



Ghostly presences in H.P. Lovecraft's "Cool Air" and The Case of Charles Dexter Ward

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Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

Dámaris Romero-González, Israel Muñoz-
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GHOSTLY PRESENCES IN H.P. LOVECRAFT'S "COOL AIR" AND *THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD*

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ABSTRACT: H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) is a writer characterized for his mixture of genres –what is known as the weird tale– that borrows influences from gothic fiction, fantasy, horror and science fiction. This amalgam of styles and genres results in the unusual apparition of classical horror figures (vampires, zombies, ghosts) that are filtered through a very original view. It is the goal of this chapter to analyze how Lovecraft dealt with ghostly presences in his tales. Through the review of theoretical approaches to ghosts and specters, I will focus my attention on two texts, "Cool Air" and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, in order to unravel the connections that seemingly detached characters might have with the classical gothic ghost.

KEYWORDS: Ghost, weird fiction, haunting figure, spectrality, Lovecraft, gothic.

ON GHOSTS, NEW AND OLD

One of the most difficult –and maybe unfruitful– tasks that scholars approaching the figure and work of H.P. Lovecraft have tackled, is the categorization of the author in a particular genre. Having written tales that cover a range of styles, from gothic to pure horror fiction, from Dunsanian oneiric stories to science fiction, Lovecraft said that "(t)here is no field other than the weird in which I have any aptitude or inclination for fictional composition"¹. But weird fiction is still a troublesome concept that needs further clarification. Lovecraft himself provided a definition in his introduction to the *Supernatural Horror in Literature* essay:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space².

¹ Lovecraft 1998: 395.

² Lovecraft 2000: 22-23.

This is probably the most accurate description of weird fiction that can be found in literature. However, Joshi mentions the following:

As I see it, the weird tale must include the following broad divisions: fantasy, supernatural horror, non-supernatural horror, and quasi science fiction. All these categories should be regarded as loose and nonexclusive, and there are some other subtypes that are probably amalgams or offshoots of those just mentioned³.

Torres Oliver, for his part, argues that Lovecraft retains some of the classical gothic roots, but that there are three main points in which the writer moves away from the genre: the cosmic dimension of his tales, which contrasts with the close environments of the Gothic; the absence of religion, clearly different from the religiosity of many gothic stories; and the lack of the feminine factor in most of his stories⁴.

The weird tale, then, seems to be a liminal genre that borrows elements from the Gothic, science fiction, horror and cosmicism. The weird tale, in a sense, undergoes the same process described by Maggie Kilgour when defining the Gothic itself as a literary Frankensteinian phenomenon that brings together topics and influences from very distant times, motifs and authors, from Shakespeare to Spenser, from Burke to Rousseau⁵. Like a modernist version of the Gothic, the weird tale is a blending of genres which has, at the same time, a clear influence in the way Lovecraft deals with one of the most classical gothic tropes, that of the ghost. It is not too risky to claim that there are no ghosts within the Lovecraftian corpus, or at the very least, there are no ghosts that are presented like those in the classical tradition, spirits that haunt a place and scare human beings. This lack of a "canonical" ghost in the narrative of H.P. Lovecraft has come from a critical disinterest in this particular motif, all the attention being hoarded by the alien-god creations that the writer from Providence imagined, and that have nowadays become part of the popular culture: Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, Dagon, etc.

However, there are figures that share many of the same purposes, effects and origins of the phantom, as defined by critics. Instead of revenants, spirits or ectoplasmic scary characters, Lovecraft used a variety of human beings and supernatural events that provoke effects similar to that of the classical ghost. It is the goal of this chapter to highlight how, in spite of the lack of a clearly defined ghostly presence, Lovecraft is able to reproduce the typical features and behaviours of a ghost, personified by other entities that, at first sight, might not be considered as spectral presences at all.

³ Joshi 2003: 6-7.

⁴ Torres Oliver 2009: 103-105.

⁵ Kilgour 1995: 4.

