

GOTHIC HAUNTING IN VALERII SHEVCHUK'S TALE THE BIRDS FROM THE INVISIBLE ISLAND

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Abstract

Valerii Shevchuk, a prominent Ukrainian writer, has frequently employed the dark imagery in his work since the 1970s in order to disclose the perverseness of human mind, the dark side of contemporary society, and the horrors of the colonial Ukrainian past. This paper focuses on the Gothic conventions in his tale *The Birds from the Invisible Island* [*Ptakhy z nevydymoho ostrova*]. By analyzing the motifs and tropes of the ghost, the spectral, the double, the haunted house (castle), and the uncanny, we show that the writer creates a hybrid narrative that comprises the elements of the Gothic, the fantastic, the historical tale and the Utopia. This paper explicates that Shevchuk utilized the Gothic conventions in order to investigate the experience of servitude and its influence on human mind as well as the history of national oppression and struggle with national identity. Shevchuk transforms the trope of the haunted house into the claustrophobic space of a mysterious castle that establishes a broader discourse of the empire in his tale. The settings of the castle resemble the reality of a totalitarian state, for example the total control of thoughts and actions, denial of national history and the past, hostility to surrounding world, pervasiveness of terror and paranoia, physical tortures and violent punishments. The tale shows that the imperial 'other' disrupts the national identity and reduces the self to the specter.

Keywords: Abjection, double, specter, colonial discourse, the uncanny

Introduction

Valerii Shevchuk is considered to establish the popularity of the Gothic conventions in contemporary Ukrainian literature. He has employed the fantastic and weird motifs in his prose since the 1960s when he started writing his neo-baroque novels *The House on the Hill* and *Three Leaves behind the Window*. Furthermore, Shevchuk combined the fantastic with the Gothic in three tales of terror *The Birds from the Invisible Island*, *The*

Confession and *The Pestilence* (written in the 1970s but published in 1990). Since the 1990s Shevchuk has utilized a number of traditional Gothic motifs (e.g. the demonic villain, the double, the ghost, the haunted house, the maiden in flight, the uncanny) in his fantastic (e.g. *The Origin of Terror*, *The Dark Music of Pines*) and realistic novels (e.g. *The Ghost of the Dead House*, *The Fading Shadows*). However, the Gothic conventions incorporated into Shevchuk's non-realistic works are more frightening because they manifest themselves in various forms and tropes within the narrative.

In recent years Shevchuk's prose has become the focus of considerable academic interest in Ukraine. Researches have outlined peculiarities of the poetics as well as philosophical and ethical issues raised in author's work. Despite this interest, the Gothic conventions in Shevchuk's tales of terror are still poorly analyzed.

The Birds from the Invisible Island is the writer's first Gothic tale and one of his most spectral and haunted texts. Shevchuk employs the concept of the uncanny to emphasize the theme of struggle with the national identity in a totalitarian society. The tale is filled with doubles and specters that epitomize the dematerialization of culture and the silenced history of Ukraine.

However, most studies have not tended to define the dark imagery as the Gothic in *The Birds from the Invisible Island*. For instance, Ludmyla Tarnashynska (2001) referred to this tale as the "story-parable" or the "story-metaphor" that depicted the struggle of hope and good against despair and evil (p. 115). She also highlighted the textual connections between Shevchuk's tale and Dante's *La Divina Commedia*. According to Tarnashynska (2001), sinners were punished for their mortal sins in Dante's Hell whereas the protagonist of Shevchuk's tale suffered because of his sin of slavery. Tetiana Blednykh (2011) determined the allusions to Franz Kafka's novels and investigated the concepts of Existentialist thought (e.g. the Absurd, the Angst) in *The Birds from the Invisible Island*.

The aim of our paper is to analyze the motifs of the double, the haunting, the specter, and the uncanny in order to extend current knowledge of the Gothic conventions in Shevchuk's *The Birds from the Invisible Island*.

Defining the haunting

The Gothic and the fantastic are essentially related in their incursion into the symbolic order. Furthermore, they provide the writers with tropes and motifs that describe the disrupted homogeneity of the real. According to Christine Berthin (2010), "the fantastic fantasizes a violent attack upon the symbolic order. The Gothic is haunted writing because it displays the possibilities of fantastic figural distortion. It is the resistant trace of a time and a space incommensurable with that of a discursive meaning" (p. 59).

Besides interfering with reality and the symbolic, the Gothic disrupts the continuity of historical time. Berthoin (2010) states that chronology is uncertain and contaminated with displacements in the Gothic world, "in which the past has never been a present and remains a mythical point of reference ... [and] the present, against which this past is pitched in a critical stance, is itself never present" (p. 67). Therefore, the motif of haunting in the Gothic and the fantastic enables to speak the unspeakable and give voice to the silenced and the marginalized through revising the conventional history.

