

A Reckoning with Specters in John Banville's *Frames Trilogy*

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Abstract

John Banville's *Frames Trilogy*, comprising the novels *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), presents an account of the ghosts existent in both the reality and art surrounding one's life. In a riveting first-person narration, Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist in all the novels, describes spectral apparitions in works of art and is haunted by his violent, ghostly past. The inextricable oscillation between reality and art, as studied previously, for instance, by Anja Müller (2004) and Neil Murphy (2024) is revealed in an ekphrastic manner throughout the novels. Here I attempt to unlock the trilogy from an alternative, hauntological perspective that is meant to shed new, spectral light on these two realms. As a philosophical and literary approach theorized by Jacques Derrida in his influential *Specters of Marx* (1994), hauntology will be used as a theoretical framework to scrutinize the ghosts that appear to Montgomery in works of art. I will thereby perform a hauntological reading where the functions of the ghosts will be analysed in each novel and I will thus illuminate details about the ghosts generating the aforementioned oscillation in connection to Montgomery's violent past, as well as determine what these ghosts finally amount to for the narrator.

Key words: Ghosts; Hauntology; Reality; Ekphrasis; Art.

Introduction

The *Frames Trilogy* by John Banville constitutes an impressive, captivating way of looking at the world through art. *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995) entail the issue of navigating the world of art in a spectral interplay. The narrative centers on Freddie Montgomery's oscillation between two realms, those of reality and art, and the spectral presences encountered in both of these worlds. It is also important to notice that reality and art constitute a dichotomy or duality, but they also exist in an inextricable relationship with each other, a certain oscillation, in terms of how Freddie perceives the two of them and how this oscillation is determined by his ghosts. While reality and art might initially seem to form a dichotomy, Banville portrays them as deeply interwoven, with Freddie's perception shaped by the haunting presences that blur the boundaries between these two. This oscillation is further complicated by the hauntological framework, as

Freddie's encounters with art are haunted by unresolved tensions – between life and death, presence and absence, and memory and immediacy.

Hauntology is meant to investigate the ghosts that Montgomery finds in both of the worlds he navigates, while this theory broadly investigates the ghosts created by the human mind, especially in literary works. Here, it will also constitute the theoretical framework of this study and the most pertinent approach for analysing the trilogy. Ekphrasis refers to the compelling description of works of art and analysing it in light of this theory only further reveals the paintings' hauntological prowess. While ekphrasis inherently engages with presence and absence, the described artworks are both evoked and absent, existing as a trace in the narrative. Hauntology complements this dynamic by focusing on the spectral of the art – the way in which something no longer needs to be present to exert influence. For Banville, hauntology highlights how Freddie's encounters with ghosts are haunted by the absent, yet present figures of the paintings, thus blurring the lines between reality and artistic representation.

The second novel, fittingly named *Ghosts*, allows for a deeper analysis of the issue scrutinized here through the hauntological framework, as Freddie is haunted by ghosts found in works of art. The haunting reaches a new level in the third novel, where Freddie's encounters with spectrality are more consciously articulated. Even though Freddie's acknowledgement of the woman's status as a ghost is not overtly expressed, the murder in the first novel and the future overall haunting that occurs to him for the rest of plot in the novels speak for themselves as for the role of the woman as a ghost in the protagonist's life. Indeed, acknowledging Freddie's spectral failure to distinguish between the real woman and the one in the painting in the first novel of the trilogy provides relevant ground for this hauntological analysis by understanding that the woman in the painting's incomplete presence in Montgomery's reality automatically extends her ontological status to that of a ghost.