Modern criticism on ghosts and spectres suggests a remarkable tendency to highlight the more psychoanalytical and metaphysical aspects of the ghost. Among contemporary authors, Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is one of the cornerstones to be considered. The French philosopher distinguishes between spectre and spirit, the former being "a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit"⁶. At the same time, both spectres and spirits are "an unnameable or almost unnameable thing; something, between something and someone, anyone or anything"⁷. They are liminal subjects, that are difficult to apprehend and that constantly cross the frontier between existence and non-existence. The conception of the ghost as something between two worlds, standing on the threshold of two opposites, will be one of the constant distinctive features of the entity for most scholars.

According to Brogan, a ghost is an "enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another"⁸. Colin Davis, when referring to the concept of hauntology, inspired by Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, also focuses on the liminality of the ghost, a figure that

is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive [...] A wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving⁹.

Thurston, supporting Badiou's ideas, also focuses on the ghost as a boundary figure, "the rupture of consistent presentation, of the plausible discursive 'order of things'-thus as an uncanny effect of the inconsistency of Being itself"¹⁰.

In a more general approach, Jerrold H. Hogle also connects the confrontation of opposites to the Gothic genre as a whole. In words of Hogle:

The reason that Gothic others or spaces can abject myriad cultural and psychological contradictions, and thereby confront us with those anomalies in disguise, is because those spectral characters, images, and settings harbor the hidden reality that oppositions of all kinds cannot maintain their separations, that each "lesser term" is contained in its counterpart and that difference really arises by standing against and relating to interdependency¹¹.

⁶ Derrida 1993: 5.

⁷ Derrida 1993: 5.

⁸ Brogan 1998: 6.

⁹ Davis 2005: 373.

¹⁰ Thurston 2012: 6.

¹¹ Hogle 2002: 11.

Brogan, Davis, Thurston and Hogle also support the idea of the ghost as something that stands between two –metaphorical or not– worlds, an idea that even stands out over that of the frightening side of the creature. The ghost is an uncanny figure in its most Freudian conception, i.e., “arouses dread and creeping horror”¹², and its source of discomfort for human beings seems to rely on its supernatural nature, its ability to belong to two different universes at the same time. However, the authors previously mentioned do not particularly emphasize the frightening capacities of the ghost, and instead they focus their attention, as has been already mentioned, on the nature of the creature itself.

It must be highlighted that, whereas Derrida distinguishes between spectre and spirit, the other authors talk about ghosts. Taking into account that Derrida states that the spirit “assumes a body, it incarnates itself, a spirit, in the spectres”¹³, we might then consider that ghosts and spectres are equivalent categories under the light of the given approaches. The ghost and the spectre are the physical manifestations of the spirit mentioned by Derrida, the figures that can be noticed by humans.

“COOL AIR” AND THE GHOSTLY PHYSICIAN

As has already been stated, it is difficult to identify pure classical ghosts within the Lovecraftian oeuvre. However, there are several samples in which Lovecraft presents a figure that fits the liminal definition of the ghost, beings that reunite two opposites in the tale and that provoke, if not a straightforward sense of dread, at least a clear uneasiness in the reader, derived from the connotations that the mere existence of that particular being implies. At the same time, these figures show clear haunting qualities, and are able to somehow affect the houses and buildings where they dwell.

That is the case of “Cool Air”, where the narrator meets Dr. Muñoz, a physician who lives above him and who is constantly troubled with keeping his room at low temperatures. As the tale unravels, the narrator keeps several conversations with the doctor, realizing how obsessed with death the man is. After a breakdown in a cooling machine that he has in the room, the doctor's physical body vanishes, leaving “a kind of dark, slimy trail led from the open bathroom door to the hall door, and thence to the desk, where a terrible little pool had accumulated”¹⁴. A handwritten note on the desktop explains that Dr. Muñoz died eighteen years ago, and he has been able to cheat death by maintaining his tissues under specific temperature conditions, basically keeping the room as cool as possible.

¹² Freud 2009: 122.

¹³ Derrida 1993: 4.

¹⁴ Lovecraft 1999: 138.

