

la rivista di **engramma**
dicembre **2021**

187

“Hardly a Christmas Present”, Always Present

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a cura di

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La Rivista di Engramma

a peer-reviewed journal
187 dicembre 2021

www.engramma.it

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Tutti i diritti riservati
issn 1826-901X
isbn carta 978-88-31494-74-8
isbn digitale 978-88-31494-75-5
finito di stampare febbraio 2022

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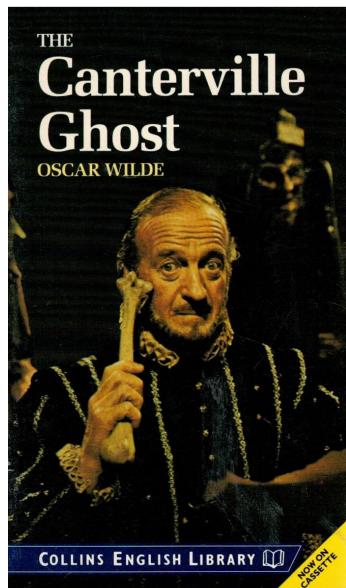
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The Ghost as Artist

Allusive Echoes in The Canterville Ghost

Laura Giovannelli



1 | Dust Jacket of Oscar Wilde, *The Canterville Ghost*, adapted by K.R. Cripwell and Lewis Jones, Longman ELT, 1978.

Originally appearing in "The Court and Society Review" in two instalments – on 23 February and 2 March 1887, with illustrations by F.H. Townsend – and subsequently included in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891), *The Canterville Ghost* was Oscar Wilde's first published short story. As such, it laid the cornerstone for his short-fiction writing and worked as a promising prelude to his celebrated fairy tales. This was a fervent period when Wilde had begun a career as a lecturer and journalist, being a regular reviewer for "The Pall Mall Gazette" and "The Dramatic Review". Jammed with resonances of his American lecture tour in 1882, *The Canterville Ghost* is also characterised by a dramatic imprint in tune with the author's theatre reviews. Widely praised as a children's story (fig. 1), it has often been adapted for the stage, radio,

screen – an animated feature film directed by Kim Burdon being a salient project currently underway in the UK – and even into comics, musicals, and operas.

Yet, when it comes to scholarly investigation, *The Canterville Ghost* does not seem to rank particularly high, despite its remarkable history of intermedial transpositions and its having been featured in "The Court and

Society Review", a fashionable, if short-lived, literary magazine for the upper classes. This is not to say, of course, that the tale has been totally disregarded. Over the last half century, critics have indeed dropped compelling hints on a variety of its distinguishing traits, focusing on models of genre and stylistic conventions as well as the paradoxical reversals operated by Wilde; on the polarities of humour and romance, comedy and Gothic horror; on satire, intertextual echoes or downright plagiarism (Wilde's more or less explicit sources encompass an astounding number of authors and works. To name only a few, these are S.T. Coleridge's *Christabel*, Walter Scott's *Tapestried Chamber*, H.W. Longfellow's *Skeleton in Armor*, Alfred Tennyson's *Maud*, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, and Edward Heron-Allen's *Autobiography of a Disembodied Spirit*). Among the authors of the first full-length studies of Wilde's literary output, Christopher S. Nassaar is worth mentioning on account of his axiological framing of the writer's mythopoetic imagination along the lines of a three-stage Blakean dialectic. This parable would pave the way for a full realisation of the self, starting from childlike innocence through adult experience (and sin) and the reaching out for a condition of 'higher innocence', capable of reconciling contrasts and antinomies.

Nassaar looks at both the decadent fascination with the demonic world and Wilde's growing "awareness of a demonic impulse within himself" (Nassaar 1974, xiii), an interiorisation of transgressive yearnings allegedly fuelled by his first homosexual experience in 1886. *The Canterville Ghost* was published just a year later and, notwithstanding its humorous and sarcastic mode, one can clearly sense an eerie strain running through it in conjunction with the motifs of uxoricide, grief, depression and a search for redemption, to say nothing of the titular character's permeating and amoral projection into the sphere of art, a major key to my reading of the text here. Although he does not sound enthusiastic about Wilde's 1887 story, Nassaar acknowledges that the work is marked by an attempt to reproduce the entire pattern concerning the fall from innocence and the final attainment of a higher spiritual status akin to salvation. *The Canterville Ghost* takes the realm of innocence as its starting point by dint of the ingenuousness of the Otises, the nineteenth-century American family who decides to move to Canterville Chase, a castle near Ascot, England, and make it their new home. As the plot unfolds, the modern American worldview is progressively filtered through the darkening lens of

an evil spirit, i.e. the splenetic ghost of Sir Simon de Canterville. Sir Simon had owned the place in the golden days of the Elizabethan era and has now successfully haunted this ancient abode for more than three hundred years. For their part, the Otises relentlessly refrain from recognising the demonic until their daughter Virginia,

a virgin who is just coming of age, finally take[s] pity on the neurotic ghost and agrees to help it die. As a result, she opens herself to the full experience of the demonic, disappears into a vast dark hole, and emerges a while later with a box of indescribably valuable jewels given to her by the grateful ghost. The jewels symbolize Virginia's attainment of a higher innocence. Her ability to love and pity the ghost has led to her total purification (Nassaar 1974, 21).