Haunting takes place when "time is out of joint" and the integrity of the symbolic structure is disrupted. Jacques Derrida (1994) states that the specter, or the revenant, is an elusive and unclear signifier because it does not refer to something that exists in the present: "the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other" (p. 5). As a trope of fiction, the specter, according to Colin Davis (2007), is a notion of epistemological and ethical questions that demand the recognition in the present and the integration into consciousness. After the symbolic debt has been properly paid, the ghost returns to the realm of the dead. Therefore, the ghosts let us "interrogate our relation to the dead, examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthought" (Davis, 2007, p. 13).

As the trace of the past, mainly traumatic or unbearable, the figure of the ghost cannot be studied without recourse to the uncanny as a concept within psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud (2003), the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is connected with the past experience that was alienated from the self through repression. The sense of the uncanny causes the disturbance of 'I' and attaches to an unfamiliar return of what was familiar in the past. Hence, "[t]he uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely')" and "[t]he negative prefix un- is the indicator of repression" (Freud, 2003, p. 134, 151).

Consequently, the uncanny can be defined as the form of haunting that emerges when the symbolic order is disturbed by "something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open" (Freud, 2003, p. 148). The aspects of the uncanny are the dead, revenants, spirits, ghosts as well as doppelgangers, or doubles. All of them evoke dread and fear. In fiction, the sense of the uncanny is connected with the fantastic as it arises "when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred" (Freud, 2003, p. 150).

In broad terms, haunting and the uncanny can be defined as a return of the past that disturbs the present state of a subject's mind. The Gothic transforms the return of the past into something terrifying and unavoidable. As a retrospective mode of literature, the Gothic depicts "the impossibility of

escape from history, with the recurrent sense ... that the past can never be left behind, that it will reappear and exact a necessary price" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 55). Furthermore, a number of studies have found that the Gothic haunting has much in common with the discourse of colonization. David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004) point out that the empire causes the dematerialization of the whole cultures; thus the repressed nation is always haunted by the ghosts of the marginalized and the silenced (p. 58). Since the whole human history is written according to "a logic of the phantom, the revenant, a logic of haunting", the history of the colonized nation is the time continuity broken by the imperial trauma (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 55). Thus, the time of the colonized culture is the spectral time out of joint that let the ghosts of the dead appear and haunt the living.

Haunted by the Past: the uncanny and abjection

The tale *The Birds from the Invisible Island* is usually defined as a fantastic or historical-fantastic story. There are two places described in the text: a mysterious castle and an Ottoman galley. The space of the castle provides the weird and gothicized settings for the tale while the space of the Ottoman galley adds the historical authenticity of the seventeenth century. Shevchuk refers to the time of the Ottoman slavery when many captives were forced to row in the galleys for most of their lives.

All through the story, the narration switches from the events in the castle to the events on the galley; consequently, it is not clear whether the protagonist Olizar Nosylovych recollects his servitude (he has escaped and now resides in the mysterious fortress) or he has become insane (he is still on the galley and has delusions about the castle). The ambiguity is maintained till the end of the tale; consequently, it evokes the sense of the uncanny and arises the uncertainty about the very reality. In addition, this uncertainty refers to the fantastic defined by Tzvetan Todorov (1973) as the "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting the supernatural event" (p. 25). The fantastic intensifies the dark imagery of the Gothic throughout the tale and establishes the bizarre instability of the narrative world caused by the mirroring and displacement.

In the beginning of the tale, Olizar, exhausted and weak, finds himself standing in front of the mysterious castle: "The tower rose above, bathed with rain, and it swayed bizarrely in the grey light... Olizar stopped for a moment and looked round brimmed with fright. But there was ghastly silence everywhere; the castle looked blurred and phantasmal through the drizzle ... [Olizar] seemed to be lost in this far land..." (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 190). Olizar is accompanied inside the fortress by two guards. Only eleven dwellers permanently live there: sturdy prince Bilynsky, skinny lady Pavuchykh, old doctor Rozenrokh, four guards, and four beautiful young

girls. There are few ghostlike servants who appear to cook and lay the table. Having done their work the servants disappear again.

As a guest of the castle, Olizar is obliged to entertain the hosts by telling about his recent adventures and wanderings. His story discloses that he was kept in bondage on an Ottoman galley for eight years but managed to escape. Olizar and his fellow inmates organized a mutiny and seized the ship. But on their way home they were attacked by the detachment of the armed Turks. This battle is the last episode of his wanderings Olizar remembers.

