Chapter Five

IMPRINTS: FORMING AND TRACING THE MALEVOLENT GHOST-CHILD

Jen Baker

1. Introduction: From Folklore to Fiction

The history of the ghost-child in British and New-England cultures can be traced through comparisons of the various theological debates about the child's soul and European folklore and legends influenced by those debates, as well as evidence of unusual burial practices unearthed by archaeological and anthropological studies. In a range of tales from across the British Isles (as in some other European regions), the spirits of unbaptized and/or murdered infants and young children unable to enter Heaven wandered the earth on the wind, or as ghostly lights, wailing and crying for their souls to be let in, or for their discarded bodies to be buried in consecrated ground. Although unsettling, according to Anne O'Connor, dead-child ghosts in British and Irish folk tradition were predominantly seen as passive, pitiful, and vulnerable souls who needed help from the living and 'are rarely represented as the spirits of murdered children', even if violence or exposure was the cause of their death.[1] These characteristics reflected their condition in philosophical and theological depictions of the underworld, from the pre-Christian imagining by Virgil to medieval and early modern conceptions of limbo, where their disembodied souls would lament their fate with 'heart-rending sighs'.[2] In other European regions, however, there is a history of considerably darker versions who will shriek, maim, even kill the perpetrator or passers-by who do not help them, and which have a much more tangible corporeality. Across many regions and cultures, beliefs about the 'deviant dead' – those who died an unnatural or ambivalent death and might rise and possibly seek revenge – characterized tales and were also reflected in burial practices, and these extended to children: More commonly this involved the exclusion of the unbaptized from consecrated ground, but there is also older archaeological and oral evidence of extreme preventative measures.[3] For instance, Juha Pentikäinen notes that, in the Ob-Ugric tradition,

> it is feared that a child whom the mother has choked and hidden under a root or stone, might change into the big-eyed and wide-jawed being called *ūtpi*. In order to prevent the *patšeχ* (dead-child being resulting from a stillborn baby) from moving about, they hide the body under the roots of a hollow tree, burying it in the earth in a basket made of birch bark, with a stone on the stomach or the heart.[4]

Burial practices and the tales indicate, therefore, that attempts were made by the living to appease the soul before haunting could occur – either defensively as seen in burial practices or through proactive ceremonies such as the sacrament of baptism – or to resolve the haunting later on by appeasement through post-mortem baptism, sacred burial and naming.[5]

From the early nineteenth century until around 1920, various factors converged to create a more ambiguous hybridized ghost-child figure in Anglo-American fiction, with some of the key influences on its composition and narrative being the transcription and scholarship of Folklore (c. 1840s but building from the late nineteenth century), which coincided with the rise of the Gothic literary ghost-story (c. 1820s–1920s) and the Spiritualist movement (c. 1840) – thus building upon the study of ghosts (their origin and composition) both philosophically and scientifically – and later impressed upon by the inception of psychoanalysis (c. 1890s), in which the imprints of the childhood Self were seen as pivotal in curing the traumatized psyche. All these developments coincided with the establishment of the empirical study of children, the demand for reform concerning their physical welfare and the more conceptual 'cult of childhood' which idolized and fetishized the child as a commodity and projected a perception of the ideal childhood.[6] The evolving attitude towards the child meant that, as Avery and Reynolds have discerned, although individual parents grieved for their children in the previous centuries, the nineteenth century determined a more generic *social* grief towards the loss of young life.[7] Yet although, as Jeffrey Brosco explains, in the second half of the nineteenth century, 'social reformers believed that all children deserved to be protected from the ravages of poverty and unsanitary living conditions' and that fears over the decline of 'their race', and thus the Nation, were of considerable concern, few of the ghosts in short stories are impoverished children – many being members of the bourgeoisie and upper classes.[8] What this suggests, however, is a directive towards child welfare more generally; for while philanthropic campaigns targeted the masses of factory and slum children, these ghost stories revealed brutality and cruelty to children of all classes in private domestic spaces. Therefore, although by the closure of the ghost-story's 'Golden Age' (c. 1920) the ghost-child was a comparatively marginal figure, its formation in Victorian and Edwardian fiction was nevertheless an important part of the discourse and institutionalization of the child-figure in the past, the present and the future.

