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How the (Un)Dead Became Modern: Supernatural Parodies of Modernity

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Abstract

This article focuses on nineteenth-century supernatural short fiction and its intersections with the urban in the European modern context. Through readings of texts by John Hollingshead, Charles Dickens and Flor O'Squarr, among others, this research addresses a form of the urban fantastic that employs satire and parody to reflect on the modern city project. In my analysis I compare different characters belonging to the ghost story tradition but whose traits relate to the discourses on progress and on being "a modern citizen". As I aim to show, character construction, and how character relates to the urban context, underscores the question of what it is to be a modern ghost and, implicitly, what makes a successful (or failed) "modern" supernatural story.

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1. Introduction

When we think about the modern city in nineteenth-century narratives, our immediate literary references point us to authors such as Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant or Benito Pérez Galdós. Their realist novels documented the unprecedented renovations of urban space and occupy nowadays a central position in the literary canon. Classical approaches to literary urban studies (Ameel, 2022: 3-5) have greatly overlooked more experimental, shorter texts that the same writers produced using the fantastic mode. Following the studies on the fantastic by Pierre-George Castex (1951), Roger Caillois (1965), Tzvetan Todorov (1970), Irène Bessière (1974), Rosalba Campra (2008), Roger Bozzetto (2005) and David Roas (2018), the fantastic is understood in this article as a specific aesthetic form of the supernatural and not an umbrella term for any non-mimetic feature (cf. Rabkin 1976, Hume 1984, Attebery 1992, Armitt 1996). I will therefore only discuss texts that frame the plot within a recognisable, realist world, with an impossible element (for example a ghost) that irrupts in the logic of this mimetic diegesis. In particular, all the short stories I analyse are set in identifiable European cities, such as London and Paris.

The "happy marriage of supernaturalism and modernity", to employ Clery's expression (1995: 5), is not a coincidence. The increased democratization and availability of culture, particularly of popular culture products and venues led to the fantastic being read and watched by larger audiences. An increasingly literate middle class benefited from the lowering of printing costs and had access to serialized novels, newspapers, periodicals and literary magazines that regularly published fictions of the fantastic. The circulation of translations also led to this popularization of the fantastic, in particular of the French translations of E.T. A. Hoffmann's supernatural tales (García, 2021: 11-16).[1]

[1] Some of the ideas in this section were originally developed in *The Modern Fantastic: A Tale of Two Cities* (García, 2021: 1-35).

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This emergence of the fantastic across European cultures was paralleled by the dramatic urban renovations giving rise to a 'modernized' experience of the city, cleared, rationalized, improved with greater sanitary infrastructures and political stability. This paradoxical tandem evolution can be explained as the (artistically fruitful) coexistence of a dyad that Richard Lehan (1998: 84-91) calls the Apollonian versus the Dionysian drives in the city. The literature of the fantastic bears witness to the co-existence of two city models. While scientific positivism celebrated the city of lights—the world city to be exhibited as a model of rationalism— the fantastic attested to a resistance to this rationalism. On the one hand, there was Haussmann's vision of Paris, the paradigm of sanitized urban space. A triumph of scientific progress. On the other, the rise of occultist practices, such as mesmerism and magnetism, that demonstrated a reluctance to surrender to dominant positivist discourses. On the one hand, the World Exhibitions showcasing the advances in science by modern, civilized, metropolitan societies. On the other, societies such as the famous Society for Psychical Research in London (since 1882) are founded to investigate phenomena that escape the confines of reason. With the purpose of systematizing the paranormal, the SPRL held landmark projects such as the Committee on Haunted Houses and a Census of Hallucinations in London. This tension between naturalistic explanations of phenomena and the pervasiveness of paranormal beliefs in industrialized societies—in other words, between the rational and irrational city—provided fertile ground for an unprecedented production of fantastic fiction. A fatigue with tales of remote castles and decadent mansions led to the city becoming a setting for fantastic plots with the urban fantastic taking hold across European countries throughout the entire nineteenth century. Some of the most representative works of the urban fantastic in its shorter forms were offered by Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas, Guy de Maupassant and Jean Lorrain in France; Georges Rodenbach and Charles Flor O'Squarr in Belgium; Rhoda Broughton, Sheridan Le Fanu, Charlotte Riddell, Amelia B. Edwards, R. L. Stevenson and Charles

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Dickens in the UK and Ireland; and Benito Pérez Galdós, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón and Emilia Pardo Bazán in Spain.