Dr. Muñoz is probably Lovecraft's closest portrait of a classical ghost. He is a mysterious figure that, in a sense, haunts the whole building. Like the ghost that moves objects or provokes noises and poltergeists, Dr. Muñoz's first appearance in the tale is not as a physical figure. Instead, he leaves a sign of his activity: some liquids that flow from his room to the narrator's. His presence on the block disturbs not only the daily routine of the narrator, but also that of Mrs. Herrero, the landlady, who has to deal with the smell of ammonia and other problems resulting from the machine installed in Dr. Muñoz's room. This is the way in which the doctor haunts the house, by means of noises and small annoyances which cause some discomfort to the landlady and the tenants.

The physical look of the doctor is neat. Far from being fearsome, he looks like an exquisite gentleman:

The figure before me was short but exquisitely proportioned, and clad in somewhat formal dress of perfect cut and fit. A high-bred face of masterful though not arrogant expression was adorned by a short iron-grey full beard, and an old-fashioned pince-nez shielded the full, dark eyes and surmounted an aquiline nose which gave a Moorish touch to the physiognomy otherwise dominantly Celtiberian¹⁵.

The external aspect of the gentleman is far from any monstrous hint, but however there is a certain sense of uneasiness invoked by his presence, that the narrator perceives the very first time they meet, "a repugnance which nothing in his aspect could justify"¹⁶. This dreadful feeling will ultimately result in the discovery of the secret that Dr. Muñoz keeps: that he is dead but alive. Like any other ghost, the doctor provokes the same shock both in the reader and in the narrator. He is an entity that has been "living" on the threshold of two opposite worlds, that of life and death. In words of Thurston, the creature indicates "the radical breach or suspension of diegetic reality involved –and it is this disobedience of the laws of rational narrative that can make the literary ghost a truly disturbing event"¹⁷. This dual nature is reinforced by Lovecraft when contrasting the terrible, almost illusory scenery where the physician has vanished, with the sunny weather and the very mundane sounds of the cars and trucks that the narrator hears coming from the street, through the window. The disturbing effects of Dr. Muñoz's truth are even more terrible when considering that there is only a wall that separates the pulpy remains from a busy street of Providence.

At the same time, the spectre provokes, according to Thurston, an ontological problem due to its nature as both being and no-being, that triggers

¹⁵ Lovecraft 1999: 132.

¹⁶ Lovecraft 1999: 133.

¹⁷ Thurston 2012: 7.

an "anamorphic eclipse of ordinary discourse"¹⁸. Discourse is distorted when the ghost appears, since the phantom is "at odds with the meaningful structure of discursive narration"¹⁹. Or, in words of Derrida, "this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [*qui nous regarde*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy"²⁰. In fact, Dr. Muñoz also incites a rupture of discourse in "Cool Air". The particular moment in which this breach of language is produced takes place at the end of the tale, when the narrator bursts into the doctor's room to find that he is no longer there and he reads the terrible handwritten note that the physician has left. The reader knows only about a little pool and some remains of a dark slime, but the narrator asserts that "(w)hat was, or had been, on the couch I cannot and dare not say here"²¹. We cannot but wonder what kind of horrid thing lied on the couch, but Lovecraft will not provide the reader with access to it. The impossibility of depicting the reality observed by the narrator, in this case the remains of what was Dr. Muñoz, his true nature as spectre that is unmasked at the climax of the tale, follows the pattern of the language malfunction described by Thurston and, at the same time, exemplifies the "unnameable or almost unnameable" thing proposed by Derrida.

In the particular case of Lovecraft, Graham Harman studies the ways in which the writer explicitly shows a language failure: what he calls the vertical and the horizontal gap in language. According to him,

Language (and everything else) is obliged to become an art of allusion or indirect speech, a metaphorical bond with a reality that cannot possibly be made present. Realism does not mean that we are able to state correct propositions about the real world. Instead, it means that reality is too real to be translated without remainder into any sentence, perception, practical action, or anything else²².