In our reading, the castle is a modified Gothic trope of the haunted house. Furthermore, it functions as a purgatory (i.e. the place of temporary torments and trials), in which the hero gets an opportunity to restore his identity. We do not support the previous opinion that the castle is hell i.e. the place of everlasting punishment for Olizar's sins (Tarnashynska, 2001, p. 115). The protagonist finds out that he is not the first guest and probably not the last one, but the dwellers would not talk about this. In order to be purified of the remaining neurosis caused by his servitude, Olizar undergoes an amount of suffering to expiate his sense of guilt for being a slave. The eerie space of the castle symbolizes his unconscious need to face his repressed memories and to deal with his traumatic past. The motifs of the haunting and the uncanny are connected with the protagonist's crisis and guilt of servitude. A sense of the uncanny emerges for the first time when Olizar compares the monotonous and restricted lifestyle of the castle to that one on the galley: "[Olizar] saw the galley and the back of an oarsman, who was sitting in front of him; the overseer yelled and they raised and put oars down, ... the oars were deepened into the sea monotonously and repetitiously, in the same way the spoons were dipped into plates by these people who were totally unfamiliar to him" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 196). Notably, the uncanny, according to Freud, is something familiar that returns as unfamiliar and frightening (Freud, 2003, p. 124). From the Gothic viewpoint, the uncanny corresponds to the haunting as it signifies the return of the repressed traumatic experience. Thus, spectral repetition evokes a feeling of the uncanny that disrupts the homogeneity of the self and the symbolic structure.

As a troubled spirit, Olizar is haunted by traumatic memories from his past. He recollects that the oarsmen's mutiny turned into a massacre on the galley. Rebellious slaves slaughtered their warders savagely and violently. Olizar himself brutally stabbed the Ottoman chief Apty-pasha. The ghost of the murdered man begins to haunt Olizar in dreams with the aim of reminding him that he swore to be an Ottoman slave on the galley for the rest of his life. In the Gothic an appearance of a ghost disrupts the symbolic order and evokes the sense of the uncanny and terror. The apparition is a notion of the silenced past that returns to be articulated. Consequently, all ghost stories

"revolve around moments of silence, which somehow allow a sense of the 'other' to intrude" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 286). When the problem epitomized by the image of the ghost is properly solved and the gasp in the symbolic order is restored, the ghost departs again.

In *The Birds from the Invisible Island* Apty-pasha's apparition is a notion of Olizar's repressed memories and a reflection of his guilt. Since the ghost also signifies the anxieties and unresolved problems that disrupt the moral and epistemological structure of the present, it has to be recognized and integrated into consciousness in order to be sent away. The protagonist resides in the castle because of his inability to forget his sins and to exorcise the painful memories of the servitude. Olizar is free from the bondage of the galley but he is still enslaved mentally and spiritually by his trauma. The ghost of Apty-pasha incarnates the servitude and challenges the hero's identity. In this case, the ghost functions, in Davis's words, as "a liar; its effects are designed to mislead the haunted subject and to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery" (Davis, 2007, p. 10). The protagonist has to prove the ghost as well as himself that he is truly free from the servitude in order to correct the mental disturbance caused by the haunting and to send the revenant away. Therefore, the apparition of Apty-pasha signifies Olizar's repressed trauma, which demands recognition in the present. It is also associated with the claustrophobic space of the castle that becomes a site of the protagonist's struggle for identity. Olizar faces two possibilities: he may either confront his traumatic past to resolve dissociation caused by repressed memories or lose his identity to become another dweller of the castle.

Having escaped from the galley, Olizar do not give up the idea of returning home. The hero can hardly accept to be enclosed in the castle for a long time; however, an unknown mysterious force does not let him out the gates. The attempt to flee from the castle is qualified as serious crime and Olizar is cruelly punished for his disobedience. In spite of the fact that Olizar is terrified of being imprisoned in this spectral reality forever, he surrenders in order to avoid being tortured: "I will do everything!", he yelled or moaned, he ate that boiling liquid, his eyes were turning wildly; he felt as if he had not had the body, as if there had been only that boiling red liquid and red-hot sword" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 214). There is an uncanny shift from haunting to physical suffering when the castle's dwellers choose the way to punish Olizar. He is condemned to be chained to an oar in a dark chamber and obliged to row continually. The protagonist let himself be dominated by fear thus reconciling to his oath of slavery. Moreover, he even assists at tortures of Rozenroch who also has tried to flee. All through the tale, the integrity of protagonist's self is questioned. Olizar behaves dishonorably and brutally in

the castle as well as on the galley, because he is terrified to be differentiated between the others.