In this article my goal is to explore some of the supernatural nineteenth-century short stories that portray this tension between the rational and the irrational city. I will address a form of the urban fantastic that employs satire and parody to reflect on the modern city project. In my analysis I compare different characters belonging to the ghost story tradition but whose traits relate to the discourses on progress and on being "a modern citizen". As I aim to show, character construction, and how character relates to the urban context, evokes the question of what it is to be a modern ghost and, implicitly, what makes a successful (or failed) 'modern' supernatural story.

2. Fantastic perspectives on modern transport expansion

2.1 "Everybody seems desirous of riding or walking across my back": *Pity a Poor Bridge* by John Hollingshead (1859)

Pity a Poor Bridge is authored by John Hollingshead, a regular collaborator in *Household Words* (1850-1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859-1895), the two periodicals directed by Charles Dickens and key publishing venues on everyday urban life during the second half of the century. Published in *All the Year Round* in 1859 and later included in Hollingshead's collection *Odd Journeys in and Out of London* (1860), *Pity a Poor Bridge* offers an unusual point of view on urban mobilities as well as an original treatment of the fantastic. Hollingshead inverts the classical scheme of a human subject narrating his or her transit around the city with a vehicle. Instead in this piece, the relation between human narrator and transport object is dismantled. The entity that addresses us, the focalizer, is the infrastructure employed by the modern citizen to transit urban space. The narrative is delivered by the New London Bridge, complaining in the first person about the amount of transport that it has to hold on its back since it was built.

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The tale opens with the following statement: "I believe that that, by this time, the public is pretty familiar with me; if not, I know this, that I am pretty familiar with the public. I have carried them on my back now for eight-and-twenty years, and my ancestors have carried them for more than eight centuries" (1859: 379). The bridge considers itself "overworked" (379) and complains about the everyday traffic, which has turned it into "the most overloaded thoroughfare in the whole world" (379). This unusual narrator tells us about his back pain due to this "endless procession" (379) of vehicles and pedestrians and proceeds with a detailed inventory of transport: "[A]n average day of four-and-twenty hours, during the present year (1859), will witness one hundred and sixty-eight thousand persons passing across me, from either side: one hundred and seven thousand on foot, and sixty-one thousand in vehicles" (379). It then laments the neglect of the political authorities: "I, in this present scorching month of July, am having my back mended after a severe course of heavy and crowded work, and am waiting for something to turn up that may improve my prospects and condition" (379).

The bridge's complaint draws attention to the excessive traffic that circulates chaotically in the city of London and to the deterioration that its infrastructures have suffered as a consequence. This neglected, stressed and injured bridge, on the verge of a burnout, begs for mercy, as the title indicates. In this plea to the reader, the bridge's testimony seeks to mobilize the British population to demand urgent measures to improve the transport infrastructure of modern London. From this original voice, Hollingshead offers us an unusual testimony of the transport crisis in which the city of London is plunged, in a plea of public action to improve it.

2.2 "Hopelessly impeding his progress!": *A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering* by Charles Dickens (1851)

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Charles Dickens, a prolific ghost story author alongside his famous London novels, published a remarkable supernatural text that worked as a satire of the state of transport in the modern city, in this case, of the rapid urban expansion of the railway system in Britain. Similarly to *Pity a Poor Bridge*, the fantastic element is not the classical ghost or monster. Dicken's tale, entitled *A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering* featured in *Household Words* in 1851. It offers a fantastic scenario that preempts the Kafkian nightmares of bureaucratic dead ends and enclosures. Dickens employs the fantastic motif of a network that becomes a prison for the individual who tries to navigate it, due to this network's disproportionate, disorienting expansion.

