In her recent study of the “Indian ghosts,” as she argues, haunt the American literary tradition, Renée L. Berglund proposes that “all stories are ghost stories,” if only insofar as all stories are told in words, and all words conjure something that is no longer present, and possibly never was. Perhaps because its object is so often language, much recent literary and cultural criticism invokes the notion of haunting to describe pasts that make themselves forcibly felt in the present, absences that still and endlessly insist upon mixing their business with that of the living.

In the shadow of the First World War, Sigmund Freud pioneered the underlying notion of the so-called return of the repressed. For Freud, this return initially occurred primarily within the individual mind—that of the subject, in 1917’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” who remains ambivalent toward the dead, or of the one who, in Freud’s later essay, “The Uncanny” (1918), has never fully come to terms with forbidden desires. But the repressed also returns at the level of whole cultures, like the ones that Freud later depicted in Totem and Taboo (1918) which make enemies of their dead and thus doom themselves to be visited by those dead again and again in perpetuity. Freud’s distinctions between psychological and cultural models of haunting charted a theoretical divide that persists even now.

Common to both models—about which more anon—is a revenant of a stock ghost story formula, one in which the spirits of the dead return to impart the whereabouts of buried treasure, or to bring guilt to light. And yet the notion that ghosts turn up to expose what has been hidden is a distinctively modern one which goes hand in hand with the enlightened conviction that ghosts as such do not exist except figuratively. This conjunction shapes two influential efforts to account for modern conceptions of the apparition by the literary critics Stephen Greenblatt and Terry Castle.

Greenblatt’s 2002 study Hamlet in Purgatory examined the figure of Hamlet’s dead father that literally stalks the wings of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Greenblatt found that the kind of ghost that he embodies (or does not)—the riddling specter who arouses tormenting ambivalence, stirs a sense of personal guilt, and simply will not be gone—came along at exactly the point where a longstanding relationship between the living and the dead collapsed. In that relationship, Roman Catholic theology and an accompanying, communal set of mourning practices and death rituals allowed it to be...
“If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semiethical criterion of ‘sublimity’ misses the mark. For it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.”

T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”
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