Both the castle and the galley are uncanny private worlds isolated from outside but extended inwards and filled with doubles and specters. These spaces look like a womb with their darkness, contamination with blood, sufferings-confinements, sobs-moans, and blurred boundaries between life and death. The castle and the galley occupy the ambiguous opposition womb/tomb, because, in Berthin's words, "the tomb is always a womb, and a womb can only be the tomb where the subject loses him/herself" (Berthin, 2010, p. 84). Being confined to the castle, Olizar dreams about a mysterious bird-woman from a distant island and wishes she took him inside her body in order to give pleasure and sense of security: "[he] embraced her legs, cuddled up his head as if he wanted to return to the same womb, which gave him birth once; he wanted ... to hide there from the world, to find that wonderful and safe shelter, and to grow not forward but backwards: to diminish and finally decrease" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 249). According to Freud (2003), female genitals make the impression of the uncanny, because what male patients "find uncanny ['unhomely'] is actually the entrance to man's old 'home', the place where everyone once lived" (p. 151). Furthermore, Olizar's dream may be acknowledged to be uncanny because it includes "a harking back to single phases in evolution of the sense of self, a regression to times when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world and from others" (Freud, 2003, p. 143).

Besides being the source of abjection, the galley and the castle are related to the semiotic and the maternal body, which must be rejected by subject in order to become constituted as an autonomous self. It is the abject that makes this repelling possible, because through abjection, according to Julia Kristeva (1982), "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (p. 3). Kristeva (1982) points out, that coherent 'I' appears only after he/she has violently separated from a mother and entered the symbolic thanks to the autonomy of language; however, this painful breaking away is not permanent and there is "the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13). Both the uncanny and abjection deal with the past and repression, but are essentially different. The uncanny signifies the return of something that was familiar before repression. Abjection is "elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" thus providing more intensive and violent experience (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). Abjection emerges from the most archaic layers of human psyche where future subject has not been constituted yet. The galley and the castle are the spatial equivalent of the pre-linguistic condition of self in *The Birds from the Invisible Island*.

The association between the maternal, the abject and the uncanny is emphasized by the figure of the Father the in the tale. As the story progresses, the phantom of Olizar's father comes to him in a dream to forgive and absolve his son from fear and guilt. Only after being visited by his father's ghost, the hero resolves his dissolutions and attains the homogeneity of his identity. According to Kristeva (1982), the father embodies the symbolic and stands for the law while the mother represents the semiotic and is the first object of desire and signification. He belongs to the realm of the ideal and may establish a relation between subject and object. Outlining the struggle of self for separation from the maternal body, Kristeva (1982) refers to a figure of the father as a "third party" that provides "the symbolic light" and "drive energy" for "a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject" (p. 13). Once the protagonist recollects his father and the paternal home, he is ready to repel the (maternal) space of the castle: "[Olizar] got through the vent – he wanted to imbibe the light faintly shed into his restricted closet... Then he sang there, in that gap, even though being called a rebel or being tortured; ... his song should not die – it was his passion and grandeur!" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 262). Purged of the load of traumatic past, Olizar is ready to move on towards the light even though his only path is death.

Confined in the Present: colonial discourse and the Gothic

The concept of the uncanny can not be fully understood without reference to colonial discourse in *The Birds from the Invisible Island*. Shevchuk draws attention to the broader context of subordinate and marginalized position of Ukraine in the former Soviet Union. Thus, the haunting is connected not only to Olizar's personal experience of servitude but also to the collective memory of oppression. Claustrophobic space of the castle may be regarded as a symbol of the empire and connected with the discourse of colonization. Consequently, the castle symbolizes the very uncanny since it manifests the unfamiliar appearance of familiar reality of the 1970s.

The former Soviet Union was an enormous cage that confined and terrorized the entire society. Those who criticized the state power or its policy were put into correctional facilities or lunatic asylums. Solomiia Pavlychko (2009) highlights that "[a]side from the actual physical plants of the numerous 'correctional facilities' ... [t]he state ran a monstrous house of repression, and writers were merely its most dangerous denizens. Even some of the best known, most servile, officially celebrated party loyalists lived under the constant surveillance of the KGB" (p. 558). The whole State was a realm of pervasive terror and threat.