The story portrays the anxiety and frustration of Mr. Lost of the Maze, a citizen who is forever trapped on the British railway network, going from one station to another, victim of sudden line cuts, construction works and its consequent schedule changes and platform closures. This character is introduced in the first line as "a gentleman of credit and of average ability" (1851: 361), emphasizing his ordinary attributes and strengthening the bond between character and reader: Mr. Lost, undergoing this extraordinary episode, could be any of us. On an ordinary day, this character leaves his home in Warwickshire for London on a business trip. As he arrives to London, he closes the relevant business deal and heads to Worcester for another business trip. This is when his nightmare starts. Mr. Lost's first attempt to leave the capital is prevented by a barrier that cuts the railway line "hopelessly impeding his progress!" (362), a formula that is repeated several times in the story.

Mr. Lost is then forced to modify his route incessantly to avoid railway cuts and construction works that have turned the map of train lines into (literally) a labyrinth. He does arrive to some destination but never to the one he intended to get to:

> He knew where he wanted to go, and he knew he couldn't go where he wanted. He was taken to Manchester, Bangor, Liverpool, Windermere, Dundee and Montrose, Edinburgh and Glasgow. He repeatedly found himself

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> in the Isle of Man; believes he was, several times, all over Wales; knows he was at Kingstown and Dublin, but has only a general idea how he got there. (362)

Mr Lost's reaction also bears Kafkian undertones, in that it echoes Gregor Samsa's naturalized reaction to his supernatural metamorphosis (1915). In *A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering*, the protagonist blames a "nameless foe", for "cutting off the communication between one town and another, and carrying out a system of barricade" (362) but he does not seek further explanation. He surrenders to this illogical situation with abnegation. Instead of placing the focus on trying to find a rational explanation, his reaction is to attempt to navigate this circumstance. With no success, however. The ending depicts Mr. Lost confined to a hotel near Euston Station in London, in a delirious state and just babbling a word, "Bradshaw", in reference to the British railway guide containing the relevant train timetables and line maps.

With this tale Dickens configures a hyperbolic parody of the modern railway and its incessant development during the mid-nineteenth century; an episode that, as the title indicates, is presented as one of "extraordinary suffering" for those who live it. Foreshadowing Simmel's famous thesis of urban modernity as hyperstimulation in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), the short story portrays the rapid expansion of the railway system and shows that this speed is not adjusted to the citizen's mental capacity to process these rapid changes.

Beyond this interpretation of the jailed-network metaphor, Dicken's text presents more nuanced readings that touch upon the image of an individual who is permanently displaced and in displacement. Mr. Lost never reaches his destination. He embodies a form of hypermobility, or a condemnation to ceaseless mobility. His situation is described as an "imprisonment" (362) and as "torture" (362): "His face was wan, his voice much weakened, his hair scanty and grey, the whole man expressive of fatigue and endurance. It is an affecting instance of the influence of uneasiness and depression on the mind of Mr. Lost"

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(363). The loss of his sense of direction develops into the loss of his sense of self. Mr. Lost becomes a captive of this permanent wandering in a maze of railway dead-ends, knots and barricades, doomed to perpetual movement and, literally, condemned to never reaching a place to be.

3. City ghosts: between tradition and modernization

3.1 "When you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots on earth…": *The Lawyer and the Ghost* by Charles Dickens (1837)

The ghost, one of the most well-known figures of the fantastic, may not be traditionally associated with the urban condition. The short stories of the next two sections show otherwise. The discourse of modernity revolves around an assessment on how adequate or obsolete this character is in the context of the modern city. The discussed texts implicitly or explicitly examine what modern ghosts should be like.

One of the most poignant portrayals of an inadequate ghost is presented by Dickens in his ghost story *The Lawyer and the Ghost* (1836) featuring in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) alongside other famous fantastic tales such as *The Ghosts of the Mail*.

