Paulina Ambroży

"It ghosts" : Language as a Haunted Dwelling in Selected Poems by Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore

Kultura Popularna nr 1 (55), 96-109

2018

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

Paulina Ambroży

"It ghosts": *Language as a Haunted Dwelling in Selected Poems by Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore*

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0012.0576

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that all writing is ghost-driven, for "everyone reads, acts, writes with *his* or *her* ghosts." The philosopher sees the figure of the ghost as paramount, "the hidden figure of all figures" (1994, 20). To explain the nature of spectral language and modern hauntology, Derrida uses Marx's formulation "*Es spukt*" [it ghosts][1] (Derrida 1994, 216), which, as I shall attempt to prove, well captures the uncanny 'apparitioning' of metaphysical truths against the domestic and the familiar in the works of modernist poets. Derrida explains the complex and indefinite nature of the German phrase *es spukt* in terms of "domestic hospitality": thus, "it ghosts" denotes an undecidable welcome which opens up a space for our encounter with the *unheimlich*. In the philosopher's own words,

Paulina Ambroży is professor extraordinarius and Head of American Literature Department at the Faculty of English, at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She is the author of *(Un)concealing the Hedgehog: Modernist American Poets and Contemporary Critical Theories* (2012). Her research interests include modernist and contemporary American poetry, 19th-century American literature, word-image relations and literary theory, and contemporary prose. Currently, she is working on an intermedial project, *Turn of the Sign: Crisis of Representation in American Poetry and the Visual Arts*.

> to welcome …with anxiety and the desire to exclude the stranger, to invite the stranger without accepting him or her, domestic hospitality that welcomes without welcoming the stranger, but a stranger who is already found within (*das Heimliche-Unheimliche*), more intimate with one than one is oneself, the absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular *and* anonymous (*es spukt*), an unnamable and neutral power, that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an identity, that, *without doing anything* [emphasis original], invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it. (Derrida 1994, 217)

Partaking of a similar tension between the strange and the familiar, modernist poetry can be described as "spectral", as it often locates itself on the threshold of the presentable and the unpresentable, between the body and the spirit, thus creating the right dwelling – or the right "body" – for the haunting traces, apparitions, and re-apparitions of the past. Using Derrida's concept of literature as the specter, coupled with Heidegger's notion of "poetical dwelling", in which man structures his relationship to the world through language, I shall examine selected poems by Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore as spaces and bodies both haunted and haunting. In my analysis, I intend to borrow Derrida's concept of undecidable hospitality to explore spectral capacities of the poetic metaphor, which, in modernist practice, often welcomes "without welcoming", positioning the reader in the space of the *(Un)heimlich*. Following Derrida's own frequent practice, my method will be close reading, as it allows both insight into the idiosyncratic practice of each poet and a comparative perspective. At the same time, however, by uncovering the textual "secrets" of the poems in question, I would like to bring to the fore broader aspects of modernist "hauntology", along with its attempts to productively destabilize and open up meaning.

As indicated above, I shall focus on selected poems: Frost's "Directive," Stevens's "Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician," and Moore's "To a Chameleon". However, I will also refer to other, related examples from the poets'

1 I am using the English translation ("it ghosts") for the German phrase "*es spukt*", rather than the more natural "it haunts", after Derrida himself, who in *The Specters of Marx* points to the difficulty in translating the term: "*es spukt,* difficult to translate, as we have been saying. It is a question of ghosts and haunting, to be sure, but what else? The German idiom seems to name the ghostly return but it names it in verbal form. The latter does not say that there is some *revenant,* specter, or ghost: it does not say that there is some apparition, *der Spuk,* nor even that it appears, but that 'it ghosts', 'it apparitions.'" (216).