The theory about the study of ghosts has been initiated by Jacques Derrida (1993) and he explains hauntology by claiming that "this logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of *Being*..." (p. 10). Undoubtedly, the ghosts permeate Freddie's reality, but also the art that steadily surrounds him. This is a mutual and almost intrusive aesthetic for Freddie, but also one that is very telling of the spectral air that lingers throughout the novels. In addition, it would be suitable to expand on some of Derrida's reflections on ghosts, spectrality and the ways in which they enter the protagonist's consciousness, as paralleled with the philosopher's ideas in *Specters of Marx* (1994). Derrida indicates that the ghosts can mean "a crowd, if not masses, the horde, or society, or else some population of ghosts with or without a people, some community with or without a leader – but also the *less than one* of pure and simple dispersion" (p. 3). This unity of ghosts is depicted here in the relentless control they have

on Montgomery's mind ever since he lays eyes on the painting of the woman with gloves. The novels suggest that neither reality nor art offers a stable ground for understanding the world. Freddie's oscillation reveals the limitations of both realms in providing truth or coherence. This reflects a fluid, interdependent relationship where each realm informs and disrupts the other. Thematically, this duality is investigated by the author in order to challenge the boundaries of Freddie's fractured psyche, where guilt and trauma manifest both his external world and his aesthetic obsessions.

Derrida's hauntology investigates the persistence of ghosts – the specters of presence and absence. Since this study implies a hauntological reading of the novels, it is also worth investigating how hauntological reading has been applied in recent literary criticism. Derrida's argument on hauntology will be adapted here to that of the novels in the trilogy, especially that of the ghost of history returning to haunt the protagonist. This article seeks to uncover how Freddie's ghosts are not merely psychological or personal, but also aesthetic and existential, as well as inextricably linked to the tension between absence and presence, reality and art. It also aims to investigate the implications of art as a haunting medium, analyzing how the paintings in the trilogy evoke spectral presences and complicate the boundaries between the real and the represented. This focus on art as a conduit for spectrality represents a significant departure from Derrida's focus on socio-political hauntings.

1. *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*

The first instalment of the trilogy, *The Book of Evidence*, unfolds with Montgomery's confession about his crime and the ghosts that initiated it, alongside what I call here the oscillation between reality and art.¹ Beginning with an account of the events from his life in prison, a "dramatic monologue", including elements from his violent past, it is meant to build upon the first ghostly encounter with art within the trilogy (Müller 2004, p. 188). Montgomery weaves elements from his previous life with the ones from his life in prison, as he gradually builds on the tension that leads to the moment of his crime. Regardless, he does not seem to desire redemption or to feel any guilt for having committed murder. Montgomery's first ghosts are the woman in the painting and her glance, which constitute the very first ghosts behind Montgomery's long series of hauntings. He admits to the painting's air of ghostly lifelessness in the very first description of it and yet, he is not deterred from stealing it, but rather he is even more intrigued by it, wishing to give it life.² Derrida's view on hauntology and oscillation would incorporate this idea of a certain oscillation between reality and art, therefore either of these

¹ All the parenthetical references to and block quotes from the novels are to the 1989, 1993 and 1995 editions.

² The *Portrait of a Woman* by Willem Drost in Budapest Museum of Fine Arts is the real life painting which may have constituted the inspiration behind Banville's fascination with this painting and its crucial role in this novel.

are elements bound to act in a ghostly duality formed by the ghosts, which cause Montgomery to land into either the one or the other. His impossibility to distinguish between these two realms is nonetheless perpetuated by the ghostliness that the painted figures represent in all three novels.

Similarly, ghosts entail being not alive, yet still somehow ineluctably present, therefore the idea of a presence in the absence seems like an enticing perspective to analyse the way in which ghosts enter Montgomery's reality. Just as Rahimi asserts, a hauntological reading provides a useful lens for understanding how the novel unearths ghosts residing in the silent spaces of its narrative. Freddie's fragmented perception – whether haunted by the murdered woman, the figures in the paintings, or his own guilt – reflects the scholar's notion of spectral entities "animating" the psyche of the protagonist. This dynamic highlights the ghostly forces driving Freddie's oscillation between reality and art. The ghosts' absence could also be "the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing", while the woman in the painting and her glance begin to constitute a haunting gestalt in Montgomery's mind (Derrida 2004, p. 113). Throughout the plot of the first novel, Montgomery's intimations of thought in the reality and art oscillation are mostly pervasive in his descriptions of the *Woman*, while his oscillation is determined by her and her gaze, which act as spectral energies for him. This painting represents the beginning of Montgomery's teetering on this ghostly art trail, which leads to his gruesome and inexplicable crime because of the oscillation the woman and her gaze prompt him towards.³

This is also the first time the readers can perceive how this oscillation works for Montgomery. It is therefore relevant to establish the role of these two ghosts in Montgomery's life, which would be that they initiate the haunting and lead him commit murder. This is the first instantiation of the oscillation or the work of the ghosts, and the painting of the woman causes him even to kill a real woman for catching him in the act of stealing it, but what Freddie does not know is that by wishing the *Woman* to live, he will murder the one next to him, the maid at the Behrens estate, Josie Bell. This kind of fascination has been masterly described in hauntological theory, as "this spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority [...] and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion." (Derrida 2006, 6-7).

