothic in the European sense, as a member of a precise genre, which he dryly describes as consisting of “overplotted novels whose success or failure hinges on the author’s ability to make you believe in the characters and partake of the mood” (260). Straub, who is inescapably—at least by label—a horror writer, has in other words constructed a novel that is essentially a revue of the American gothic inheritance; it is an American haunting, groaning with the twin heritages of the European past—for while the fantasy-castle of The Turn of the Screw, an edifice nodding back to the manor of the original Gothic writer, Horace Walpole, is gone from James’s narrative, it exists in Straub’s, as the home of the dashing Lewis Benedikt (Ghost Story 93)—and of the American frontier, with its marginalized, racialized Other. Haunting Ghost Story’s text are the American and English canons of literature, more than the canon of horror. Straub took the texts that probed the gothic spaces of previous eras and reread them for his modern hour, and it is into this distorted mirror that we must now peer, to see what Straub defines as the gaps in which the gothic consists, and how the insistence of his horror on the unconfessed facts of the self form a statement about the nature of the gothic’s modern manifestation.

II: The Mirror
From *Julia* through *Floating Dragon*, all of Straub’s novels have included two major premises: that there is a secret, or mystery, in the world, hidden but available to those who look for it; and that our understanding of this secret, and possibly the secret itself, is constructed from elements which are deeply familiar, and possibly even fundamental, to our own selves. (Bosky 8)

Nearly every story, every lie, every repression—every opportunity for irruption in *Ghost Story*—shapes the construction of the teller/repressor’s identity. Sears, in telling his story, reveals his compassionate streak, well hidden under his prickly façade, as well as resolving the mystery of why he claims to have made a terrible teacher (in fact it was terror of the haunted boy Fenny Bate in his classroom that soured him to the profession). Don Wanderley creates Dr. Rabbitfoot as an attempt to externalize his emotions regarding Alma Mobley; he writes down Alma’s story as an attempt to relate his own experiences to those of the Chowder Society and to articulate the incident to himself—for he has written a novel fictionalizing the entire matter and has confused his memories with his imaginings. And the death of Eva Galli, unspoken for decades, haunts every member of the Society, and this haunting is the haunting at the heart of *Ghost Story*. The creature come upon them is Eva herself, ancient and vengeful—and on a metaphorical level, a perfect manifestation of their guilt, eating them alive one by one. The ghosts of *Ghost Story* have, in much the same way as, according to Toni Morrison and others, the black has done for the white, created the definitions of those whom they haunt.

The challenges, the blows to the core of selfhood, come at first slowly. The first time Straub depicts a Chowder Society meeting, Ricky Hawthorne describes their paradigm, which will soon be challenged: “They believed in the efficacy of knowledge” (*Ghost Story* 41). They are lawyers, doctors, in the camp of the Enlightenment. But in their roots, their history, are the ghosts of wicked children and encounters with hermetic magi; and Hawthorne, dreaming a nightmare in which he is trapped in a house looking out the window, knows that “whatever was
coming [for him] was going to come from inside, not out there” (85). On a thematic level the
text suggests the ghosts come from within, not without; while later in the novel the antagonists’
physicality is the key to their defeat, those same antagonists never stop insisting that they in fact
are the characters they claim to haunt.

And Dr. Rabbitfoot suggests the same. His carnival music plays through the streets of
Milburn in the depths of a winter blizzard, and he is no mere hallucination, for “inexplicable
music that should have sounded joyful but was instead wound full of the darkest emotions they
knew” frightens the snowbound people (483). Yet Dr. Rabbitfoot was Don Wanderley’s
creation, and we have already seen Don’s ruminations on the act of dreaming up this latest icon
of Alma Mobley. Dr. Rabbitfoot did not exist, but his name appears on false Jehovah’s Witness
pamphlets (402). The figure who is the most explicit articulation of the Other via race becomes
real, though he was known not to be. The constructed Other becomes capable of haunting the
self; it becomes, in a sense, a double. A mirror image.

Stephen King observes that “three of the book’s epigrams are Straub’s own free
rendering of the Narcissus story” (King 259), a fact that underscores what King calls “Straub’s
hall-of-mirrors approach” and “keeps us constantly aware that the face looking out of all those
mirrors is also the face looking in; the book suggests we need ghost stories because we, in fact,
are the ghosts.” The focus of the book in large part tends to close in and in on the self. When
writing down his recollection of his encounters with Anna Mobley, Don Wanderley says,
“[Alma] turned very slightly toward me and said, ‘I saw a ghost.’ […] but did Alma actually say
‘I am a ghost?’ I could not be sure; […] but if she had said I am a ghost, would I have responded
differently?” (Ghost Story 238) For only much later does Don recognize her as a ghost, as
something other than human. And yet, he has misremembered the encounter; in a still-later
scene of the novel he recalls what she actually said, “words he only now understood: ‘You are a
ghost.’ You, Donald. You. It was the unhappy perception at the center of every ghost story”
(429). Since the “ghosts” of the novel are eventually reframed, redescribed as shapeshifting,
immortal creatures with more in common with the vampire or the werewolf, if one is to insist on
a literal ghost one must look to where the hauntings are. And there we return to the mirror of
Narcissus. As Straub’s epigram puts it,