oeuvres; the selected texts will serve as instances of spectral poetics or uncanny dwelling in and through language, in which the tension between the domestic and the anti-domestic spells out the aesthetic goals of modernism as well as the spiritual, existential and epistemological doubts of the era. As I shall argue, the domestic in those poems is often haunted by the repressed past or translated into quasi-transcendental forms and figures, suspending the reader between the impossibility and revelation of truth. The trajectory of the argument – from Frost, through Stevens, to Moore – is determined by my desire to show the poets' different relations to language as an experience of secrecy and spectrality, within, however, a shared "hauntological" sensibility of the modernist age. Thus, the intention is to show how the three poets both "inhabit" and deconstruct metaphors of the domestic and the familiar haunted by transcendental longings, moving towards their destabilization in favor of increasingly spectral engagements with the notion of "domesticity". If poetry, to borrow from Emily Dickinson, is indeed a house that tries to be "haunted", the architectural metaphors of Frost take us to the familiar spaces of memory and loss – the house "under erasure", with the ethical and metaphysical inheritances that cannot (and should not) be easily abandoned. As Frost's poems imply, we must confront our specters as well as "reckon with them" (Derrida 1994, xx), and the confrontation itself becomes a form of moral responsibility. In turn, Stevens's ghostly chambers suspend us at the threshold of the post-metaphysical sublime, where the arrested revelation, the "as if" of transcendence, works to redefine "being-there" both as a presence in the world but also as a differing and deferring. Moore's uncanny imagination, firmly located in the world, and yet showing a strong penchant for the exotic, the fantastic and the liminal, employs tropes of animal camouflage to probe poetry's oscillation between adaptability and otherness. Her metaphors of spectrality and quasi-transcendence, as will be argued, move beyond the conflicts and tensions underlying Frost's and Stevens's hauntological concerns. Namely, they disseminate a process that breaks the constructed boundaries between the subject and the object, the self and the Other, producing "an opening", a haunting of non-being within being, or – to borrow from Derrida again – "an unnamable glimmer beyond the closure [that] can be glimpsed" (1976, 14).

As proposed above, the poems under analysis represent three different visions and uses of the spectral as a metaphor, creative force and function of the imagination. The first vision is captured in the image of Frost's spectral cellar from his early poem "The Ghost House" (from *Boy's Will*, 1913) and his late poem "Directive" (from *Steeple Bush*, 1947), in which the domestic returns in the form of ruins – as an uninhabitable but necessary trace, generating lack and desire, which for Frost are conducive to the creation of thought, memory and language. The next metaphor is Stevens' richly furnished room of the Poet-Metaphysician, in which the curtains become a figure of spectrality or self-haunting. The last vision is represented by Moore's most creatively "spectral" figure of the chameleon, serving as the ultimate symbol of an ontological flicker and indeterminacy, and pointing to the inexhaustible capacities of poetry's undomesticated at-homeness in the world.

In accordance with avant-garde poetry's anti-domestic thrust, the poetic worlds of all the three poets exhibit a curious absence of homely domesticity. Stevens's best works are mostly landscape or peripatetic poems, topicalizing poetry for its capacity of "luminous traversing", as can be seen, for instance, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" or "The Auroras of Autumn". Moore claims in her poem "Silence" that "superior people never make long visits",

inviting us to "make her house [our] inn", as "inns are not residences" (1987, 91). Feeling safe as a somewhat detached observer of discursively mediated nature, and showing strong preference for wild but armored, erinaceous and highly protective creatures, the poet demonstrates a rather cautious, if not outright distrustful attitude to the very idea of domestication. Similarly, Frost, who often adopts "a homespun persona" (Spurr, 77) and frequently writes of homecoming in his poems, rarely presents human habitations as cozy structures teeming with life and domestic happiness. As noted by Richard Poirier, home often functions as "the initial condition or form from which it is necessary to wander" (89). "Frost is at his best", the critic continues, "when 'home' is at its worst" (Poirer, 111).