Whether these be called life and art or reality and paintings, even though not in a limitrophic couplet, they have been previously noticed, while "*The Book of Evidence* brilliantly invests the fictional with a trace of the real [...]" and the painting stolen by Freddie "is based on a self-reflexive fusion of what is stubbornly concrete and what is imaginatively transfigured" (Smith 2018, p. 86). In this article I extend this idea and state that it is the painting which ascertains the oscillation because of the ghostly, enthralling qualities that

³ When mentioning the *Woman*, I refer to the one in the painting.

Montgomery glimpses into it. Contemporary hauntological scholars, such as Rahimi (2021), also imply that “[a hauntological reading] manages to animate a text/subject through an outpouring of ghosts and other spectral entities from the otherwise silent depths of the text/psyche” (p. 4) and here I also attempt to provide an account of the previously unexamined ghosts residing in the depths of the text or in Montgomery’s descriptions of the ghostly figures in the paintings. This nuance could be extended towards a hauntological understanding of Montgomery’s crime, as a result of the oscillation between reality and art, which transcend the frame of the artwork into Freddie’s life. Reality itself is performative or constructed, much like art and the novels depict reality as fragmented or illusory, akin to the interpretive nature of viewing art. This reflects the protagonist’s inner conflicts and the deeply self-reflexive aesthetic of an artwork.

As indicated before, besides teeming with richly artistic elements, this novel’s action is designed around ghosts. In line with this, Anja Müller (2004) observes that “since the ekphrasis in *The Book of Evidence* accentuates precisely the deliberate obliteration of the material framework of a piece of art as a necessary prerequisite for arousal and desire to emerge, it also unmask[s] the alleged presence of the *Woman with Gloves* as an illusion created by the selective ekphrasis that results from this desire” (p. 191). Ekphrasis, meaning the highly detailed description of paintings, is prominent throughout the entire trilogy and it appears in Freddie’s limitrophic ruminations. He clearly acknowledges that “for me she [the maid] was not alive”, therefore she might very well have been a ghost, which he assumed the woman in the painting to be, but also alive enough to kill her, since ghosts are both alive and dead at the same time, thus his inability to distinguish between the *Woman* and the maid.

The painting becomes more than an object; it symbolizes Freddie’s spectral failure and inability to distinguish between the real woman he murders and her artistic representation. It has been observed that “this creative deployment, which in a very curious way explores the power of ekphrastic *energeia*, can be assessed in terms of framing” and beyond using his immersive imaginative skill to describe the painting, Freddie is always drawn into the oscillation between what is real and what is art (Müller 2004, p. 186). In his desire to own the painting, stealing it in a hurry and forcing the maid to follow him are his prerequisites for committing the final act of murder later on, though unbeknownst to him at the time, in the context of the spectral power that the *Woman* emanates, thus causing him to oscillate between reality and art.

2. The Golden World

In the second novel, *Ghosts*, Freddie is an exile on an island off the west coast of Ireland, a decade after the events from *The Book of Evidence*. He now lives together with Professor Kreutznaer – an art historian with a particular interest

in painter Jean Vaublin's life – and his peculiar assistant, Licht. Freddie's interest is aimed towards the investigation of one of Jean Vaublin's paintings, namely *Le monde d'or* or *The Golden World*, "a conflation of two paintings by Watteau, the *Embarkation to Cythera* and *Pierrot*, formerly known as *Gilles*..." (McMinn 2002, p. 140). The emergence of a group of shipwrecked, seemingly ghostly figures on the island seems to wreak havoc in Freddie's world in terms of his past and ghosts. The intimacy he develops with himself and the paintings is different in this novel, as he entertains a feeling of spectral lowliness, having reached a point where he is no longer capable of violence – where ten years of prison had been world enough for him.