This makes perfect sense, at least as far as the process of awakening and restorative maturity of the "redemptive heroine" is concerned (notably, the epithet was part of the subtitle that Wilde added to the 1891 version of the story: *The Canterville Ghost—A Hylo-Idealistic Romance: The Redemptive Heroine*). Nassaar's concise assessment places a high premium on the gentle (and puritanical) nature of Virginia Otis, especially in her role as a personified vehicle of love, empathy and a laudable transition from blissful unawareness to 'innocence regained', as it were. On the other hand, much is left unsaid about the ghost himself, the Blakean 'energetic creator' overbrimming with rage and visionary impetus, who is just too quickly dismissed and literally laid to rest in the context of Nassaar's analysis. This speculative void has been gradually filled by other critics. One of them, to cite another relevant contribution from the 1970s, is Philip Kent Cohen, who provides insights into the encryption of the homoerotic theme by pointing out that the main action of the story "takes place in 1884, three hundred years after Sir Simon murdered his wife – and in the same year that Wilde married his", so that "a transformation of life into confessional art" might be detected (Cohen 1978, 62). While implicitly resuming the threads of the archetypal journey from innocence to experience, Cohen lays stress on the saint/sinner moral contrast and interprets Sir Simon's marginalisation and banishment as ciphers of "the lonely refuge of an anguished sinner" who eventually grows weary of masks – of his own otherness – and looks forward to gaining peace and forgiveness (Cohen 1978, 63). A few tantalising glimpses into the ghost's

protean self-multiplication through art, as opposed to a philistine audience's rejection of his hair-raising performances, are also offered. On the whole, however, what takes centre stage is the figure of a conceited self who is doomed to surrender to social (bourgeois) constraints and rules of public conduct. In the upshot, Cohen lends poignancy to the image of the sinful sufferer – and violator of the 'sacred institution' of marriage – hidden behind the poseur's disguise and whose redemption is made possible through the powers of Christian mercy.

In more recent times, a similar line of thought has been pursued by Stephanie Green, who approaches Sir Simon's wandering spirit as a synecdoche for alterity and a separation "from the binary structure of heterosexual Romance, in which he participates only as a representational figure of desire" (Green 1997, 74). Caught between life and death, the ghost is kept away from family ties and the social community, thus arguably allegorising a case of sexual 'unspeakability', or same-sex attraction. With reference to the sham phantom manufactured by the Otis twins with the purpose of playing a dirty trick upon the real Canterville spectre, Green even suggests that such an aping double "may be read as a manifestation of an unanswered homoerotic desire", as a distorting mirror where Sir Simon captures "the empty horror of representation" (Green 1997, 75).

To conclude this brief survey, it should be noticed that in the last two decades some further light has been thrown on a series of *topoi* and motifs that inform *The Canterville Ghost*. For example, a passage from Deaglán Ó Donghaile's monograph seems to uphold the 'higher innocence' trajectory by drawing attention to the typological affinities between Sir Simon and other characters in Wilde's fairy tales. In particular, the Selfish Giant's hubris and visceral attachment to material possessions are similarly repaid with excruciating loneliness and a humiliating exile in a state of permanent winter. Both ghost and giant are seen as groping their way toward reintegration through the intercession of a pure, empathetic soul – Virginia and the infant Christ, respectively – and by ultimately spurning self-concern or considerations of interest, "the alluring but corrupting influence of the commodity" (Ó Donghaile 2020, 124). From the stress on Wilde's attack on cupidity, class-consciousness and property relations the emphasis has occasionally shifted back to the

Jamesian ‘international theme’ and the well-known cultural clash between Europe and America during the nineteenth century. That is to say, between traditional values, insightfulness and sophistication (or corruption) on the one hand and modernity, naivety and material progress (or crass utilitarianism) on the other. Majid Mgamis, for one, brings into play the question of the diverging national characters on the two sides of the Atlantic to contend that in “the story, Wilde expresses a heart-felt desire for *obliterating* the clash and finding a middle ground that would combine the aesthetics of the Old World and the developments of the New one” (Mgamis 2014, 19, my emphasis).