Taking my cue from the latter critic, I would like to begin with this peculiar condition of domesticity in Frost's poems. Arguably, Frost can be seen as a poet who best problematizes modernism's uneasy relation to the notion of home. What is more, his poems prepare the ground for a freer "apparitioning" of undomesticated figures and specters in the poems by Stevens and Moore. Frank Lentricchia argues that enclosure related to home is "one of the more psychologically compelling images in Frost's poetry and essays", adding that it often "enclose[s] experiences that are potentially fatal to mental serenity" (60). Similarly, Spurr sees Frost's homes as figures of "absence, emptiness, and negation" (77), presented as "invariably lonely, deserted places", devoid of warmth and haunted by "worn-out relics of human dwelling" (77). Among the best examples here would be such poems as "The Ghost House" (1913), "The Census-Taker" (1923), "The Black Cottage", and "The Directive" (1946), in which, in the critic's words, "the notion of dwelling as a poetic and spiritual condition depends, paradoxically, on the loss of the dwelling as a physical structure" (77). Indeed, Frost seems to thrive on the very ghostliness or spectrality of an abode that vanishes along with its inhabitants. Yet I wish to qualify Spurr's understanding of the aura of "pure negativity" (77) haunting Frost's abandoned homes as well as Lentricchia's focus on the house as a place of darkness and crisis-driven consciousness (61–62). Instead, I propose to see Frost's nostalgic "homecoming" and fascination with house ruins in Heideggerian terms, as "a return to a place that properly we can never leave" (Malpas, 311). *Da-sein,* literarily "being there", means to exist in the world, to be in a concrete "there" (*da*). For Heidegger, as Jeff Malpas observes in his insightful study of the philosopher's topology, returning to a place is thus a return to the place of being, "not to what is familiar but to that which is essentially 'uncanny', inexplicable, wondrous" (Malpas, 311). Poetry has a special role in this process, for to "speak" the place *poetically* means to return to the original question of being, to ponder the dynamic nature of our situatedness in the world. Through this return we do not ground ourselves in something stable and certain, but remind ourselves of who we are and gain a fuller realization of our own mortality. For the German philosopher, the critic argues, the world is "that which environs or surrounds us and also that toward which we are oriented, about which we are concerned, and to which we attend" (Malpas, 52). It is always already "a gathered place" understood as "a fundamental happening of unity" which nevertheless exhibits its "differentiated and differentiating" character (Malpas, 311). The gathering happens through being-there, *Da-sein*, through our encounters with things within the world in which we create "the context of meaning" (Malpas 53, 55).

A similar notion of space and place underlies Frost's homecoming poems. Significantly, Frost's return to the vanishing ruins is frequently through the cellar

hole – the house's foundation. In Gaston Bachelard's influential psychoanalysis of the house's structure, it is the space which resists rationalization (1969, 20, 19). As a symbol of the unconscious (19), the cellar can be also connected to the Heideggerian figure of "facticity" (*Faktizität*), which refers both to the impenetrability, the irrationality of existence and to its temporal situatedness, its "lingering 'there'" (Heidegger 1999, 24). In "The Ghost House", which is Frost's early poem from *A Boy's Will*, the speaker admits that he "dwells in a lonely house … / That vanished many a summer ago / And left no trace but the cellar walls" (15).[2] In his late and most elusive piece "Directive", first published in 1946, and considered to be his *summa poetica*, the poet 'directs' us again to the image of the cellar hole, this time strongly insisting on our participation in the ritual of mourning for the lost abode (Frost, 341).

"The walls of the cellar are buried walls", Bachelard observes, with "walls with a single casing, walls that have the entire earth behind them" (20). This "nearness" of the earth that is more poignantly exposed in the ruined structure is important also in Frost's poems – for the cellar-as-trace is more open to encounters and meaningful involvements, as its wound-like structure is unconcealed and concerns us as more immediate than its intact and usually concealed form. We are encouraged to accompany the poet in probing the wound in an attempt to counteract the abandonment: "weep for the house that is no more a house, / But only a belilaced cellar hole / Now slowly closing like a dent in dough" (Frost, 341). Grounding our vision in a series of negations that follow – "a house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm / And in a town that is no more a town" (Frost, 341) – the speaker stresses the significance of the sense of loss or absence here represented as "a dent" threatened by total disappearance. This negative rhetorical patterning of the spectral ruin combined with the persistent present tense paradoxically creates a degree of stability and consistency – a degree zero of narrative time – freezing and framing the site of loss against the dispersal of signs and further erosion or dissolution of its past meaning through this extended discourse time. At the same time, the language "gathers" this place into what Heidegger calls "presentness", in which all happenings and things, no matter how dispersed and fragmented, come into relatedness. In the poem, Frost takes us "back in time made simple by the loss / Of detail, burned, dissolved and broken off" (Frost, 341), echoing Thoreau's conviction that "[n]ot till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are in the infinite extent of our relations" (Thoreau, 213). To "be lost enough to find yourself", as Frost proposes in "Directive" (341), is a form of "gathering" which recognizes unity in confusion and dissolution. Entropic decline, death and trauma inform the poem, written, as his biographers observe, in the wake of historical and personal tragedies: the Depression, the Second World War and the tragic deaths of Frost's wife and daughter, followed by his own depression and illness (Thompson, 511; McArthur, 71–74). Thus, the negative capacity of language to uphold absence as a poignant presence partakes of the preservation of the rift, that "dent in the dough" of human forgetfulness. "Summoned by poetic will," Tim Kendall observes, "the past both exists and is lost" (380); its fragments, which carry also the poet's nostalgia and personal despair, are