Even though ghosts will only further enhance oscillation for him, this time emerging from Montgomery's ekphrastic descriptions of a different, fictive painting.⁴ Vaublin's imagined painting is both a "visual text" and an image in a frame, thus "the two forms become so closely aligned that any sense of hierarchy between word and image is erased" (Murphy 2024, p. 135). The ghostly figures in the paintings' function for the narrator is fulfilled differently this time and besides causing oscillation for Freddie akin to the first novel, they appear to deepen the haunting, since the characters on the island where Montgomery lives and the ones in the painting appear to be counterparts of each other and Freddie's impossibility to realise this entails the oscillation at its strongest point yet.

Furthermore, scholars have also perceived this aspect of the plot's similarity with real life paintings and claim that "the plot of *Ghosts* is designed after the fabled voyage in Watteau's *Embarkation to Cythera*, one of the artist's most enigmatic representations of the *fête galante*, in which a party of lovers and revellers seems to be setting out for, or returning from, the Greek island, home of Aphrodite" (McMinn 2002, p. 140). The same scholar mentions that the painting's motif is "complemented and reinforced by related allusions to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*", Banville paralleling the oddly familiar individuals, newly emerged on the island with the ones in Shakespeare's play and the similar shipwreck (p. 140). Art in the novels functions as a spectral presence throughout, imbuing reality with an otherworldly quality. This suggests that Freddie's understanding of his actions and surroundings is shaped – or haunted – by artistic forms, and their main role here is to deepen Freddie's haunting.

In *Ghosts*, Derrida's idea of spectral multiplicity is vividly realized as Freddie encounters figures that seem to oscillate between the real and the imagined. These characters, like the artworks they resemble, challenge Freddie's perception of reality and reinforce the haunting presence of the past. The spectral dynamics here exemplify Derrida's assertion that ghosts disrupt the stability of the being, forcing a re-evaluation of identity and memory. Montgomery, at times, even articulates his status as a ghost in his own world, someone who willingly chose to disobey the natural course of events that his

⁴ Fictive in the world of the reader.

life could have taken and takes refuge on this island instead, while sensing close scrutiny from his very surroundings:

From my copious reading – what else had I to do, in those first days of so-called freedom, except to read and dream? – I gleaned the following: *I have a habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence.* I had burned my boats, the years were strewn like ashes on the water. I was at rest here, in the calm under the great wave of the world. Yes, I felt at home – I, who thought never again to feel at home anywhere. This does not mean I did not at the same time feel myself to be an outsider. The place tolerated me, that's all. I had the impression of a certain disdain, of everything leaning carefully away from me with averted gaze. The house especially had a frowning, tight-lipped aspect. Or perhaps I am wrong, perhaps what I detected was not contempt, or even disapproval, but something quite other: tactfulness, for instance – inanimate objects seem ever anxious not to intrude – or just a general wish to preserve the forms. (p. 25)

It seems like Montgomery teeters between a world of his own imagining, that of art, and his reality, as expressed here in what he supposes is “his real life”, irretrievably shattered in the aftermath of his crime. This empty feeling of existing as an absence could be given by the spectral environment Freddie is surrounded by, while struggling with the violence of his past. What conjures the feeling of “home” for him as an exile is the unlikeliness of finding home on this island or anywhere, for that reason, yet strangely enough, he does so here more than, for example, by having returned home to Coolgrange. In a similar ghostly prefiguration, “the suspended narrative that follows, *Ghosts*, is Montgomery's apophatic attempt to ease the pain of exile...” in the way that, I suggest, he turns to describing of works of art, where the oscillation is accentuated further for him because of the ghosts that he finds in art and more exactly, in the painting *Le monde d'or* (Delgado Crespo, p. 123).