Although there can be little doubt that Wilde adroitly built on received opinions and social habits to poke fun and lend a satirical piquancy to his tale, Mgamis postulates that *The Canterville Ghost* should rather be located at an intersection. Toning down the thrust of corrosive jesting, he claims that a transnational reconciliation is effectively ushered via Sir Simon and Virginia’s intimacy in the last sections of the text. The ghost would then emerge as a mediator for compromise, with the Otises’ English-born daughter – and Duke of Cheshire’s bride-to-be – helping to bridge the gap between malice and candour, spiritual refinement and practicality, the Old and New World. Last but not least, current critical debate includes a long-overdue foray into the field of spiritualism and occultism, which is in fact an ingrained component of any tale of the supernatural. True, in many obvious ways *The Canterville Ghost* amounts to a parody of the governing codes of the ghost story or haunted-house story, a subgenre that was extremely popular among Victorian readers and whose horizon of expectations Wilde teasingly subverted through the character of an *unscary* visitant being turned into a laughingstock. Yet, in spite of his all-too-human traits and weaknesses (throughout the story the ghost habitually sleeps, wakes up and wears clothes. He is also subject to illness and injury and not at all immune to fear or panic when faced with humans. For a detailed discussion of these aspects, see Sarkissian 1985 and Balakrishnan 2011), Sir Simon is manifestly the tormented spirit of a killer who suffered violent death at the hands of his vindictive brothers in law. In an act of retaliation for his murder of their sister Eleanore, they condemned him to die of hunger, with his chained-up skeletal remains lying undiscovered for ages in a secret chamber. The curse is broken when Miss Otis enters the picture and, like a fairy-tale benign rescuer, helps him

to fulfill the prophecy written on the library window, announcing that one day a “golden girl” will weep and pray for his deliverance.

It would be no exaggeration to surmise that Wilde moulded his otherworldly protagonist with an eye to the phantasmal apparitions that, together with subliminal and mesmeric mysteries, mediumistic contacts with the deceased and other paranormal phenomena, were at the time scientifically probed by the Society for Psychical Research. Founded in London in 1882 by a group of scholars and academics, the SPR was presided by Henry Sidgwick, a philosopher and economist from Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1886, this organisation published *Phantasms of the Living*, a two-volume study which caused quite a stir. Co-authored by psychologist Edmund Gurney, philologist and classicist Frederic William Henry Myers and researcher Frank Podmore, it incorporated a huge collection of data and reports relating to sightings of apparitions and alleged cases of preternatural hallucinations and thought transference. Importantly, the SPR’s associates went to considerable lengths to draw the line between their adoption of scientific criteria and unbiased spirit of inquiry and any fake psychic effects or pseudo-testimonies by fraudulent mediums, whom the Sociey did not hesitate to expose. From this standpoint, there is probably a double edge to Wilde’s irony when, in one of the first pages of *The Canterville Ghost*, the third-person narrator dwells on Washington Otis’s reactions to the uncanny. At the beginning, the boy’s narrow-minded practicality famously induces him to scoff at the English housekeeper’s warning and remove Lady Canterville’s blood on the library’s floor by means of “Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent”, one of the fetishised household products of the American market. On the third morning, however, given the punctual reappearance of the bloodstain, the Otises feel they ought to set matters right. In this instance, Washington’s behaviour reminds us of a well-advised attempt to determine the true nature of the spectral presence. He consults Myers and Podmore with a view to recording ‘evidential substantiation’ and guaranteeing that this is no hoax. Instead of the stain, what is now removed is the shadow of doubt concerning phantasmic agency:

Mr. Otis began to suspect that he had been too dogmatic in his denial of the existence of ghosts, Mrs. Otis expressed her intention of joining the

Psychical Society, and Washington prepared a long letter to Messrs. Myers and Podmore on the subject of the Permanence of Sanguineous Stains when connected with Crime. That night all doubts about the *objective existence of phantasmata* were removed for ever (Wilde [1887] 1992, 63, my emphasis).

Wilde's incursions into ghostlore and clairvoyance – with such related offshoots as mediumship and séances, cheiromancy and fortune-telling – would require much more space than can be allotted here. Certainly, Wilde was anything but indifferent to the late-Victorian craze of supernatural phenomena, as confirmed by his contacts with, say, society fortune-teller Mrs. Robinson, astrologer Edward Heron-Allen, and palmist W.J. Warner ('Cheiro'). In this connection, an article by Geoff Dibb further piques our curiosity by expanding on the 1880s stage shows of Stuart Cumberland and Washington Irving Bishop, respectively an English mentalist and his American homologue who were to feed suspicion amid the SPR's members. These 'modern diviners' toured across Great Britain and Europe with their boisterously advertised performances – from blindfolded stunts to muscular-movement reading and the detection of hidden objects – and eventually became zestful competitors (with Bishop fatally getting the worst of it, due to a public vilification of his activities and an early death). Cumberland, in particular, took pains to ascribe his own intuitive faculties to muscle reading ('Cumberlandism') rather than telepathic powers and declared himself an "exposer of supernatural shams" (Dibb 2013, 84). Evidence exists that, in 1884, Wilde was in the audience for a Cumberland exhibition and even attended a meeting of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, although he seemed to have mixed feelings about experiments in thought reading and metaphysical abstrusities of the sort. Be that as it may, one can hardly fail to catch telling reverberations in his 1887 ghost story, starting from the English vs American antagonism up to the SPR's investigation into the ontology of *phantasmata*. There are also glaring overlaps with the entanglements between human physiology and the paranormal, factuality and conjuring tricks, empirical data and the extrasensorial; in other words, between the material ('hylo-') and ethereal ('idealistic') components alluded to in the story's subtitle (*A Hylo-Idealistic Romance*).