2 McArthur traces some of the material sources of Frost's abandoned houses, which include the cellar hole across the road from Frost's Derry farm. The inspiration comes also from Frost's childhood and adult experiences of frequent new beginnings, as well as his parents' and his own inability to secure and maintain a stable home. (McArthur 2008: 44).

pushed towards the present and fullness by acts of recollection. This fragile and temporal trace of the past, transforming the material world of wounded objects and places into a site of remembrance, becomes a clearing, a fracture in the wilderness, a differentiating rift in the wholeness of reality that lies at the origin of thought and language. Thus, the shrinking and scarred site of human presence gradually reclaimed by nature withdraws into the clearing of poetic language, producing an extension, an opening for the unconcealment of being. This dent-as-specter combines visibility and disappearance, suturing absence to presence, creating a new coherence, a temporary delay of the landscape's disintegration and erosion.

Frost constructed his poem as a form of guidance. The eponymous "directive", followed by multiple references to an unspecified "you" throughout the poem, suggests that it is the reader who becomes the addressee of Frost's spectral evidence. Invited to become lost in the *unheimlich* of Frost's elusive image and to traverse the grounds of memory, personal, regional, and national history that have sedimented both temporally and spatially in the vanishing edifice, the reader becomes a necessary heir and carrier of the trace, a participant in nostalgia committed to the recovery of the semantic and affective density of the spectral abode and its salvation from non-meaning.

On one level, the poem can be read as a psychological drama of repression and return, for, as Marit J. McArthur argues, Frost returns imaginatively to his previous family farmhouse in Derry, New Hampshire, his longest continuous residence, haunted by the memory of his family life and his formative years.[3] In this context, the image of the cellar implies an externalization of repressed trauma, a visual representation of the connection between the conscious and unconscious, and of the unspoken reality of suffering (McArthur, 9). The poem becomes a case of "spectral materialism", to borrow from Eric Santner, understood as the capacity to register the persistence of past emotion that has been absorbed into the substance of material space (57). The specter of Frost's house takes us also to the realms of human devastation and darkness that are at once physical and metaphysical. However, it also contains the traces of man's relentless activity to withstand that darkness like the "children's house of make believe," "shattered dishes underneath a pine," or "the broken drinking goblet like the Grail" (Frost, 342). The house becomes the secular equivalent of Heidegger's Greek temple, which "structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory or disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny" (Heidegger [1923] 1971, 20–21). Heidegger sees human existence always in relation to the divine, claiming that the capacity to measure ourselves against it constitutes the true nature of humanity. Frost's metaphor of the Grail-like goblet, hidden in the ruins of the house, from which we can drink to reach a sense of clarity beyond confusion is a material figure connecting us to the immaterial mythical reality. It is always contingent, however, on our willingness to reinvent the landscape and its tenuous afterlife, the lingering Heideggerian "thereness", as a communicable and visionary but always human experience.

Derrida sees the specter as a symbol of our need to recognize our own failure of interpretation, language and comprehension. "One does not know", the philosopher writers, "not out of ignorance, but because this non-object,

3 McArthur observes that "by the late nineteenth century, when Frost first explored rural New England, the landscape was littered with abandoned farmhouses" – a result of "rural depopulation in New England" (12).

this non-present present, this being–there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge" (6). This shift from the knowledge and material vision to the elusive metaphysical is visible in Frost's choice of mythical temporality and religious discourse in the second part of the poem. The language of the biblical parable, the brook capable of quenching spiritual thirst, the questions about salvation and the hidden Grail all show that Frost's return to the past is not only a nostalgic gesture, but a return to the essence of being that precedes rational knowledge and takes us beyond personal memory and remembered time.

According to Bachelard, "[a] house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability" (15). Frost's return to the homely and domestic topoi is a similar, if somewhat precarious redemptive project which comes from a trust in "constant symbols"— the unifying, even if ever shifting structures of thought and being which are best realized in poetic language. Frost's trust is also contingent on his relentless urge to ground the imagination and language in figures of order and unity (e.g. fixable moments of childhood, images of coherent rural landscape, salvaged domestic artifacts and walls amidst modern ruins). Frost needs his own ghosts of repetition – the recurrent metaphor of the ruined home with the base of cellar walls forces the landscape, with its chaos containing fragments of history and memory, into an imagined coherence, a temporary form "beyond confusion" (Frost, 342).