Conversely, Freddie seems to be most exquisitely at home in his mind where a certain part of him is reading into the signs around him, everything else having an “averted gaze” or a “tight-lipped aspect”, like the house. The peculiar, otherworldly stillness that surrounds him under “the great wave of the world” is part of a new understanding of his life, a “general wish to preserve the forms”, perhaps by that meaning the ones found in paintings. Wendy Lesser (1993) emphasizes the Shakespearean-inspired nature of the second novel's plot by paralleling the narrator's supposedly creative qualities with those of Prospero's in *The Tempest*, “for this narrator considers himself the novel's master, the Prospero-like figure who has created the entire cast. ‘A little world is coming into being’, he tells us on the second page. ‘Who speaks? I do. Little god’” (1993). Montgomery also believes to be the creator of his own world and keeping in mind the ghosts that started to emerge for him in the painting ten years before, one could notice that they only determine his impossibility to distinguish between the world he attempts to create, and art. In this novel ghosts as spectral figures in the painting *Le monde d'or*

specifically enhance the oscillation for Freddie in reminding him of his crime for art.

Additionally, Derrida (1994) also refers to the famous Shakespearean quote from *Hamlet* in his attempt to explain the disjunction of time in connection to history and to parallel the apparition of Hamlet's father's ghost in the play with the idea of historical haunting. The anticipation of the specter could signify the wait for a specter that will appear for the first time, while "the ghostly would displace itself like the movement of this history", which has nothing to precede it (Derrida, p. 4). In this famous literary example, the ghost returns simply, yet not having been there in the first place:

Hamlet: Rest, rest perturbed Spirit! So, gentlemen,

With all my love I do commend me to you,

And what so poor a man as Hamlet is

May do t'express his love and friending to you,

God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together,

And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.

The time is out of joint. O, cursèd spite,

That ever I was born to set it right!

Nay, come, let's go together. (Shakespeare 2015, p. 38-39)

In a similar way, Montgomery's ghosts exist outside of time and a certain linearity, as it is suggested in this scene that "time is out of joint" because Montgomery's life now follows its own chronology, somehow discontinued if compared to any other life's linearity. Derrida explains, "each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. [...] Let us call it a *hauntology*" (p. 10). In a similar manner, so do Montgomery's ghosts appear in no determined order in his narration, thus in being out of control, they generate the oscillation between reality and art, which the narrator describes via his imagination. His descriptions in the second instalment of the trilogy differ from the same descriptive instances in *The Book of Evidence* through the return of his ghosts from before his time in prison, the *Woman* and her glance. These two are yet not overtly acknowledged here by Freddie and that somehow sends him even deeper into the oscillation at work when acknowledging the painted figures in *Le monde d'or*, enacting a domino effect. Freddie has no control over the apparition of these ghosts, "for it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter" (Derrida 1994, p. 6). One of the strongest

moments where the ghosts visibly control Freddie and determine his oscillation between the real and unreal is the awakening of a memory when the ghost of his son appears to him in a spectral illusion:

Suddenly, as if nothing at all had happened, the blackbird with a sort of clockwork jerk rose up and flexed its wings and flew off swiftly into the cottony white light. Van made a little disappointed mewling noise and pressed his face to the glass, craning to see the last of the bird, and for a second, as he stood with his face turned like that, I saw my mother in him. *Dear Jesus, all my ghosts are gathering here.* (p. 186, emphasis added)

In the second part of the novel, Montgomery describes one of the events that occurred before his coming to the island and here his vulnerability shines through, oscillating between the remembrance of one of the moments he shared with his son as a child, before his death and an imaginary moment with a grown-up Van and still “miraculously youthful” Montgomery (*Ghosts*, p. 185). His confession about the realisation of all his ghosts gathering there is the very acknowledgement that his past has followed him into the present and that it is inescapable, thus sheerly oscillating between the realms of the real and unreal, Van’s ghost standing proof of it. Hauntology becomes central to the themes elaborated in this novel, where Montgomery’s encounters with ghosts – both literal and metaphorical – underscore the instability of his reality and his aesthetics experiences. Derrida’s notion of the specter’s disruptive presence provides a foundation for analyzing the trilogy’s layered exploration of haunting.