As the title indicates, the protagonist of *The Lawyer and the Ghost* is a London lawyer who is currently broke and can only afford to rent an old shabby little room in London. The surprisingly affordable rental price of this room is due to a ghost that haunts it.[2]

By means of frame tale, the narrator provides an introduction that emphasizes the shabbiness of such place in detail:

[2] The subgenre of urban haunted-house narratives is particularly popular in the British Victorian ghost stories of the mid-nineteenth century. The hauntings of this corpus are city houses and apartments that reflect the pressure involved in finding accommodation in the overpriced and overcrowded Victorian London. In addition to Dicken's *The Lawyer and the Ghost* (1837) there are further tales authored by Sheridan Le Fanu, Rhoda Broughton and Charlotte Riddell (see García, 2021: 72-75).

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> I knew a man- let me see- forty years ago now - who took an old, damp, rotten set of chambers, in one of the most ancient inns, that had been shut up and empty for years and years before. There were lots of old women's stories about the place, and it certainly was very far from being a cheerful one; but he was poor, and the rooms were cheap, and that would have been quite sufficient reason for him, if they had been ten times worse than they really were. (330)

With these introductory lines, the narrator presents himself as an immediate acquaintance of the protagonist, as opposed to somebody who has heard this story second hand (or "women's story"). This device serves to emphasize the verisimilitude of the fantastic occurrence to be narrated in the coming scenes.

The narrator then leads to the actual story, which might be well-known by readers familiar with ghost stories at the time: an "unearthly appearance" (331) irrupts in the tenant's apartment. The ghost tells its story with the aim of expelling the tenant. In this room the ghost was ambushed by "two wily harpies" (331) and his "wordly ruin was worked" (331). Having died of grief, the ghost is bound to this place ever since: "This apartment is mine: leave it to me" (332).

So far, the tale follows the typical ghost story line of a new tenant that moves to a place in which an unfair act took place and is forced to leave by the haunting of a ghost that reclaims ownership to this place. But Dickens introduces an innovative component at this stage, which the title had already hinted upon. The tale is not about the ghost but about "the lawyer and the ghost", thus about their interaction. The tenant engages in a dialogue with the apparition, politely giving him advice on how to improve his very condition of haunter. This dialogue concentrates the humoristic undertones of the tale. The lawyer's logic, "equally applicable to most of the ghost I ever heard of" (332), is the following: if ghosts can traverse material space and haunt any place of their liking, if they have the ability to visit "*the fairest spots of earth*" (332), why would they "return exactly to the very places where [they] have been most miserable" (332)? Consequently, the lawyer advises the ghost to take possession of better and brighter places, than his London apartment.

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> 'Well', said the tenant, 'it does appear to me somewhat inconsistent, that when you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots of earth - for I suppose space is nothing to you - you should always return to the place where you have been most miserable.'
>
> 'that's very true; I never thought of that before', said the ghost.
>
> 'You see, sir,' pursued the tenant, 'this is a very uncomfortable room. From the appearance of that press, I should be disposed to say not wholly free from bugs; and I really think you might find more comfortable quarters, to say nothing of the climate of London, which is extremely disagreeable.' (332)

Equally in a polite manner, the ghost admits this eye-opening irrevocable logic. "It never struck me till now; I'll try a change of air directly" (332-333). In the final scene, as the ghost vanishes, the tenant kindly asks him to spread this advice to its other ghostly colleagues, "now engaged in haunting old empty houses" (333), which could transform their supernatural lives for the better if they can find more comfortable venues to haunt: "'I will,' replied the ghost; 'we must be dull fellows - very dull fellows, indeed; I can't imagine how we can have been so stupid.' (333)".

With these final words, Dickens alludes to and dismantles a long history of ghost story clichés. First, the ghost is not portrayed as a scary apparition but as a kind creature, willing to engage in dialogue and learn from the tenants' perspective. Second, the bond between the haunted place and supernatural creature, provides a twist that even encourages the whole army of ghosts to think for themselves and assert their agency over where to live. By admitting the historical "stupidity" of ghosts in choosing their venues, Dickens points to an exhaustion in ghost story formulas and questions one of its most identifiable traits: the haunted place as the place of previous trauma.