Daily situations might be easy to describe using language, but when the ghost appears, it completely breaks the rules of our reality due to a nature that belongs to two different worlds, and we are unable to cope with it in terms of language. The vertical gap occurs when Lovecraft uses "vaguely relevant descriptions that the narrator is able to attempt"²³, whereas the horizontal gap "language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the

¹⁸ Thurston 2012: 7.

¹⁹ Thurston 2012: 5.

²⁰ Derrida 1993: 5.

²¹ Lovecraft 1999: 138.

²² Harman 2012: 16.

²³ Harman 2012: 24.

thing”²⁴. So it seems clear that when the narrator avoids the description of what is on the couch at Muñoz’s room, Lovecraft is effecting a vertical gap that makes it impossible to apprehend the real nature of the ghost²⁵.

As in part of the classic Gothic tradition, it is interesting to notice that Lovecraft also tries to provide a rational explanation for the unbelievable events. But whereas some kind of detective work is traditionally used to unmask the illusion, here the use of technology and the vague explanations provided by Dr. Muñoz both in his final letter and during the conversations he keeps with the narrator through the story produce a different impact, since the figure of the ghost is not refuted but reinforced. There is a scientific explanation for the events and that will not trigger a relief; much to the contrary it will create a feeling of uneasiness due to the acceptance as a fact that, with the suitable knowledge, Dr. Muñoz’s case can be replicated, producing an impregnable breach between life and death.

THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD: GHOSTLY PAST, HAUNTED PRESENT

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is a much more complex text, in which the figure of Joseph Curwen, ancestor of Charles Dexter Ward, is central as a spectral figure that haunts the present and the past, and tortures –and ultimately murders– his descendant. The novella narrates the investigation conducted by Marinus Bicknell Willett, Ward’s doctor, after the disappearance of the latter from the mental asylum where he has been confined. Firstly, he is able to reconstruct Curwen’s biography and most remarkable life events, a century and a half ago, when he was an evil magician and necromancer. Willett’s discoveries conclude that, in the fictional present, Ward has been killed and replaced by his resurrected ancestor -owing to the extreme physical resemblance they had–, who came back to life thanks to Ward himself. Curwen had plans, together with some fellow necromancers, to subjugate humanity, acquiring immense power and knowledge by torturing the wisest minds on Earth, but his strange behaviour pretending to be Ward sent him to the asylum. At the end, Willett is able to confront and overcome the necromancer in his cell, using a kind of exorcism that turns the wizard into a little mountain of dust.

Through Willett’s discoveries, the reader is told about the life history of Curwen, and how he comes to be a figure that, like a ghost, haunts the community he inhabits. It is made clear that there have been several attempts over time to destroy any reference to the historical figure of the necromancer, removing most of the available records and documents related to him, “as if a conspiracy

²⁴ Harman 2012: 25.

²⁵ For a more detailed analysis of Lovecraft’s gaps and its connections with the Lacanian concept of reality and the Real, see Pérez-de-Luque 2013.

had existed to blot him from memory", becoming a "hushed-up character"²⁶. Curwen, who is a deviation from the regular human being, an uncomfortable celebrity, is kept apart from records in order to sink him into oblivion. He is the spectre that nobody wants to mention but everybody gossips and whispers about. The deliberate attempts to throw him into oblivion are a way of repressing the troublesome disturbance of reality that, in case of being widespread, might collapse humanity due to the implications that reality entails.

Joseph Curwen was surrounded by a mysterious aura and seen with suspicion by his neighbors in Providence during his life. He owned both a house and a farm, and from the very beginning there are references to both dwellings that match that of a haunted house, "with the queer gleaming of his windows at all hours of night"²⁷. Willett finds testimonies of neighbors claiming that "certain sounds [...] came from the Curwen place in the night. There were cries, they said, and sustained howlings"²⁸.