If Dibb wonders whether it was purely coincidental that in *The Canterville Ghost* "Wilde should take Bishop's first name – Washington – for the

American family's son" (Dibb 2013, 96), Eleanor Dobson calls for a deeper unravelling of the spiritualist subtext in Wilde's *oeuvre* and its roots in the *fin-de-siècle* magical revival. Her commentary on Wilde's flirtations with spiritualism, the occult, painted images and the potentialities of the photographic medium (such as the boom of 'spirit photography' in the 1880s) is surely a springboard for illuminating deductions. Nonetheless, her reflections give priority to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, when discussing *The Canterville Ghost*, she hastily and somewhat dryly casts the spectre as "a figure of absurdity, decked out in chains in emulation of Marley's ghost in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and similarly backwards in his stubborn resistance to the paraphernalia of modernity filtering into his ancestral home" (Dobson 2020, 153).

My contention in this paper is that, beneath the tale's paradoxes and blatant mockery, a higher and indeed *nobler* status should be accorded to Sir Simon de Canterville. A Renaissance aristocrat of birth and a learned reader of poetry and ancient chivalry books, he is the representative of a patrician lineage who had proudly worn his suit of mail "with great success at the Kenilworth tournament, and had been highly complimented on it by no less a person than the Virgin Queen herself" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 68). Behind his ghoulish and often grotesque semblance, Sir Simon might be depicted as a vestige as well as nemesis of the Tudor period, as an *unheimlich* memory trace of its past glories, prosperity and international expansion. When, during his second apparition aiming to strike terror into the Otises, he ends up getting hurt by clumsily falling on the stone pavement under the weight of the Kenilworth armour, his incapacitated body possibly harks back to a woefully dissolving body politic. It can also be assumed that Wilde is picking up a few purple strands of Elizabethan tragedy, with its repertoire of craving overreachers, devouring passions, revenge and supernatural manifestations that work as catalysts for the action (the ghost of the murdered father dressed in full armour in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* being a momentous epitome of this).

At the structural level, *The Canterville Ghost* can be divided into two macrosections. In the first half of the story (Parts I-IV), where the panoply of humour, parody, debunking of social conventions and behavioural standards is developed, Sir Simon strives to get proper recognition as an overruling ectoplasm. He is like a malignant concentrate of spiritual

energy who makes a point of befuddling and chilling to the marrow a population of ‘Muggles’, to use a catchword from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Better still, he could be identified as a *poltergeist*, being literally a ‘noisy revenant’, a disembodied creature suspended in a condition of limbo and intent on pestering any living visitor who dares cross the threshold of his castle. In the second half of the text (Parts V-VII), the time comes for the harassing spook to bear the burden of silencing, disavowal and defeat. After long revelling in haunting, he is to transmigrate into a shadow region reminiscent of purgatory, a domain enveloped in a wistful atmosphere of contrition. It is at this juncture that Virginia Otis takes the lead and lends him a helping hand, thus bringing about a turning point in the tale and a modulation of tone from a comic vein to Gothic romance and allegory.

One day, while he is sitting alone with his brooding thoughts in the Tapestry Chamber – a theatrical, scene-shifting backdrop of sorts – the ghost is addressed by the girl, who both apologises for the insolence of her brothers and scolds him for his misbehaviour. As their conversation goes on, each of them appears to dialectically jostle for position. Virginia rebukes him for the assassination of Eleanore and, incidentally, for pilfering her paints in order to artificially (artistically?) restore the bloodstain on the floor as a counter-challenge to the Otises’ insulting attitude. However, she also dishes out advice and feels sorry for his misery. If crying for help, Sir Simon shows no sign of regret for his past misdeeds, including uxoricide, to which he self-righteously lays claim as an act of ‘aesthetic revenge’: “Oh, I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery” (Wilde [1887] 1992, 77). Drenched in grim humour, this acerbic statement possibly winks at Thomas De Quincey’s *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827, 1839, 1854), although the spectre is here less committed to aesthetically appreciating a perfectly orchestrated murder than raising a bulwark against vulgarity in the name of the preservation of the fine arts themselves. By virtue of his 1887 story, Wilde might also be sowing the seeds of *Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green* (first published in “The Fortnightly Review” in 1889 and then included in *Intentions* in 1891), a provocative reconstruction of the growth of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright’s artistic sensibility and style in unison with his gruesome achievements as a forger and serial poisoner. In

