

# **HAUNTING MODERNISMS: GHOSTLY AESTHETICS, MOURNING AND SPECTRAL RESISTANCE IN LITERARY MODERNISM (2017) BY MATT FOLEY**

Review by Lucy Hall

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**Foley, Matt. *Haunting Modernisms: Ghostly Aesthetics, Mourning and Spectral Resistance in Literary Modernism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 236 pp.**

Haunting as a literary concept has a great deal of flexibility in its definition and application. Ranging from the literal spectres of early Gothic fiction to Freudian reflections on subjectivity, the ghost becomes a useful critical tool through which both personal and cultural anxieties can be interpreted. In her 1952 introduction to *The Second Ghost Book*, Elizabeth Bowen writes that the “universal battiness of our century looks like providing [ghosts] with a propitious climate” (vii). It is within this climate of war, uncertainty, and residual cultural trauma that Foley situates *Haunting Modernisms*.

Taking a variety of theoretical approaches to authors such as Wyndham Lewis, Elizabeth Bowen, and D. H. Lawrence, *Haunting Modernisms* attempts to bridge the gap between Gothic and Modernist definitions of what it means to haunt and be haunted. Foley’s chief aim is to examine new methods of reading allusions to haunting and ghostly experience in relation to early twentieth-century discussions about temporality, the perception of reality, and the limits of understanding the self and the Other. Although discussions of intertextuality are observed throughout the study, Foley positions his study as an alternative to this existing approach to Modernist haunting, as well as to the necessity of reading the ghost as a purely Gothic trope. Rather than reading the ghostly into texts, Foley attempts to excavate the meanings behind explicit recourse to the language of haunting in Modernist discourse. By situating this work within the context of the First World War and its aftermath, *Haunting Modernisms* explores the ethics of representing cultural and personal loss and how the negotiation between approaches to the ghost both troubles and reinvigorates Modernist literary aesthetics.

Crucial to the first section of Foley’s study is the idea of purgatorial haunting as a denial of the ghost as a transcendent or consolatory figure. Chapter Two charts the progression from Modernist aesthetics of deadness in pre-war poetry, to an aesthetic of ghostliness in the post-war period. Here Foley argues that ghostliness exists as an aesthetic of excess, disrupting the totalization of human experience expounded by early Modernism, particularly when confronted with the ethics of representing First World War experiences of the Front. Foley suggests that there is a

crisis of representation in the poetry of Richard Aldington and Ford Maddox Ford that struggles to reconcile the restrained 'Classical' aesthetics of early masculinist Modernism with the bodily excess of the experience of war itself, setting up the ethical problems surrounding ideas of haunting and mourning that form the discussion in later chapters. The denial of the Derridean reading of the ghost as transcendent messenger becomes particularly clear in the reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Through Eliot, Foley argues for a movement towards purgatorial, melancholic haunting in which the dead are denied any knowledge-bearing, consolatory, or redemptive function and instead are trapped alongside the living. Drawing on existing discussions surrounding the relationship of Modernism to mourning and trauma, these initial chapters explore the limits of Derridean ideas of hauntology and pave the way for Foley's discussion of more radical readings of the Modernist ghost.

The second section explores how the ghostly impacts on ontology and interacts with the Modernist aesthetics of interiority. Taking the earthbound spirits of Eliot's *The Waste Land* to the next logical level, Foley examines how this recourse to purgatorial haunting can also apply to the subjectivity of the living. As such ghostliness in the work of Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen is bound up with Modernist notions of temporality, the aesthetic of interiority, and self-definition. Foley's extended reading of Bowen's interwar writing is a particular highlight of the book, especially as her more explicitly ghostly short stories are read alongside more metaphorical instances of haunting in novels such as *A House in Paris* (1926) and *The Hotel* (1922). This helps to support Foley's overall aim of situating haunting as something independent from, but often overlapping with, the Gothic genre. Where haunting expresses a degree of 'stuckness' in Eliot's work, by Foley's discussion of Bowen, it begins to take on more positive, self-preserving attributes. The liminality of ghostliness relating to an idea of perpetual becoming both creatively and ontologically, attests to the particularly Woolfian awareness of the impossibility of completely knowing the Other. It is this examination of Bowen's work in particular that constitutes the most effective bridge between Gothic and Modernist criticism. Here Foley tackles discussions surrounding identity and subjectivity that are often the key focus of much Modernist criticism using the more literal approach to the ghostly that characterises the Gothic. Though never claiming to read his material through a purely Gothic lens in the way previous studies and essay collections have, Foley finds an alternative reading of spectrality that privileges narrative, and is most effective and innovative as a means of exploring how an understanding of ghostliness in these texts strengthens our grasp of the Modernist approach to ephemerality, subjectivity, and otherness.

The final section examines these ideas of communion with the impossible Other in the light of D. H. Lawrence's work. Foley suggests that, for Lawrence the ghost is entirely removed from the symbolic realm, only accessible through a return to a primal, corporeal experience. Particularly interesting in this discussion is the idea of the trauma of idealised memory in which reality falls short of memory and expectation, particularly in relation to soldiers returning from the Front. An exploration of Lady Cynthia Asquith ties Foley's discussions of Bowen and Lawrence together in an interesting way, and his reading of her as an inspirational force behind D. H. Lawrence's ghost stories is an innovative means of understanding the author's work in relation to his life. Foley suggests that Lawrence's work moves towards an alternative understanding of the ghost as a corporeal, instinctual

and a-symbolic means of ethically engaging with trauma, loss, and ethical forms of mourning post-First World War. By the book's conclusion, the reader is profoundly aware of how the limits of representation that apply to ideas of subjectivity, theories of haunting, and the experience of trauma intertwine in the work of Modernist writers, deeply influencing each author's aesthetic approach to representing otherness and loss.

Although Foley's theoretical exposition is dense at times, he teases out and illustrates theoretical points with nuanced and exemplary textual readings that elucidate the complex material he handles. Nonetheless, Foley's focus is chiefly historical, situating texts in both the biographical and cultural contexts that produced them. This is particularly gratifying in the recurring connection between ghostliness and representations of the feminine 'Other' arise time and again throughout the study. This is a particularly effective vein that highlights one of the many ways in which haunting can be defined beyond the dichotomy of the living and the dead. While the study is focussed principally on an examination of poetry and prose, Foley introduces complimentary examinations of author correspondence, Modernist journals, and art to further enrich his textual readings. These not only demonstrate the breadth of Foley's knowledge, but also hint at the expansive possibilities of examining haunting in other Modernist texts using a similar approach. Each chapter sows the seeds of discussions yet to come, creating a rich and complex study that draws together both theoretical and historical approaches. *Haunting Modernisms* is a work which will complement existing criticism in Modernist studies, the Gothic, and war studies and one which will only benefit from a second or third reading.

#### WORKS CITED

Bowen, Elizabeth. "Introduction." *The Second Ghost Book*. Edited by Cynthia Asquith. Pan Books, 1964.

#### BIONOTE

**Lucy Hall** recently completed her PhD at the University of St Andrews. Her thesis entitled 'Home Front Gothic: Power, Identity and Anxiety in British Culture, 1938-1951' examines the cultural output of the Second World War Home Front and its affinities with the Gothic mode. Her writing explores the themes of tyranny, terror, monstrosity, and haunting that run through the literature, film, and art of the period. In the past she has presented on topics of film adaptation, memorial culture, and tyrannical 1940s husbands, and is has contributed to a recent volume of essays exploring heroism and British culture