He acquires the role of the haunted presence that lives in his frightening residences. But far from being a ghostly figure, except for his paleness, he is not a particularly aloof citizen and maintains some social life. However, the town rejects him because of the gossip surrounding his figure, the disappearances that take place around his properties and his incorruptible body, which seems to be forever young as years go by. As far as the necromancer is not affected by aging, looking "hardly middle-aged in aspect yet certainly not less than a full century old"²⁹, he is again a figure between two worlds that challenges the natural order, being a singular living ghost. This position in the frontier between life and death is reinforced by the fact that the magician is said to be in contact with the dead. Willett reads several testimonies in which "the sinister scholar began to astonish people by his possession of information which only their long-dead ancestors would seem to be able to impart"³⁰.

As time goes by, Curwen haunts not only his house and farm, but also the underground. Witnesses asserted, according to Willett readings, that there were "faint cries and groans"³¹ that came up from the regions under the farm, and many different voices and accents could be distinguished. Curwen apparently used underground corridors, halls and catacombs to proceed with his secret experiments and rituals. At a certain point, the community decides to take action. The most influential people in Providence conclude that "Curwen, it was clear, formed a vague potential menace to the welfare of the town and

²⁶ Lovecraft 2001: 98.

²⁷ Lovecraft 2001: 99.

²⁸ Lovecraft 2001: 100.

²⁹ Lovecraft 2001: 105.

³⁰ Lovecraft 2001: 109.

³¹ Lovecraft 2001: 112.

Colony; and must be eliminated at any cost”³². They believe that Curwen must be confined in a mental asylum if he is a madman or, if he is performing any kind of grotesque activity, he must be killed “and even the widow and her father need not to be told how it came about”³³. It should be noted how the plan of repression and suppression is secret, probably because were the truth known, the ghostly element would alter the reality of the community, in so far as Curwen’s horrendous experiments would certainly disturb the conception of life that the inhabitants of Providence might have. The liminality of the spectre, again, threatens those who are haunted by his presence. But this time, in contrast with Dr. Muñoz, Curwen is an active evil being and actions are taken to exorcize him from the community, restoring the natural order of life.

The raid against Curwen is successful but little is known about what really happens in the combat that takes place on the farm and in the underground corridors. Curwen dies, and the survivors “had lost or gained something imponderable and indescribable. They had seen or heard or felt something which was not for human creatures, and could not forget it”³⁴. Once again, as shown in “Cool Air”, the direct assimilation of the nature of the ghostly figure, that takes place once the party explores Curwen’s dwelling, provokes the fracture of language mentioned by Harman, and the horrors that take place during the combat cannot be explained with language. As in the case of Dr. Muñoz, Curwen’s real nature is impossible to apprehend due to its duality, which locates him between two worlds, that of the living and that of the death. A vertical gap arises from the very moment that the events are not suitable for human creatures, and there is a loss (or gain) of something that cannot be described for those men who took part in the combat. The truth behind the ghost remains unexplained.

At the same time, Curwen’s defeat can be read, following Derrida, as a political conjuration:

A conjuration, then, is first of all an alliance, to be sure, sometimes a political alliance, more or less secret, if not tacit, a plot or a conspiracy. It is a matter of neutralizing a hegemony or overturning some power. [...] For to conjure means *also* to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonized, diabolized force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a specter, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post mortem*. Exorcism conjures away the evil in ways that are also irrational, using magical, mysterious, even mystifying practices³⁵.

³² Lovecraft 2001: 115-116.

³³ Lovecraft 2001: 116.

³⁴ Lovecraft 2001: 122.

³⁵ Derrida 1993: 58-59.

The first time he is attacked and vanquished, Curwen is still a living creature that haunts his dwellings. What the citizens perform is a restoration of the original order, in which the social threat disappears by using mysterious (for not being explained) ways and tricks. Similarly, when Willett defeats Curwen at the asylum, the exorcism-like conjuration takes place. Willett uses a magic formula that allows him to permanently expel the spirit of Curwen:

So in a clear voice Marinus Bicknell Willett began the second of that pair of formulae whose first had raised the writer of those minuscules - the cryptic invocation whose heading was the Dragon's Tail, sign of the descending node³⁶.