Similarly, Stevens's speaker invites specters into the comforts of his home to test the creative potential of their liminality and probe the figures of instability and confusion. The poet often uses the sheltering image of the house or room, situating the poetic imagination on the threshold between the domestic and the external world, as for example in "The House Was Quiet, The World Was Calm", and infusing his poems with human light and the sensual pleasure of the quotidian. Nevertheless, even his most domesticated figures, such as the leisurely woman in "Sunday Morning" enjoying her "late coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" (Stevens, 66) or the poet-figure in "The Domination of Black", protected from darkness by the warm light of his fireplace (8), are haunted by an anxiety, "the encroachment of that old catastrophe" ("Sunday Morning", 67) that darkens the atmosphere and often submerges the homely character of their abodes. Recognizing that "we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" ("Notes towards a Supreme Fiction," 383), Stevens, like Frost, sees the modern landscape as fragmented and alienated, often connecting home to a desire for what lies beyond the domestic and homely. The unease and restlessness of his imagery, continuously oscillating between materiality and immateriality, creates a haunting effect of radical instability which disrupts the continuity of familiar, domestic and ordinary spaces.

As argued by Wolfreys, the ghostly effect "needs structure, within which its efficacy assumes maximum disruption. The act of haunting is effective because it displaces us in those places where we feel most secure, most notably in our homes, in the domestic scene" (5). In Stevens's "Domination of Black", the secure domestic scene, the poet's fire-lit room, is opened up for haunting and dislocation by "an internal eruption and interruption" (Wolfreys 5) of the figures of the autumnal sublime:

> At night, by the fire,
> the colors of the bushes
> And of the fallen leaves,
> Repeating themselves,

Turned in the room
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind. (Stevens, 8)

The turning of colors stirs both the landscape and the poet's memory into restlessness: "but the color of the heavy hemlocks / Came striding. / And I remembered the cry of the peacocks" (8). The ghostly "cry of the peacocks" is an uncanny disturbance, a revenant which haunts the poet's imagination and language. Stevens tries to protect the mind from the encroachment of darkness through the slippage and excess of discourse – the dizzying motion and re-turning of tropes: "Turning in the wind, / Turning as the flames / Turned in the fire / Turned as the tails of the peacocks" (8). The unsettling cry, with its promise of return, is of phantasmal nature, reiterated in the poet's memory, as the poem unfolds, through a series of rhetorical displacements and deferrals. The traces that those strange articulations leave in the disjunctive structure of Stevens's poem-as-dwelling continually disturb the poet's perceptions of the real, filling his mind with a sense of a haunting absence and foreboding. The cry also unseals the spatial and temporal framework, blurring the boundary between sight and insight, and introducing a rift in the security of the speaker's position – no longer insulated "against the twilight" (9). "I felt afraid / And I remembered the cry of the peacocks" (Stevens, 9), the speaker confesses in the final lines of the poem, unable to dispel the spectral memories which "apparition" as the last, quasi-eschatological, inscription. The movement of tropes unveils the spectral nature of all figuration, suspending us between reality and intimations of a "beyond".

"Spectrality", Fredric Jameson argues, "is not difficult to circumscribe, as what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage" (38). Stevens's poem which best problematizes this wavering and flickering of reality through its use of spectral troping is the short poem "The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician" (1919). The central metaphor here is the eponymous curtain, which captures beautifully the Hartford poet's penchant for shifting and destabilizing metaphors that push against the integrity and insularity of domestic dwelling. This is in accord with Stevens's larger vision of reality and language, both in their physical and metaphysical dimensions, as an undulating and ever "fluent mundo" (Stevens, 407) in which meanings and truths are always subject to change, erasure and negotiation. Constructed as one meandering sentence, "The Curtains" needs to be quoted in its entirety:

It comes about that the drifting of these curtains
Is full of long motions; as the ponderous
Deflations of distance or as clouds
Inseparable from their afternoons;
Or the changing of light, the dropping
Of silence, wide sleep and solitude
Of night, in which all motion
Is beyond us, as the firmament,
Up-rising and down-falling, bares
The largeness, bold to see.
(Stevens, 62)