“And what is innocence?” Narcissus enquired of his friend.
“It is to imagine that your life is a secret, his friend said, “Most particularly, to
imagine it a secret between yourself and a mirror.”
“I see,” Narcissus said. “It is the illness for which mirror-gazing is the cure.”

(471)

There is no turning back from revelation.

From this examination of mirrors comes the threat of the Freudian double, the cruelest
self-examination. The child, Angie, the youngest incarnation of the haunting, insists to Don that
there is no divide between them: “I am you” (26). And this is a statement that Gregory
Bate/Greg Benton repeats to the youth Peter Barnes, who is profoundly disturbed by this, telling
Don, “He said he was me. […] He said he was me, I want to kill him” (400). The idea of the
dark half, the twin, abject self, proves the most terrible haunting in *Ghost Story*: characters go
mad, fallen to their insecurities and unacknowledged flaws, and Don, given the chance to end the
ghost story forever, finds himself confronting the notion of stabbing a child to death, and reflects
on Hawthorne’s evasive question, which turned out to be the most pointed one after all:

What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done? Did you kidnap a friendless girl
and drive without sleeping, hardly eating, stealing money when your own melted
away…did you point a knife toward her bony chest?
What was the worst thing? Not the act, but the ideas about the act, the
garish film unreeling through your head. (554)
The question, in the end, is of good and evil, who is right, which course is least
repugnant. Stephen King has also commented on this property of *Ghost Story*: “A great many
writers who have attempted the horror story have […] realized that it is exactly this blurring about where the evil is coming from that differentiates the good or the merely effective from the great” (King 262). Thus King identifies one of the keystones of horror’s best presentation. But in a story of absolutes such a “blurring” would be impossible; to exist there must be a certain fluidity of right and wrong, a fluidity that must be uncomfortable because it exposes the gaps in morality, the hypocrisies, the questions of self, shows the “garish film unreeling”; in short, elements of the gothic. Moreover, King draws on a study of Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* to articulate his view of the American gothic of the late seventies and eighties, the American gothic of *Ghost Story*:

The new American gothic provides a closed loop of character […] this is an exciting, even fundamental change in the intent of the gothic […] [the new gothic] uses the Bad Place [e.g. the haunted house, or haunted state of mind] not to symbolize sexual interests and fear of sex but interest in the self and fear of the self…instead of a symbolic womb, a symbolic mirror. (281)

*Ghost Story* is the gothic of the late twentieth century—the gothic of Narcissus discovering a certain repugnance in the face in the mirror, abjecting it, unwilling to admit that something is amiss, and able to persevere only through admission of guilt, through an act of recognition. And *Ghost Story* is a work also of horror, the sort that probes at the gaps in the self, which exist because what is there has been abjected, or is beyond articulation. King’s “great” horror is indistinguishable from the gothic.

To say as King did that a sea change has occurred in the gothic, however, is to misconstrue the gothic. The gothic is “America’s underside,” the repository of silenced things that speak anyway, through their reflections and projections, and what is silenced is never constant. It tells us very little new about the gothic that the emblem of the gothic in the late 1900s is the mirror of Narcissus. It tells us much, however, about the late 1900s. Recall Savoy’s
description of the gothic as “a fluid tendency” (Savoy 6). The gothic finds gaps to consist in wherever they are. And the thesis, the assumption, that there is a gothic assumes also that those gaps exist.

If the gothic has not changed, however, horror has at least gone through a process of self-recognition much as *Ghost Story* seems to push for; at a 2007 panel of horror writers and critics, the definition of horror was debated, and John Clute offered the statement that “horror terminates in the realization of our bondage to the open eye of the horrific nature of the world we live in” (“The horror! 76”). Peter Straub replied, agreeing, “And there you are in the country of the sublime, which is not the land of bliss.” Horror as a genre has defined its goals around a moment of recognizing what is normally not recognized—echoing Savoy’s discussion of the “imminent irruption, the proximate quality, of the not-forgotten” (Savoy 17). The “certain point of view” (“The horror! 76) that Peter Straub suggested is the sole requisite of horror is that of the gothic.
Works Cited