addition to the inference of there being no essential incongruity between culture and crime, another *trait d'union* is provided by Wilde's quotation of Wainewright's alleged rejoinder on the killing of his own sister-in-law: "Yes; it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles" (Wilde [1889] 1969, 337).



2 | "The ghost glided on more swiftly". The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Canterville Ghost*, by Oscar Wilde, Illustrated by Wallace Goldsmith, Boston-London 1906.

As for the plot's *denouement*, Virginia's compassion eventually wins God's forgiveness for the unrepentant ghost who is now pining for a peaceful death. His detachment from the sublunary dimension demands a rite of passage that has Virginia personify the much-awaited tender soul mentioned in the lines of the Cantervilles' prophecy. In order to open the portals of Death's house and intercede with the Angel of Death, she must give proof of both heartfelt pity and fortitude. Her journey to the Otherworld is also an *underworld* trip that smacks of an abduction by Sir Simon, a revived Gothic villain who first kisses her hand with burning lips and then grabs hold of it while leading her into the recesses of the

mansion, apparently a black cavern behind the wainscoting (fig. 2). Before gaining access to the Garden of Death, they must break through a faded green tapestry that, like a weird *tableau vivant*, features waving huntsmen and fantastical reptile creatures coming to life and warning her against setting foot on hellish territory. Indeed, the ambiguity of Virginia's final words to her husband in the epilogue – "He [Sir Simon] made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 87) – perfectly chimes with the multifacetedness of such a boundary crossing. She actually experiences a space-time contraction where distinctions among the earthly plane (the place where Sir Simon's corporeal remnants are locked up), a chthonian grey zone and providential grace are inextricably blurred. In all this, the embroidered tapestry that serves as a magical doorway objectifies a stage curtain that the reader/spectator is not allowed to lift. The final act of Virginia's

frantic race takes place as though off-stage, together with the climaxing of the ghost's hunt for salvation and his earning of a 'higher innocence' status, to be crowned with a nocturnal funeral procession and proper burial.

It is similarly in the dead of night – namely, and quite befittingly, at midnight – that Virginia is able to ideally tear the curtain, break the fourth wall and retrace her steps to the 'proscenium of the living'. As a trophy from her eight-hour risky trip, she holds a gift from Sir Simon: a casket of ancient jewels, with a ruby necklace standing out as an archetypal (and biblical) symbol of victory and wisdom as well as beauty and passion. Again, the triad Life/Death/Love emerges as a hyperconnoted isotopy, involving Judeo-Christian ethics and mythography, *agape* and *eros*, agony and bliss, the private and public sphere. It is in fact tempting to connect the red gemstones to the vermillion pomegranate seeds eaten by Persephone while below ground with Hades, her abductor and King of the Underworld. If Demeter's virgin daughter and Goddess of Death and Life is to cope with an everlasting cycle of descents and returns, Virginia Otis's initiation brings with itself – at least figuratively – a metamorphosis from girl to woman. With its strong suggestions of an erotic encounter, her elopement with the old lord into a cavernous space does entail tasting the food of the subterranean realm.

Viewed thus, the casket of jewels constitutes a 'crystallised signifier' of a coming-of-age parable. In relation to the more mundane level of social ascent, that memento patently typifies a dowry and lucky charm for the future Duchess of Cheshire and resurrected Persephone, whose precious parure does not go unnoticed when, in the *spring* of 1890, she "was presented at the Queen's first drawing-room on the occasion of her marriage" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 86). From Elizabeth I's praise of Sir Simon's armour to Queen Victoria's appreciation of another Canterville heirloom, the circle emblematically closes. Or maybe not, since there is a further layer of meaning deserving attention, and that is the transition from disarray and jarring discord to beauty, order and poetic justice. In what might be called his 'phantasmal extravaganza in red and green', Wilde seems to be reflecting on aesthetic paradigms and the dynamics of performance and reception, including a progression from a condition of Dionysian frenzy to a sort of Apollonian sublimation or catharsis. In the

story, Sir Simon resembles most of the time a dedicated performer and the sanguine paladin of a counter-religion inspired by the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’, albeit awash with lurid tones. True to his family name, he resorts to various forms of ‘cant’, from rhetorical flourish and hedonistic insincerity (his voice can be dreamy and seductive) to a jargon overburdened with literariness, to the point that even his oaths are spelled “according to the picturesque phraseology of the antique school” (Wilde [1887] 1992, 71).