3. *The Birth of Athena*

In the third and last novel of the trilogy, art historian Morrow is asked to identify a series of eight paintings, out of which only one is authentic. Montgomery chances upon that one painting by the end of the novel’s plot, which offers an explanation to the love story that he so ardently engages with throughout his last story about art, murder and ghosts. This time around, Montgomery calls himself Morrow and A., or possibly Athena, like the figure in the painting, might be an allegory for art itself or the woman that he killed in the events of the first novel –or even both. Hauntology is also evident in the novel’s treatment of time: Freddie’s narrative blurs the boundaries between past and present, as he grapples with memories that refuse to stay buried. The past continually intrudes upon the present, creating a sense of temporal collapse that aligns with Derrida’s concept of haunting as a disruption of linear time.

In *Ghosts*, while “in Flora, he momentarily glimpses the Other...”, in A., Montgomery perceives a ghostly muse which leads him to a reality where one is only left to imagine her (McNamee 2006, p. 184). In *Athena*, Morrow seeks to renegotiate his past within the reality he has created for himself, by imagining a love story between him and A. I believe that A. takes the form of

a ghost in a work of art because of her fleeting presence, which would rather entail an absence as she is a figment of Morrow's imagination. For short, "the uncertain, vulnerable, lovelorn, lustful, bedraggled hero of Banville's trilogy ends up writing a long account of his adventures as a so-called expert for some very seedy characters to a love mate who has disappeared apparently forever" and intimates his confessions to her, hoping that he would manage to rethink his ghostly past (Moore 1998, p. 324). The oscillation here is also a result of A.'s influence, who is a figure in a work of art, but also a ghost, and is imagined by Morrow, yet her purpose here is different to Morrow's other ghosts residing in art. A. somehow completes the haunting, in the end leading Morrow to a point where he has not managed to fully understand his past, but perhaps he is able to rethink the way he perceives it.

Indeed, the last account of Montgomery – or Morrow's – involvement with ghosts in art as analysed through this hauntological frame presents the most powerful of his three stories and develops the subject he had been attempting to grasp ever since he first acted on the influence of *The Portrait of a Woman*: giving life to the one he has killed. His confession is no different in terms of the hauntological crux the reader may find as relevant here as in the other two novels. The narrator begins with an ekphrasis of a series of seven paintings in art critic fashion, as commissioned by Morden to identify, himself a fraudulent art dealer. He has stolen them together with his father (the Da) and engaged Morrow in this affair in order to pass the one authentic painting unnoticed by Inspector Hackett, who had been watching them for years. In his descriptions of the paintings, Morrow is very much imaginative, as he attempts to understand and reorder his ghostly past one final time, whose only legacy are the specters found in art.

McNamee (2006) describes the fourth painting, *Syrinx Delivered*, as "depicting the nymph who escaped Pan by turning herself into a reed out of which he then fashioned his pipes" (p. 190). Morrow's engagement with this painting further reveals the hauntological lengths he goes to in order to renegotiate his past, since he parallels Syrinx with A., the ghost whose ethereality he almost senses next to him and the one who deepens the oscillation by her mere presence in absence:

She is the pivot of the picture, the fulcrum between two states of being, the representation of life-in-death and death-in-life, of what changes and yet endures; the witness that she offers is the possibility of transcendence, both of the self and of the world, though world and self remain the same. (p. 105)

Besides ekphrastically describing A. throughout the novel, in this fourth painting it seems that A. is Syrinx in terms of the ghostly power the painting depicting her holds over him. She acts as a muse for Morrow in a place where "world and self remain the same", like the reality and art oscillation, whose boundaries the protagonist could never fully grasp due to the ghosts appearing in paintings. As it is hinted at in Syrinx's description, as hovering "between

two states of being”, which usually the ghosts inhabit, A.’s (hau)(o)ntological borders are also blurred as she exists merely in Morrow’s imagination, there being no proof as to whether A. actually entails a presence in the protagonist’s world, hence Morrow knows that she is a ghost and feels the spectral power she bestows upon him.