3.2 "Ghosts have improved themselves over time": *Vision* by Charles Flor O'Squarr (1885)

Further texts in the later part of the nineteenth century exploit this subversion of ghost story conventions by presenting a parody of the classical ghost. *Vision*, by Belgium writer Charles Flor O'Squarr in his volume *Les Fantômes: étude cruelle* (*Ghosts: A Cruel Study*, 1885) offers an

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excellent example. In this text the apparition is a polite and well-dressed gentleman that mistakes his victim in Paris. In a first-person narrative, the protagonist addresses us to recall his own experience with an apparition. The intertextual references to revenant literature are set out in the initial paragraph:

> Do you not believe in revenants? You are mistaken.
> Certainly, the ghosts of today are no longer the fantastic apparitions of the past who would appear at midnight, close to the cemetery, to terrorize some old-fashioned villagers; ghosts have improved themselves over time, they have advanced with progress and while they still enter the homes of the living without invitation at least they now don the impeccable attire of true gentlemen. (1885: 168, my translation)[3]

The narrator then recalls the first encounter with the revenant some years ago, as he heard some knocks on the window. This initial meeting reproduces the genre conventions of the frightening supernatural meeting: "In front of my window, in the void, a long white shape was suspended, stopped. It was a tragic moment. Between the apparition and me look was exchanged, one of those looks that before the fight undergo the two opponents in a pistol duel; an anguish and a challenge."[4]

These conventions are then subverted as the characterization of the revenant unfolds. Firstly, this is observed in his good manners and modern attire.

> Contrary to legend, he did not appear not wrapped in a shroud, but clothed. Dressed up, you can hear me fine. That is to say, in his dress, - which was not a costume, but only a transparent vapor – I unraveled a modern design, jacket cuts. The overall impression, physiognomy and clothing,

[3] «Vous ne croyez pas aux revenants? Vous avez tort. Certes, les revenants ne sont plus ces apparitions fantastiques d'autrefois, surgissant au coup de minuit, dans les environs des cimetières, pour pétrifier de terreur quelque villageois attardé; les fantômes se sont perfectionnés avec le temps, ils ont marché avec le progrès, et, s'ils pénètrent encore chez les vivants sans se faire annoncer, au moins gardent-ils dans le monde la tenue irréprochable des vrais gentlemen.»

[4] «Devant ma fenêtre, dans le vide, une longue forme blanche était suspendue, arrêtée. Ce fut un instant tragique. Entre l'apparition et moi un regard fut échangé, un de ces regards qu'avant le combat subissent les deux adversaires dans un duel au pistolet ; une angoisse et un défi.»

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> was favorable. Without a doubt, I was in the presence of the shadow of a well brought up man. (169)[5]

The revenant then kindly asks the victim for permission to enter his lodgings and presents his apologies for the inconvenience: "'I am unwelcome, no doubt. … Sorry to bother you at this time. … Believe me that. … No, I'm really confused.' It sounded like an elector asking for an apostille from his deputy."[6]

A central part of the comical effect is generated by the naturalization of this supernatural visit. The victim's reaction to the ghostly apparition also breaks with the established trope of the terrifying haunting and engages in a dialogue with him to express this alleged misunderstanding: "My dear ghost, I said, […]. Barely dead and you have already adopted ideas from the otherworld. But, my boy, we no longer practice the superstition of the fantastic. […] I am a child of the nineteenth century and I do not believe in the supernatural" (171). As this statement shows, the narrator presents himself as modern citizen ("a child of the nineteenth century"), inhabiting a period in which science has displaced supernatural beliefs. The narrator treats the revenant with courtesy, even rejoicing in his companionship as the revenant follows him around Paris. The revenant is invited to join the narrator in his flânerie around the city, to mingle with the crowd and to accompany him at social and professional gatherings. The revenant is confused, polite, well-intended and lingers in the city until he apologetically acknowledges his mistake. By presenting a characterization of the apparition that is in stark opposition to the expected tropes of revenant literature, *Vision* provides a humorous revision of haunted-tale tropes and a