In his world of artistic illusions, a piece of cloth might well take on a life of its own, and emerald-green can just as easily substitute red, as happens with the bloodstain on the library floor. Its removal via the industrial detergent causes him to run for cover and come up with a solution that replaces the biological stain which mars his soul – his *raison d’être* as a slayer trapped in purgatory – with a magic trick capable of transposing his bloody deed into the realm of artifice. The colours that he unabashedly employs, until an apex is reached with the intense shades of green, are actually stolen from Virginia’s paintbox, and this circumstance significantly adumbrates their bond. When translated into aesthetic terms, such a bond opens up possibilities for the ghost to renovate his wizardry and for the girl – a budding painter – to start developing a new symbolic vision beyond mimesis or hackneyed representation and towards lunar (Whistlerian?) atmospheres. As she complains, “finally I had nothing left but indigo and Chinese white, and could only do moonlight scenes, which are always depressing to look at, and not at all easy to paint” (Wilde [1887] 1992, 77). On top of this, of course, green sardonically sticks out as the quintessential trace of an anti-mimetic, poisonous and decadent art, evoked here through the tapestry and refurbished stain along with the ghastly green light or the green hand that are part and parcel of Sir Simon’s ‘stage equipment’. In a typically Wildean twist, however, green may also come coupled with biological processes and allegorical traits that run parallel to the sacrificial symbolism of blood. When the Otises discover the skeleton of the ghost starved to death, we are told that a dusty trencher and a water jug, whose inside is now covered with green mould, are placed just out of his reach. These two elements bear testimony to Sir Simon’s punishment for his crime and seem to encapsulate the stigma of excommunication.

On even closer inspection, one perceives that *The Canterville Ghost* is infused with (meta)dramatic qualities all along. Among the allusive echoes that connote the narrative, those concerning the spectre as an artist figure are far from peripheral. Fluctuating between the poles of tragicomic/melodramatic hero and villain, he is a devilish artist of the supernatural invariably at one with his own mask(s). As he says to Virginia, his only reason for existing is to rattle his chains, “groan through keyholes, and walk about at night” (Wilde [1887] 1992, 76). But this is a palpable understatement that pertains to the nadir period of his approaching demise. Parts I-IV of the story are in fact crammed with references to his celebrity status as an adept who takes pride in a catalogue of horrors spanning three centuries. His self-esteem is so deeply hurt by the first confrontation with the newcomers that, after Hiram B. Otis advises him to oil his chains with “Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator”, the ghost puts aside his plainest apparel and sets about honing his skills. His appearance as a red-eyed old man manacled at the wrists and ankles is evidently not enough for a foreign audience who looks down on him as a curious inconvenience and annoying fellow tenant. What soon follows is a long, internally-focalised passage where Sir Simon finds consolation by going over his “most celebrated performances” with the “enthusiastic egotism of the true artist” (Wilde [1887] 1992, 65).

As Lydia Reineck Wilburn pertinently holds in an article that has been instrumental in tracing the route of my argument, Wilde’s ghost is a “conscious fiction-maker” who has so far shocked a public consisting of his peers and members of the household staff, over whose names and reactions to his deadly games he lingers with relish. Sir Simon “glories in his artistry, taking every opportunity to provoke fresh terror in the new residents of the mansion” and setting up performances that are “elaborate, theatricalised with costumes and alliterative titles” (Wilburn 1987, 45-46). Elements redolent of a heightened theatricality and the ‘audience factor’ are laid bare from the very outset, when the republican minister and the phlegmatic Lord Canterville are discussing terms for the purchase of the mansion. The supercilious lord is quick to reveal the shattering effects of the ghost’s feats on a multitude of target addressees across the decades. Finding oneself *vis-à-vis* the ancient patriarch of the castle is like playing Russian roulette: no matter how many spins the revolver’s cylinder is given, stage illusion is bound to turn real. Spine-chilling emotions are

fomented until the *poltergeist* is through with his feasting and the victims are scared out of their wits (or, worse, dead):

"We have not cared to live in the place ourselves," said Lord Canterville, "since my grand-aunt, the Dowager Duchess of Bolton, was frightened into a fit, from which she never really recovered, by two skeleton hands being placed on her shoulders as she was dressing for dinner, and I feel bound to tell you, Mr. Otis, that the ghost has been seen by several living members of my family, as well as by the rector of the parish, the Rev. Augustus Dampier, who is a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. After the unfortunate accident to the Duchess, none of our younger servants would stay with us" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 59).