4. *Spectral Afterglow*

Except for the ekphrastic descriptions with A. as the pivotal element, Morrow describes the seven paintings he is asked to identify with the skilfulness of an art critic. The narrator’s dalliance on each painting seems to be brief, yet these affordances of description subtly parallel the erotic moments that he and A. supposedly share in the room where all the eight paintings are hidden. That would entail Morrow skilfully paralleling his and A.’s movements and romantic gestures towards each other with the scenes in the paintings that he ekphrastically describes throughout the novel, though it is difficult to say whether either party is aware of the subtle, rather spectral resemblances between the two planes. Morrow is aware of the ways in which he pictures A. and “perhaps when I peered into those pictures what I was looking for was always and only the prospect of you, a speck of radiance advancing towards me from the vanishing point” (*Athena*, p. 81). I suggest that Morrow’s close inspection of the paintings is part of Montgomery’s attempt of rethinking his past in A.’s spectral image.

Similarly to the previous novel, Morrow is not granted freedom from his past and the figures of loss, violence and romantic bewilderment observed in his descriptions of the seven paintings somehow follow a ghostly pattern which spiritually materializes as the thought of A. in Morrow’s mind. “With every painting he focuses on the contrast between stillness and movement”, while A. guides him, perhaps unknowingly, towards the realization that she is just art, therefore never truly belonging to the protagonist’s world, henceforth a ghost (Moore 1998, p. 192). In his art critic-like perception of the paintings, Morrow does not overtly acknowledge the similarities between the reality and art before him because of the oscillation that A. generates. The image of A., however, allows for the parallels Morrow draws between the scenes in the paintings and the romantic scenes he fantasizes about. Art is ghostly just like his past, yet in describing it, the protagonist paves a way for his rethinking of it because A. is the imaginative embodiment of the woman he has killed, thus offering Morrow the possibility to revisit his past so that he can continue living with it regardless of the ghosts permeating it and the oscillation they generate.

When discussing the *Syrinx Delivered* painting by fictive Dutch painter Job van Hellin, Morrow acknowledges that Syrinx, the woman figure, “is the perfect illustration of Adorno’s dictum that ‘in their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different.’ I haven’t even a reed

pipe to play in commemoration of you” (p. 105). The way he shifts the narrative by remembering A. immediately after describing this painting could be regarded as his imaginative attempt of seeing her as a spectral imperative which lingers on his very nostalgia for the past. Morrow finishes some of the painting descriptions with A. in mind, as seen in the quote above, and that is what may lead the reader to think that the paintings are parallels to the movements and intimacies of his encounters with A., without his being aware of it. Like Syrinx, Montgomery will be exonerated from his imaginatory sins by understanding his connection with the ghostly figure in the painting – A.

Furthermore, McNamee (2006) observes that “the paintings depict scenes from ancient Greek mythology but it soon becomes evident that Morrow’s readings of them reflect the events – may in fact be generating some of them – that are narrated in each of the chapters preceding them” (p. 185). The ghosts even reside “in him, but [...] outside of him [...] this is the place outside of place of ghosts wherever they feign to take up their abode” and this could enhance the position A. occupies in Morrow’s life, that of a ghost, which could be seen as a “place outside of place”, a spectral layer of Morrow’s mind, a ghost generative of oscillation, which entails blurring the border between reality and art for the narrator (Derrida 1994, p. 106). The protagonist’s world is divided into what is real and the paintings, which are ghostly and unreal, whereas “it is as if reality is not reality unless it can be intensely imagined” by the protagonist (McNamee 2006, p. 193). His reality comes in the form of an art, but art cannot be reality, thus it can only be imagined as such.

They speak of guilt as something heavy, they talk about the weight of it, the burden, but I know otherwise; guilt is lighter than air; it fills you up like a gas and would send you sailing into the sky, arms and legs flailing, an inflated Grock, if you did not keep a tight hold on things [...] That’s why I was so easily fooled, that’s how I could be so easily taken in: because I was always thinking of other things, struggling inwardly with those big burdensome words that had I had the nerve to speak them would have made you stare first and then laugh. Atonement. Redemption. That kind of thing. I was still in hell, you see, or purgatory, at least, and you were one of the elect at whom I squinted up yearningly as you paced the elysian fields in golden light (p. 67).