While Frost, in his home poems, opts for stabilizing metaphors of grounding, thereness, foundations, return and origin, Stevens's curtain takes us to the truly spectral space of trembling, signaling tangible ambiguity and drifting of sense in which language and the world cannot be stilled by figures of coherence and clarity. Instead, they are often threatened by ultimate disjointedness, opacity and loss of stability. The curtains in the house of the modernist metaphysician are in constant motion, trying to catch up with the largeness, impenetrability and fluidity of the external world. Indeed, the whole poem "drifts" in an incessant movement of language and imagery that is at once physical and immaterial, abstract and concrete, circumscribed and elusive. The enclosure of the room, the curtains, clouds, the nocturnal sky, and the light are all familiar elements of physical and observable reality and have an undeniably material effect, but when married to verbs of change and movement, and pushed into drifting by Stevens' skillful use of enjambment, they begin to lose their ontological grounds, defamiliarizing the recognizable space until it becomes too "bold" for us to see.

Stevens's curtain is the figure of the imagination that "ghosts", a trope located at the threshold of the unknown, between the visible and the invisible, which cannot and will not be anchored "beyond confusion", as Frost's containing frames of form and metaphor often can, even if the order forged by them is only provisional and ultimately unstable. In his poem "Tree at My Window", Frost addresses the title tree: "Let there never be curtain drawn / Between you and me" (230), positing directness and clarity of vision as the source of his aesthetics. In contrast, Stevens' partial and deeply ambiguous vision of the uncontained sublime – "the firmament / Up-rising and down-falling" (62), this largeness, or, as Joseph Carroll sees it, "some shadowy absolute" (37), afforded and protected by the drifting opaque screens of Stevens' figuration – becomes a metaphor of partial knowledge and epistemological limits, inherent in the confrontation with the ultimate otherness and unrepresentability of the world. In Derridean terms, the curtain becomes the figure of a welcomed strangeness, of otherness that is always already haunting the familiar and known. While Frost reinstates our sense of wholeness and comfort in "Directive", through the final metaphor of poetry as a restorative water in the broken goblet of modern belief, Stevens' poem refuses to scale down the engulfing darkness and immensity of the sublime sky. Rather, he allows his metaphysician to get caught between the disorienting curtains, in the space of language where every revealing is at once a re-veiling. The curtain, like the cry of the peacock in "Domination of Black", is also a figure of return and (un)forgetting, capable of holding the past within the shifting "folds" of the present. The past, here indicated by the tropes of the Romantic sublime and the titular metaphysician, is a difficult "spectral" heritage for the poet. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida claims that "an inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself", adding further that "[if] the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. … One always inherits from a secret – which says read me, will you ever be able to do so?" (Derrida, 1994, 16). Stevens' "inheritance from a secret" is kept safe and alive through the undulating curtain of language which takes us to the limit of imagination and knowing, offering no absolute closure, as it always stops short of the final revelation.

I would like to close this analysis with Marianne Moore – a poet whose use of spectral figuration confronts us with yet another aspect of the tension

between the domesticated and the untamable. Since the author of *Observations* defines poetry as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (1961, 40), the metaphors that dominate her work belong to the world of nature rather than domestic architecture. If Moore does refer to architectural enclosures, as in the poem "The Fish", where the poet takes us underwater, to a mystifying subaquatic "edifice" (1967, 33), her tropes always defamiliarize and "pierce" the construction, creating gaps and interruptions in its continuity and, as with Stevens, opening up porous boundaries between inner and outer realities. In the latter poem, the eponymous fish that "move / through black jade / Of the crow-mussel shells" (32), uncover a spectral space of ruins, filled with mysterious "ash heaps" and "turquoise sea of bodies": a quasi-gothic space carrying "the physical features of ac- / cident – lack of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and hatchet strokes" (33). The violent "marks of abuse" on this "defiant edifice" (32) as well as the constantly shifting of imagery which the poet's imagination keeps "opening and shutting" throughout, "like an injured fan" (32), evokes the spectral other, an uncanny apparition of something unnamable and incorporeal, namely the subject of absence and death. Considering the date of the poem's publication (August 1918) and Moore's brother's service as a marine chaplain (Leavell 159), the violent imagery can be linked more directly to the historical moment – the global and personal trauma of the war, coupled with the painful memory of its casualties, all of which had by then invaded the American consciousness. The site, haunted by an indication of wounding, erasure and fragmentation, becomes a burial ground, or crypt, where the "ash heaps" and "marks of abuse" trouble our memory as "repeated evidence" (33), at once real and phantasmic. "The estranging materiality of the spectral," as Wolfreys observes, "persists in its disturbance, even if we can acknowledge its effect at the limit of comprehension" (6). The enigmatic liminality of Moore's representation, which serves both to cover and uncover the encrypted memories and bodies, points also to the poet's aesthetic engagement with absence as a quasi-concept which resists conceptualization and coherent identification typical for epistemologies of presence. Hovering at the limits of knowability, Moore's tropes resist wholeness and bear witness to the existence of something other, the secret which ultimately cannot be told but only uncannily intimated.