Lord Canterville's earnest attempts to corroborate his claims through circumstantial evidence and credible witnesses – the Reverend Dampier being both a member of the clergy and an academic – are promptly countered by the American buyer's pragmatic panache. Even so, in his repartee, Mr. Otis interweaves a brisk and businesslike manner with metatheatrical innuendoes, in a nod to an investment logic where the seemingly intangible value of cultural heritage is not excepted from financial appraisal and branding. Prospective American sponsors and theatre managers – the wealthy minister presses on – are titillated by what European attractions can offer and would hire them in no time:

"My Lord," answered the Minister, "I will take the furniture and the ghost at a valuation. I come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy; and with all our spry young fellows painting the Old World red, and carrying off your best actors and prima-donnas, I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 59).

Although Sir Simon's recursive apparitions have *already* entered the circuit of commodified culture – as attested by Mrs. Umney, the old housekeeper, when remarking that the bloodstain dates back to Lady Eleanore's murder in 1575 and "has been much admired by tourists and others" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 62) – he is not likely to budge on his mission as a 'national artist' of the old school. A metaphorical scene-stealer from Marlowe's and

Shakespeare's England, the ghost might well continue to claim for himself the task of (literally) painting the Old World red. Indifferent to profit-making – owing to his post-life condition, but also to class privilege and high-born inheritance – he would unequivocally opt for royal patronage rather than raise cash as a street artist in a transatlantic city. Needless to say, that is the area where, in a matter of years after Sir Simon's putative passing, the English were to start planting their settlements and embark on their massive colonial project in North America (via King James I's 1606 chartering of the "Virginia Company of London", of all names). It is then little wonder that the blazoned ghost should aspire to assert his dignity when glancing into the abyss of his (and England's) subjugation by boisterous invaders who come with a vengeance from a materialistic future and a former colony. Triggered by patriotic sentiments, the sixteenth-century Lord Canterville spares no effort in warding off a would-be reverse colonisation, an 'American invasion' led by a democratic coalition armed with a paraphernalia of detergents, patent medicines and all 'things Usonian'. In 1887, the publication of *The Canterville Ghost* was accompanied by *The American Invasion* and *The American Man*. These were two essays that, alongside *Impressions of America* (1883), wittily testified to Wilde's familiarisation with American society, gender spheres and values both in the wake of his 1882 sojourn and back on the London scene, with a host of well-off, sprightly American ladies in pursuit of titled husbands.



3 | "Its head was bald and burnished". The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Canterville Ghost*, by Oscar Wilde, Illustrated by Wallace Goldsmith, Boston-London 1906.

Snubbing Virginia's invitation to improve his mind by emigrating to New York, he perseveres in tailoring the mechanics of his staging at the Chase. In a few weeks' time, he engages in an array of flamboyant exploits which, from the impersonation of a ragged man in fetters and a failed attempt to earn the spotlight as an Elizabethan armoured spectre, reach a virtual pinnacle in the midnight hour of a stormy Friday 17th. This venture is buttressed by a detailed plan of action worthy of his resourceful stagecraft. The plan pivots on a careful choice of wardrobe and a sequence of targeted attacks, in an escalation of intensity that should have culminated with a harsh lesson being taught to the troublesome twins. In a bizarre twist of fate, though, the prefigured ambush proves an ill omen for the ghost himself, who is ludicrously outwitted by the clever "Stars and Stripes" brothers in one of the funniest episodes of the story. Turning the logic of weird manifestations on its head, they both forestall Sir Simon's move and manage to predict his terrified response by creating a wraithlike simulacrum issuing from their American know-how and Yankee imaginary. As soon as he turns the corner, Sir Simon is appalled at the sight of a Halloween spook put together with a sweeping-brush, a hollow turnip and a white bedcurtain (fig. 3). What is more, attached to this contrived fabrication is a placard that spoofs the authentic-quality labels of advertised products and which may also be snickering at the 1880s' debates on the exposure of 'supernatural shams': "*YE OTIS GHOSTE. Ye Onlie True and Originale Spook. Beware of Ye Imitationes. All others are Counterfeite*" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 71). By means of their assembled puppet and concocted archaic language, the Otis boys somehow hold the mirror up to the 'original' and shake him out of his complacency. Like a well-matched pair of pop/trash artists, they seem to gleefully replicate their own doubleness under the aegis of a "junk art" that does cast a shadow over a centuries-old saturnine craft, symbolised here by an affronted Sir Simon (Giovannelli 2009, 267). In this previous essay I had also expanded upon the motifs of Hylo-Idealism, a philosophical approach theorised by Constance Naden and Robert Lewins, onomastics, American pan-utilitarianism as well as Wilde's transatlantic tour and his sardonic self-projection into the character of the ghost.)



4 | "A heavy jug of water fell right down on him". The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Canterville Ghost*, by Oscar Wilde, Illustrated by Wallace Goldsmith, Boston-London 1906.