[5] «Contrairement à la légende, il ne se présentait pas enveloppé d'un suaire, mais habillé. Habillé, vous m'entendez bien. C'est-à-dire que dans son costume, – qui n'était pas un costume, mais seulement une transparente vapeur – je démêlais un dessin moderne, des coupes de veston. L'impression d'ensemble, physionomie et vêtement, était favorable. À n'en pas douter, je me trouvais en présence de l'ombre d'un garçon bien élevé.» (169)

[6] «Je suis importun, sans doute…. Désolé de vous déranger à cette heure…. Croyez bien que…. Non, je suis vraiment confus… » On eût dit un électeur sollicitant une apostille de son député.» (169)

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modern subversion of the story of a revenant that appears to a victim to avenge some past injustice. While the plot is not entirely innovative, the construction of the characters and the setting most definitely are. The object of this haunting, a modern citizen and man of politics, is well versed in the traditions of the supernatural and shows neither fear nor intimidation at the sight of the ghost. These are two modern gentlemen (a human and a ghost) who resolve the misunderstanding that has arisen between them with the urbanity expected of the time.

3.3 "People have grown used to my rustle, accustomed to my rattle, habituated to my clatter, familiar with my ring": *A Monotonous 'Sensation'* (anonymous 1863)

The Lawyer and the Ghost and *Vision* presented ghosts who engaged in a dialogue with their haunted victims and were capable of self-reflection: acknowledging the senseless traditions, in the first case, or their mistakes, in the second. The premise of the self-critical ghost is also central in the short story *A Monotonous 'Sensation'*, featuring anonymously in the periodical *All the Year Round* in 1863. This text which also works as a summary and parodical criticism of haunted-house tales.

The tale starts by reinforcing the genre clichés: "A certain house at the corner of an obscure but tolerably respectable street in London was said to be troubled. The troublous signs were of the usual kind" (1863: 406). In this house, doors and windows slam shut unexpectedly, tenants have reported the sounds of eery chains, and bells and a long list of tropes that follow the conventions of haunted-house narratives. This property is in London and is cheaper than the average market price because of the ghost that comes with it. Over several paragraphs, the reader finds out that there have been a series of tenants who have rented this property and have left it after a short period frightened by the apparition:

> The effect of public opinion on the marketable value of the house was practical enough. The owner of the property, who had tried to restore it to good repute by offering it for a

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> short term of years at the low rent of nothing a quarter, with a clause that he himself would keep it in repair, could not, even on those easy conditions, find a permanent tenant, and had abandoned it in despair, so that for a long time the frontage exhibited a combination of smashed glass and accumulated dirt, that was quite sufficient to breed a collection of ghost stories, if none had been already in circulation. (407)

At that point the first twist is introduced. Over time, the newer tenants have grown used to the spirit and – out of financial reasons– prefer to stay there and rent that London place for a cheaper price than a place without a ghost for a much higher rent. The Frenchman who argued that "would rather pay £30 for the house with its chains and its silks than £50 for a similar establishment without such incumbrances" (407) is after a while succeeded by like-minded tenants who follow the same financial logic. For instance, an auctioneer, a Yankee speculator and an "Epicurean" who only wanted the place for office spaces "and did not care sixpence what happened upon them after nightfall" (408). As the haunted house increases in its market value, the omniscient narrator raises the question of whether this meant "the end of the ghost" (408).