The second frontier in which Curwen is involved is the temporal one. He is a character that belongs to the past, but he is able to come back from remote ages to haunt Charles Dexter Ward and his environment. The process of obsession and gradual madness suffered by Ward and described by Willett, reaches its climax when the young man is able to resurrect his ancestor. But in the meanwhile, until this happens, Ward will become himself a modern version of Curwen. When he gets locked in his room and attic, the whole family mansion becomes haunted with the sounds, screams, smells and strange events that take place in these chambers, and the effects produced in the Ward's residence are very similar to those described in Curwen's places:

There were chantings and repetitions, and thunderous declamations in uncanny rhythms; and although these sounds were always in Ward's own voice, there was something in the quality of that voice, and in the accents of the formulae it pronounced, which could not but chill the blood of every hearer. [...] And always in the night those rhythms and incantations thundered, till it became very difficult to keep servants or suppress furtive talk of Charles's madness³⁷.

Ward's secret activities, then, trigger a domestic haunted setting that has been ultimately brought about by the influence that the historical figure of his ancestor creates over the young man. This kind of ghostly *mise en abyme* will literally create a "menace to the order and nervous well-being of the entire household"³⁸, that being the typical effect caused by the presence of a spectral figure who confronts people with a dual nature that escapes human understanding.

Apart from the evident life/death nature of Curwen, he is also a being that oscillates in the timeline, divided between past and present. He is, before

³⁶ Lovecraft 2001: 205.

³⁷ Lovecraft 2001: 143-144.

³⁸ Lovecraft 2001: 149.

being resurrected, a historical character that exerts a fascination over Ward to the point of affecting Ward's own personality and essence, turning him into a spectral figure as well that starts exhibiting uncanny behaviors in his mansion. In this sense, Curwen behaves like a classical "ghost from the past", typical of Gothic narratives, in which a secret –in this case, family related– torments and captures a being from the narrative present. As Botting states, when he analyses Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, "ghosts of past family transgressions become the major source or awful emotion"³⁹. In the same vein, Mitchell, when she refers to the ghosts in the novels *Sixty Lights* and *Afterimage*, states that:

Ghostliness becomes a metaphor for a past both lost and, paradoxically, perpetuated, endlessly returned or repeated in the present. The mediums for this haunting are photographs, maps, bodies and, importantly, novels and stories⁴⁰.

Obviously, the textuality of the ghost expressed by Mitchell, the way in which ghostliness appears throughout novels and stories, is a cornerstone in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Most of the story is a reconstruction of the different manuscripts, documents, letters, etc., that Willett has been able to collect. In this way, he can reproduce the life story of Curwen. The texts provide the description of his haunting presence, and also textual is the representation of the fears, via the testimonies provided by his contemporary neighbors. A second level of textual haunting⁴¹ occurs when Ward himself tries to get as much information as possible about his ancestor. In order to do so, he also gets access to letters, books, documents, diaries, etc., that will provoke the progressive transformation of Ward into a ghostly presence, until he is killed and substituted by Curwen himself.

CONCLUSIONS

The three figures that have been studied, Dr. Muñoz in "Cool Air", and Curwen and Ward in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, might not fit into the classical view of the ghost, as an apparition of the dead, that has been traditionally used in literature. However, they act as spectral figures at two key levels, those of haunting presences and liminal beings. They are able to create gothic settings in a technological context –in the case of Dr. Muñoz–, or in a much more classical environment –both Ward and Curwen– in which they highlight their connection with the past. The three of them, without being typical representations of the

³⁹ Botting 1996: 69.

⁴⁰ Mitchell 2008: 82.

⁴¹ In words of Wolfreys 2002: 12, "we speak of the text as 'saying something', we write that the text does things or makes things occur, as though it had a life or will of its own".

ghost, act as spectres that follow the conventional features of that motif, as described in the different approaches through the chapter. Lovecraft, then, is not strictly following the literary tradition of the ghost, but he is able to distill the essence of the trope and transfer it into characters more suitable for his modern view of horror, located within the weird tale.