This secret, protected by Moore's quasi-transcendental figuration, haunts also her poems devoted to animal camouflage. Spectral metaphors do abound in her work,[4] but it is the chameleon which seems to me the fullest expression of Moore's understanding of poetry as a special form of dwelling. The chameleon recurs in various contexts in "The Plumet Basilisk," "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing," "To Disraeli on Conservatism" and "Saint Nicolas," finding its fullest representation in the poet's tribute to this master of disguise, i.e. her early ode "To a Chameleon" (1916).

Hid by the august foliage and fruit
of the grape-vine
twine
your anatomy

4 Moore frequently uses figures of lizards, echidnas, hedgehogs, unicorns, pangolins, basilisks, etc. I discuss those metaphors, along with that of the chameleon, in more detail in my book *(Un)Concealing the Hedgehog: Modernist and Postmodernist American Poetry and Contemporary Critical Theories* (2012). See especially Chapter Three, devoted to the figures of haunting in the work of Stevens and Moore.

round the pruned and polished stem,
Chameleon.
Fire laid upon
an emerald as long as
the Dark King's massy one,
could not snap the spectrum up for food
as you have done.
(Moore, 179)

The creature's liminal and empirically unstable nature which allows it to simultaneously haunt, inhabit, and possess reality, makes it a perfect choice for Moore, who espoused a belief that illusion is more precise than precision (1967, 151) and whose poetic credo was "to value in style the principle that is hid" (85).

The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art presents the chameleon as the animal of perfect camouflage and adaptability – capable of moving through diverse environments and equipped with protective coloring due to a layer of chromatophore cells. Endowed with quick tongue and perfect vision, the chameleon is often seen as a quasi-supernatural being – a symbol of contingency, transformation, spiritual knowledge and as an intermediary between the world of men and gods (Werness, 82–83). Through his ability to elude perception by blending perfectly with his surroundings, the lizard overcomes the opposition between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, belonging and otherness, containment and freedom. At once at home in the world and elusively disappearing from it by "snapping" its colors, the chameleon becomes the most flexible and intriguing spectral being – a perfect metaphor for the power of poetry to both hide and reveal. The creature is not so much a ghost that returns as the repressed, unburied and haunting past that waits to be revealed and exorcised, but a phantom made of color and light, whose goal is to open us up to the very experience of mystery and transformation, suggesting the futility of our search for the ultimate secret of a poem. Thus, the chameleon – protectively "hid by the august foliage and fruit / of the grape-vine", and "twining" around its stem – signals a productive opening of poetry to the spectral instability and contingency of meaning, and its ultimate rejection of a pre-determined script or form. Just like the chameleon, which exemplifies the experience of becoming other, as it uses light and its own anatomy to continuously push and modify the contours of its being, poetic language and form push the boundaries of thought, representation and expression, thriving in the space of sense that cannot be domesticated.

The chameleon assumes diverse colors of the world, both partaking of reality and shielding itself from it; similarly, Moore's language absorbs multiple forms and voices to create a space of contact between reality and imagination without violating the poem's ultimate secret. By "twining" the lines and margins of her poem to mimic the movement of the creature's agile body, the poet reveals her understanding of poetry as a form inseparable from the raw materials of its immediate environment and capable of capturing a ceaseless variety of linguistic, stylistic and thematic registers. The image suits the poet also for another reason: with its shifting identity that refuses to stay put, but which is never objectively detached from its surroundings, it blurs the boundaries between the subject and object. It "gathers" colors and shapes of reality in its own body, and yet remains free of a desire to possess them. As such, it overcomes the metaphysical anxieties and self-haunting of

both Stevens and Frost, as its thrives in the space of the undecidable and is not haunted by dreams of unity.