As readers, we are made aware of the ghost's perception of these changes. Frustrated by the new tenants' indifference to its presence, the ghost, "as active and vigorous as ever" (408), further exaggerates its supposedly terrifying supernatural show, "rustling, rattling, slamming, clattering, and casting shadows without the aid of a substance" (408). However, all this insistent performance is of no use to scare the tenants away. This is when the second twist is introduced. The last scene situates the reader on a Christmas evening, a much-loved timing for ghost stories,[7] with a group of new tenants of the haunted: a company of young actors who use the premises to rehearse. Exhausted by the fruitless effort, the ghost enters the scene and pronounces a wonderful closing monologue demanding that they take pity on him:

[7] Many of these texts on city hauntings, including *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens, were published as part of much-loved Christmas special issues. On Christmas specials and their relation to the Victorian ghost story, see Tara Moore's chapter *Ghost stories at Christmas* (2009: 81–98).

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> True, I am only the ghost, and much do I deserve your pity. Many years ago I resolved to make a sensation in this neighborhood, and I effected my purpose chiefly by means of the noises, which most of you know but too well. But people have grown used to my rustle, accustomed to my rattle, habituated to my clatter, familiar with my ring. Even my shadow, my grand effect, scarcely elicits a remark. My invention has been exhausted long ago, and noisy as I may be, I cannot command attention. If any one here among you, having greatly distinguished himself in youth, thinks he can go on for ever on the strength of his early reputation, by simply repeating himself, without giving any new direction to his talent, let him take warning by me, or he will find in time that he is only a ghost. (408)

The ghost self-reflectively considers that as it stands its features has gone out of fashion. Addressing this group of young actors, it makes a plea for renewal because simple repetition of a formerly successful character will over time lead to exhaustion, to a "monotonous sensation" as the title indicates. This monologue also offers a remarkable intertextual dimension that parodies commonplace motifs of the fantastic. The ghost's closing statement reflects the awareness of the monotony of fantastic tropes associated with the haunted-house genre. The succession of similar formulas, such as "accustomed to", "habituated to", familiar with", "exhausted", "simply repeating himself", point to this tradition fatigue that was similarly highlighted in the other discussed short stories.

4. Conclusion: "Modern readers must have modern ghosts" (*The Latest Thing in Ghosts*, anonymous, 1862)

In an anonymous short story entitled *The Latest Thing in Ghosts* (1862), one of the protagonists notes that current apparitions "have made immense progress. Ruined castles have given place to railway stations" to the point that "Modern readers must have modern ghosts" (101). This gentleman advises a writer friend of his to renew the inventory of ghosts in the stories he writes, otherwise he will not engage modern readers. Modern ghosts must reflect the changes that have altered their urban environments and that I briefly outlined in

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the introductory section to this article. Thus, a "modern spectre" (100) "of the very newest style" (101)

> drives to a railway station in broad daylight, takes a ticket (first-class ticket; no ghost has yet been known to travel second), gets into a carriage […] borrows your Bradshaw, begs you to tell it how it can get to A-, is sorry to trouble you, but it cannot understand Bradshaw […], converses with you fluently on various subjects, and shakes hands with you affectionately at parting (101).

The stories discussed in this article emphasize a need of renewal of the classic commonplaces of the fantastic. They do so by situating their plots in an urban setting that has undergone profound transformations and to which traditional ghosts must adjust. The literary texts highlight the need to create renewed characters that are attuned to the expectations of modern readers. The character-construction often distances itself from the classic tropes of the Gothic genre, for example by presenting ghosts and revenants who are well-mannered and well-dressed, who engage in conversation with their victims and who are self-reflective and critical of the traits they have inherited. By so doing, the discussed texts parody some of the established tropes of the ghost story tradition and propose aesthetic innovations because "modern readers must have modern ghosts" (anon. 1862). The analysed corpus also preempts some traits commonly associated with more contemporary expressions of the fantastic, namely the "neofantastic" (Alazraki 1990) and the "postmodern fantastic" (García 2015; Roas 2018). These traits, which I outlined throughout this article, include the use of humor, the presentation of the ghost's voice and perspective, the intertextual discourse and a certain banalization of the horror effect. Ultimately, the argument presented in this article questions the novelty or distinctiveness of the formal aspects attributed to newer forms of the fantastic and shows that after all, well-intended, funny, emotional and pathetic ghosts were "the latest thing" over a century ago.

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