Shevchuk combines the fantastic and the Gothic to create the uncanny settings of the fictional castle in *The Birds from the Invisible Island*. He also claims that this spatial image "functions as a model of the world – of the totalitarian society" (Tarnashynska, 1995, p. 175). Furthermore, some attributes of the castle are similar to the settings of Utopia. According to Yurii Lotman (1992), Utopia is an artificial city that establishes a new semiotic system deprived of history. It breaks any connections with the structures of the past in order to manifest the reason of this "regular state" (p. 13). In Shevchuk's tale, the castle is an unnatural spatial construction distant in time and space from human reality. The whole life in the castle is determined by undeniable and unbreakable rules. Everybody who does not obey is severely punished and tortured. In order to supervise each other, the dwellers assembled a system of eavesdropping. This system consists of golden burning buttons that enable hearing any distant sounds as if they were nearby. Besides erasing any spatial boundaries, these devices create the atmosphere of persistent danger and persecution.

The lifestyle in the castle is restricted and precisely planned. The dwellers are obliged to do their work: prince Bilynsky must govern, doctor Rozenrokh must treat and counsel, lady Pavuchykha must spin threads, the guards must protect, and girls must make wood wares. The regulations forbid any personal feelings, emotions, discussions, private contacts, memories; however, the dwellers are allowed to gather all together for mealtime, and the girls have a right to become intimate with guards or guests of the castle. The rules demand everyone to be happy and content, thus not to rebel or depart. Moreover, the rules prohibit admitting that there is surrounding world beyond the castle. Prince Bilynsky tells Olizar: "Our doctrine is built on faith, not reason. That is why we do not judge the principles of our life; we learn and accept them as they are. And therefore we say: there is a hollow outside our castle" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 218). The dwellers also deny the existence of history and do not consider their future. Time in the castle is the continuous present when one day is similar to another and everything remains permanent and unchangeable. The dwellers, captured in the repetition of the present, can hardly be defined as human beings. They may be acknowledged as components of the castle's architectural structure. When Olizar asks lady Pavuchykha whether she has ever considered the possibility of moving away from the castle, she replies: "I do not even know such word: to leave. How can the heart leave the body? How can the arm having been torn off the body wander anywhere else?" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 202).

The dwellers reside in the uncanny realm of ambiguity that transformed them into spectral duplicates that think and look alike. According to Freud (2003), a doppelganger, or double, signifies an annihilation of the self through repetition, division and divergence, for "a

person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own" (p. 142). Leading to disruption of self, the duplicate evokes terror and the sense of the uncanny. In *The Birds from the Invisible Island* the characters have the similar faces, figures and dresses, therefore Olizar can not distinguish them and thinks that they are just different images of one person: "The bizarre thought came into his head: there was only one girl, but she was divided into four images as into four mirroring copies" (Shevchuk, 1989, p. 204). This weird reflection causes the feeling of ambiguity and unnaturalness of the characters. Moreover, their physical resemblance may be perceived as corporeal deformity; therefore the dwellers of the castle are hardly beautiful, they are unnatural and ghastly.

Throughout the tale, Shevchuk (1982) represents the malicious ability of the state power to reduce individuals to "cold monolithic masses" (p. 210) through restriction of personal freedom and destruction of their minds. The lifestyle of the castle is similar to the servitude thus turning the dwellers into ghostly (non)beings, spectral doubles, neither alive nor dead. This spectrality of the characters epitomizes the silenced, marginalized and repressed condition of the Ukrainian nation in the totalitarian state.

Conclusion

In *The Birds from the Invisible Island* Shevchuk combines the fantastic and the Gothic conventions to establish the motif of haunting in his narrative. However, he does not utilize the Gothic just to provide fear or the supernatural. His aim is to rethink the national trauma and the colonial experience of the Ukrainian people. Shevchuk employs the motifs of the double, the ghost, the spectral and the uncanny in order to show the impact of the traumatic past on the human mind. Haunting also reveals the hidden, disguised and silenced defects of seemingly complete and civilized present.

The protagonist of the tale suffers from neurosis caused by trauma of servitude. The dissociations of his mind mirror the anxieties about coherent self and national identity. Therefore, the personal story of Olizar can be comprehended as the representation of the collective history of repression.

Viewed in a broader context, the fictional space of the castle establishes the colonial discourse in the narrative. The tale depicts common terrors of repression, persecution and imprisonment in the totalitarian state. The motif of haunting reflects the reality of the Ukrainian past. The uncanny space of the castle represents the malicious ability of the totalitarian state to annihilate national identity and erase the colonized culture. Shevchuk manifests the atmosphere of persistent danger and pervasive terror that determined life of Ukrainian society in the 1970s. The writer employs the

motif of haunting and doubles to transform the familiar world of the totalitarian state into the uncanny realm of the specters and the dead.

The fantastic and the Gothic conventions in the tale *The Birds from the Invisible Island* foreshadow the forms of haunting in Shevchuk's prose written in the 1990–2000s. However this gap in the literary study still needs further interpretation and investigation.

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