It seems thus that the modernist poets presented above are indeed ill at ease with the comforts of the domestic and homely. However, as Christopher Reed notes, when repeatedly repressed, the ghost of the domestic returns (13) with a vengeance and, as I have demonstrated, it is its spectral rather than material form that becomes a productive site for modernist poetic practice. To quote Julian Wolfreys, "a spectre haunts modernity, and the spectral is at the heart of any narrative of the modern" (2–3). Frost, Stevens and Moore certainly have learnt to live with their ghosts. Frost seems to corroborate Michel de Certeau's convinction that "haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (108), as his poem thrives in the ruins and disintegration of domesticity, where loss and dispossession represented as an abandoned house, haunted by spectres of wholeness, creates a desire for a poetic extension and coherence of being. These, for Frost, can be found in the ordering capacities of language, integrations of metaphor and form. The trace of the cellar hole in his poetry serves also to trigger the intersections of memory and emotion, which seem to be out of grasp or inarticulate, making space for contact between the external world and the self. Stevens, in turn, uncovers language as a more ambiguous dwelling, in which drifting and withholding of sense, its spectral trembling, to borrow a hauntological term, becomes a peculiar mode of confronting reality and a new form of metaphysics. While Frost's poem is a directive, implying a sense of guidance and destination, Stevens's is a house of spectral and spectacular secrets, with language functioning as veils or theatrical curtains that both reveal and conceal meaning, and take us to the limits of perception, figuration and interpretation. The metaphor of the curtain, combined with the tropes of the sublime informing his poem, imply also that our acts of perception and cognition are always circumscribed and framed, and thus never free of the commands of ghosts or the force of their secrets. The latter in Stevens' work elude final coherence, for the "fluent mundo" of negotiated meanings will not be contained, always pressing against familiar categories and transparencies of sense. Finally, Moore's chameleon is one of the most imaginatively apparitional beings in her oeuvre, functioning as a figure of the spectral agency of modernist poetry, which is most at home in continuous acts of occlusion, displacement, epistemic inventiveness, readjustment and redefinition. As noted by Esther Peeren, "the specter stands for that which never simply *is*, and thus escapes the totalizing logic of conventional cognitive and hermeneutic operations" (10, emphasis original). The lizard's uncanny materiality and intermittent visibility, which results from its productive fusion of being and becoming, subvert the image of dwelling as belonging, rootedness and boundedness; instead, it demonstrates the porousness of the boundaries between the familiar and the unknown, the self and the other, identity and nonidentity. The chameleon does not assimilate otherness; rather, it thrives in the non-appropriative relation to it: in the strategic necessity of continuous transformation, a repetition with a difference. As such, it becomes the most flexible trope of the modernist effort to grasp the inherent instability of language and the world.

WORKS CITED

Ambroży, Paulina. *(Un)Concealing the Hedgehog: Modernist and Postmodernist American Poetry and Contemporary Critical Theories.* Poznan: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2012.

María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds. *The Spectralities Reader.* Bloomsbury. New York and London, 2013.

María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities." *The Spectralities Reader.* Ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 1–27.

María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. "The Spectral Turn." *The Spectralities Reader.* New York and London: Bloomsbury. Ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. 2013. 31–36.

Carroll, Joseph. *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International.* 1993. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Frost, Robert. *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. New York: The Library of America, 1995.

Heidegger, Martin. *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity.* Trans. John van Buren. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought.* Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. 15–86.

Jameson, Fredric. "Marx's Purloined Letter", *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx.* Ed. Michael Sprinker. London: Verso, 1999. 26–67.

Kendall, Tim. *The Art of Robert Frost.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Leavell, Linda. *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.

Lentricchia, Frank. *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self.* Durham, N.C. Duke University Press, 1975.

Malpas, Jeff. *Heidegger's Topology.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008.

McArthur, Marit J. *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery: The House Abandoned.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Moore, Marianne. *The Complete Poems.* New York: The Macmillan Company / The Viking Press, 1967.

Moore, Marianne. *Collected Poems.* New York: MacMillan, 1961.

Peeren, Esther. *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Poirier, Richard. *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Reed, Christopher. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Santner, Eric. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald.* Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Spurr, David. "Architecture in Frost and Stevens". *Journal of Modern Literature* 28. 3 (2005): 72–86.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems.* New York: Vintage Books, 1982.

Thompson, Lawrence Roger. *Robert Frost: A Biography.* New York: Henry Holt & Co. Inc., 1988.
Thoreau, Henry, David. *Walden; or Life in the Woods.* Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1995.
Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature.* London: Palgrave, 2002.
Werness, Hope, B. "Chameleon." *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art.* New York: The Continuum Publishing Group. 2006. 82–83.