In a sequence where Morrow idealizes A. as an element external to his guilt and the only one who could exonerate him from it, one could observe the poetic setting he fantasizes about when describing her, which seems to temporarily shelter him from his haunted present. Morrow’s descriptions of A. gradually lead to the renegotiation of his past, but at the cost of having to release her in the end. Morrow is metaphorically enveloped in golden light, while he regards A. as the only escape of his spectral past through an alternative understanding of it. The amount of detail that Morrow places in his descriptions is proof of the oscillation at work both in his world and the paintings, as he tries to accommodate his thoughts on his ghostly past, which

inherently follows him. Derrida's assertion that specters destabilize being oneself, thus creating an ontological ambiguity in Freddie's perception of A.

Given that A., as a ghost, has the role of making Morrow attempt the tumultuous renegotiation of his past, his imagination leads the narrator to contemplate the moment when he would release her from his mind like she would release him from hers:

But I knew I must not give in to self-pity. I had nothing to pity myself for. She had been mine for a time, and now she was gone. Gone, but alive, in whatever form life might have taken for her, and from the start that was supposed to be my task: to give her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. Intending, of course, whether I knew it or not, that I in turn would live in her. What I had not bargained for was that this life I was so eager she should embark on would require me in the end to relinquish her. No, that was the wrinkle I had not thought of. Now there I stood, in the midst of winter, a forlorn Baron Frankenstein, holding in my hands the cast-off bandages and the cold electrodes and wondering what Alpine fastnesses she was wandering in, what icy wastes she might be traversing (p. 223).

Morrow's spectral admiration for A. is consistently exposed throughout the novel with the purpose of rethinking his past, whereas in order to do that, he must "relinquish her" in the end. By comparing himself to the inventor of a failed creation, "Baron Frankenstein", the protagonist only emphasizes his connection with a creator of a life, as he is the creator of his own present. Relinquishing A. constitutes for Morrow a sense of failure in itself, but also a possibility of renegotiation of his past and being able to live with his ghosts. A. represents an elevated version of the narrator's ghosts through the complexity of her constitutive details, as described by Morrow in the sequence above. By releasing her, he acknowledges that he is able to live with the haunting, even if this is not expressly his ultimate goal, but rather something the ghost accomplishes for him as part of her role in the narrator's life. A.'s own life in the narrator's mind will have to exclude his because she is merely an absence or a ghost, especially since Morrow is ruled by her throughout this last narration, while she occupies the largest space of his descriptions and propels him into spectral limitrophic extremities. Morrow could never live in her since A. cannot metaphorically live in him, thus by imagining the ghostly element in his world and the paintings, he has to release her from his mind. If there ever was a world where A. and Morrow could materially co-exist, it would only be in the shadow of a spectral afterglow. One may observe that A.'s purpose is to allow Morrow to rethink his past, even though it is uncertain whether, after the third novel, there will be other ghosts.

Conclusion

This article has shown the ways in which Montgomery's ghosts determine the inescapable oscillation he encounters in his life. In the events of the first

novel, this happens because of a spectral work of art, which is followed by the apparition of ghosts in several other paintings throughout his life, spanning from the encounter with the painting of the *Woman*. In Banville's trilogy, the paintings that haunt Montgomery/Morrow are imbued with more than aesthetic beauty, they also carry the weight of his guilt, desires and fears, functioning as spectral objects that bridge his internal world with the external one. Hauntology also complements the presence-absence dynamic and defines the oscillation between reality and art, as an apparently ephemeral interplay stemming from a long lasting connection with these haunting works of art. The hauntological reading performed here has aided in extracting the ghostly elements of art in Banville's work, together with Derrida's theory and concept of *hauntology*. By carving out this niche, the study not only complements Derrida's work, but also contributes to the evolving discourse on hauntology, anchoring the study in contemporary criticism. A study about art and aesthetics may benefit from this hauntological analysis because of its connection to representation and aesthetics and the ways in which these are more thoroughly understood in a hauntological paradigm. This also contributes to the significance of exploring art in connection with hauntology. The spectral nature of representation is central to ekphrasis and artistic experience because of the paintings existing as a trace both in the narrative and Montgomery's memory. Precisely because the ghosts linger until the end of Montgomery's narration, one might wonder whether there will be other ghosts appearing in works of art for the narrator in the future, but as readers, we are only left with a spectral aftertaste and the possibility to imagine for ourselves whether these ghosts will return to him in other forms.

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