If Sir Simon's *coup de théâtre* slides into an anticlimax where he is paradoxically assigned the role of the affected spectator, it would be hasty to conclude that his career breaks up with a landslide victory on the twins' part. Indeed, his passing is slower than one might suppose. The "Otis Ghoste" counterfeit is featured in Part III, and there is a whole section to go before the protagonist's underworld journey in Part V. Briefly stated, the fourth section continues to record Sir Simon's strenuous resilience in the face of the Otises' callousness and the twins' pranks (fig. 4), including their offensively vocal "Boos". His treading "as lightly as possible on the old worm-eaten boards", (Wilde [1887] 1992, 72) and creeping about the passages as a doleful stay-at-home prone to oiling his chains is accompanied by yet another series of striking impersonations. The

personae that he adopts are all drawn from titled scripts that had apparently been the rage some time in the past, such as "Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods", "Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl", "Jonas the Graveless, or the Corpse-Snatcher of Chertsey Barn", and "The Vampire Monk, or, the Bloodless Benedictine" (Wilde [1887] 1992, 72-75). Along with Red Reuben and Gaunt Gibeon, Dumb Daniel and Martin the Maniac, mentioned previously in the story, those are stock characters identified by make-up, costumes and props. As illustrated by Maureen O'Connor, these accomplishments fall within the province of a Transpontine tradition of gothic melodrama and its garish parodies, like W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *Ruddigore, or the Witch's Curse*, a comic opera which opened in London in January 1887 (O' Connor 2004, 329). From a metadramatic as well as historical perspective, then, it would not be preposterous to read the conflict between Wilde's conservative protagonist and an unreceptive audience in terms of an ongoing evolution in the performing arts and the aesthetics of reception. In light of their philistine and puritanical traits, the Otises cannot but carry with

themselves a deep-seated mistrust towards the theatre. However, as members of a high-flying middle class, they might also herald new trends in theatrical performance, especially if one considers that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, sensation drama would give way to society drama, realism and problem plays.

To sum up, *The Canterville Ghost* lends itself to an impressively nuanced understanding. And self-referentiality obviously thrives in this semantic substratum. The ghost is partly a fictionalised *alter ego* whereby Wilde tackled the plight of “how to get audiences to hear his works, how to keep them from ridiculing or dismissing him [...], seeking out their recognition” and trying “several means to persuade them to consider his vision” (Wilburn 1987, 47, 54). Picking up on the relationship between Sir Simon and Virginia, we might finally argue that the former – a consummate professional on the wane – has been safely escorted by a burgeoning artist bent on reducing the traumatic cleavage between an old episteme and a rapidly transforming world. As various scholars have pointed out, the name ‘Virginia’ resonates with the concept of virginity as well as with the American state named for the Virgin Queen of England, which speaks volumes about this female character’s conciliating role. If incapable of appreciating the ghost’s archaic suit of mail, as Elizabeth I had done at the tournament, Virginia Otis sympathetically ensures that he is not forgotten, but rather ‘historicised’. By paraphrasing and amending one of the American minister’s skeptical banters at the beginning of the story (Hiram B. Otis’s brazen reply to the living Lord Canterville: “But there is no such thing, sir, as a ghost, and I guess the laws of Nature are not going to be suspended for the British aristocracy”, Wilde [1887] 1992, 60), one can ultimately assert that *there is* such thing as a ghost and that the laws of nature have indeed been suspended for his spectacular pieces.

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English abstract

Originally appearing in "The Court and Society Review" in two installments (February-March 1887) and subsequently included in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891), *The Canterville Ghost* was Oscar Wilde's first published short story. As such, it laid the cornerstone for the author's short-fiction writing and also worked as a promising prelude to his celebrated fairy tales. Yet, when it comes to scholarly investigation, *The Canterville Ghost* does not seem to rank particularly high in the author's canon. The aim of this paper is to offer an in-depth analysis of the text's metaphorical substratum and the most relevant traits connoting the ghost figure. It will be shown how Wilde established an ironic but not insignificant dialogue with various cultural trends that characterised late-Victorian England, such as spiritualism and an interest in paranormal phenomena. At the same time, emphasis will be placed on the episodes, descriptions and turning points in the narrative where the eponymous protagonist can be manifestly associated with the realms of artistic creation, performance and a consummate, if old-fashioned, stagecraft. This parable sees him as both crushed by the callous unresponsiveness of the American purchasers of Canterville Chase and capable of singling out a kindred spirit within that group. Virginia Otis, an amateur painter who is to marry into the British aristocracy, proves a sympathetic intermediary and the herald of a more engaged kind of audience reception.

keywords | Ghost Story; Illustration; The Canterville Ghost; Audience Reception.

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dicembre 2021

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