This chapter identifies the cultural and literary norms that were established in relation to the figure of the ghost-child in Victorian and Edwardian stories (I use the latter term loosely for those published up until 1916) and how this trope has become a staple component of late twentieth- and twenty-first century historical appropriations of the ghost-story on page and on screen. Each reappropriation discussed reconnects with the aesthetics, buildings and landscape, or what are deemed to be persisting Victorian/Edwardian values and ideals; but it is their use of the ghost-child on which I will focus. Many of the features and tropes found in both the original and contemporary stories are more widely integral to the ghost-story genre – such as the ghost as projection of a sinful past, the uncanny imprint of that which should have remained hidden but has come to light – but the crux of this chapter will be the use of the child figure to represent distinct

fears and particular forms of trauma; ones that breed malevolence and are all the more terrifying and dangerous because ideals of innocence are contravened. This is concurrent with the significant shift in the perception of the child since the nineteenth century and, more specifically, the increasing number of and higher intensity of monstrous depictions of children more widely.

2. Spectral Ambivalence in Victorian/Edwardian Fiction

Conforming to theological and folkloric precedent, very few children in Victorian/Edwardian Anglo-American fiction were depicted as unequivocally evil or violent. Among the corpus of child-ghost stories of the Victorian and Edwardian period there are a great number which conform to the passive and pitiful trope of folklores from British and Irish regions. For instance, in 'A Speaking Ghost' (1890) by New England writer Annie Trumbull Slossan, the narrator is visited by a 'heathen' child-ghost who had died from disease decades earlier and simply comes to talk to her. She teaches him the ways of the Bible and so prepares his soul to be received in Heaven. In 'The Little Silver Heart' (1906) by Josephine Daskam Bacon (another New England writer), the ghost of a child accidentally trapped under the floor in a barn appears to a child-relative decades later because she wishes her body to be found and buried; there is nothing sinister here. In a number of stories it is not the child itself but what it represents that is the cause of terror: In the extended version of Charlotte (J. H.) Riddell's 'Walnut-Tree House' (1881), for instance, the ghost of a little boy starved and mistreated for his inheritance wanders passively and silently through his house over and over, searching for the missing will that will restore his living sister to her rightful place. Although a previous occupant who had hidden the will and abused the boy is said to have been driven insane by the ghost's repetitive activities, which has also 'driven every tenant in succession out of the house' (8), the child is never said to touch or even directly engage with the living. The new owner gets over the 'first horror' (22) and helps to lay the spirit to rest out of both pity and fear of going mad himself from the guilt of the child-ghost's misery.[9] In Margaret Oliphant's 'The Open Door' (1882), the apparition heard on the ruins of a Scottish estate is that of a wayward son who had returned home to find his mother gone and the door to 'home' barred, and seemingly died from the grief of separation. His cries of 'Oh, mother, let me in! oh, mother, let me in!' is a trope found in a number of the other stories such as the pleas of wandering ghost-child Cathy at the window in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and sometimes in the form of silent appeals or scratching at thresholds, which draws directly from theological and folkloric conceptions of the dead-child spirit barred from 'home' – which equates to Heaven.[10] His spirit has no physical form; rather it is the narrator's living son Roland who becomes increasingly feverish and pale and begins to imitate the ghost's cries as if possessed, suggesting a palpable and dangerous connection with the spirit caused by the strength of grief rather than malice. The local minister, a father-figure, identifies (and so names/baptizes) the boy (whom he had known in life as Willie) and performs a pseudo-exorcism to lead the 'wandering spirit' (26) to his mother in Heaven – fulfilling the rites of appeasement. Although various members of the band of men (a retired Colonel, his ex-soldier Butler and a doctor) are 'half dead with terror'

(17) at the sounds, the horror is not connected with the child-ghost *as* child, but as a manifestation of an 'other world'.

Others are passive and pitiful, but their manner of death and the deadly outcome of the plot imbue the ghost's presence with a sense of horror. In Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'The Lost Ghost' (1903), a lodger and her landlords (two elderly sisters) encounter the ghost of a little girl who, it turns out, was locked in her room and abandoned by her mother who ran away with another man (the mother was later hunted down by her husband and shot). The girl with a dreadful but pitiful face wanders the house looking for her mother and can touch objects despite the lightness of her movements. She causes no direct harm through violence, but the lodger and one of the sisters are horrified when it appears the other sister has died and chosen to accompany the little girl in the afterlife. Anna Hoyt's tale 'The Ghost of Little Jacques' (1863) features a passive child but a gruesome end for the perpetrator, getting closer to the more malevolent ghost-child of modern Horror. The eponymous boy is described in life by the misopedic narrator Christine (a family acquaintance) as 'rather disagreeable […] a horror to his mother', but after a rather severe dose of punishment for mischief, he becomes 'utterly vacant of expression' and eventually dies of an unknown cause.[11] Before his burial she sees the ghost of Jacques with 'drooping posture' and the same vacant gaze imprinted from life, and in terror accidentally breaks a new mirror:

> I saw again, repeated in a hundred jagged splinters, up and down in zigzag confusion, in demoniac omnipresence, the uncanny eye, the spectral shape, which had so appalled me. The little phantom had arisen, its slim finger was outstretched – it beckoned. (200)

The apparition leads her to, and points at, a box of expensive confectionery which she had seen the boy's mother giving him in the days leading up to his death and then disappears. Years later, the narrator discovers it was not the mother, as she suspected, but the father who poisoned Jacques, as well as some other siblings, because he arrogantly believed he was saving them from 'misery and imbecility' (205). As he attempts to flee justice, they both see 'like a white mist in the darkness, a visible shape' (206) of the boy. The father interprets it as a 'warning of death' and commits suicide by poison. Despite the creepiness of the mirror scene, it is Christine's own impression of the boy's ghostly existence and simply his appearance in the room that prompt the father's death, rather than anything singularly grotesque about his body or malicious intent, which prompts her feelings of horror. Jacques, Willie, the unnamed boy and girl are therefore examples of what Nina Auerbach identified as a juxtaposition of the Victorian child-ghost as 'something subtler, innocent, admonitory, and terrifying at the same time'.[12]

In the next section I give an overview of some child-ghosts whose 'innocence' is dubious, their forms potentially dangerous and their actions full of malice, to pave the way for a comparison with their neo-Victorian counterparts. The unnamed ghost-girl in Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852), the abused stowaway in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 'Kentucky's Ghost' (1868), the two murdered poor children of M. R. James's 'Lost Hearts' (1895) and Ellen Glasgow's vengeful stepdaughter in 'The Shadowy Third' (1916) are examples in which the ambiguity of the spectral child – from

its ambivalent corporeality to its intent and its actions – is recognizable in the more explicitly malevolent and dangerous spectral children that haunt contemporary fiction and film.

3. Crafting Corporeal Malevolence

In a number of Victorian and Edwardian stories, the ghost-child possesses an ambivalent tangibility that demonstrably increases its monstrosity and the terror with which it is perceived. Gaskell's ghost-child in 'The Old Nurse's Story', for instance, appears to be a collective imprint of the rage felt by its grandfather, the despair of its mother and the bitter jealousy of its aunt, and a reverberation of the physical and mental anguish felt by the real child. The spirit functions like a photograph of what it was shortly before death; for, as the eponymous narrator Hester observes, it had a 'dark wound on its right shoulder', which she later learns mirrors a blow inflicted by its grandfather shortly before he sent the child and its mother out into the snow, where they perished.[13] Rosamond, the living and present-day child of the story, is shown to possess the ability to hear and touch the phantom child, but Hester, Rosamond's nurse, initially cannot perceive its presence at all. Even when she does, its composition is not quite whole: 'I saw a little girl, less than my Miss Rosamond – dressed all unfit to be out-of-doors such a bitter night – crying and beating against the windowpanes, as if she wanted to be let in. She seemed to sob and wail'; but Hester realizes she had 'heard no sound of little battering hands upon the window-glass, although the Phantom Child had seemed to put forth all its force; and, although I had seen it wail and cry, no faintest touch of sound had fallen upon my ears' (24). Like the dead-child spirit of folklore, it is banished from the house in death as it was in life. Where Rosamond refers to the ghost-child (which she does not seem to realize is a ghost) as 'my poor little girl' (24), her guardian, the elderly Grace Furnivall, refers to it as a 'wiling', evil, 'wicked, naughty child' (23). Hester learns that Grace's jealousy of her sister secretly marrying and bearing the child of a foreign musician they both loved in their youth had been a key factor in the death of the child and its mother when she had revealed the secret to their aristocratic father. As a clear victim of family and class pride, Hester feels pity for the ghost-child – however in its phantom-state it is very dangerous. Although it cannot inflict actual physical harm, it tries repeatedly to lure the vulnerable and oblivious Rosamond outside to her death and gain revenge on those responsible for its death. On the anniversary, the event is re-enacted before the current household, and the elderly Grace tries to make amends by crying out 'Oh, father! father! spare the little innocent child!' (31). The scene cannot, however, be altered. The presence of a living child in the house, and furthermore, residing in the nursery that should rightfully have belonged to the dead child, has caused the traumatic events to replay in full. It does not succeed in taking Rosamond, but the haunting stops because a life has been claimed – Miss Grace falls down at their feet, death-stricken, and is carried to her bed muttering continuously, 'What is done in youth can never be undone in age!' (32).

Old Testament–style justice is similarly served in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 'Kentucky's Ghost': the eponymous stowaway, a slight pale boy in his mid-teens with a fondness for the Bible, is beaten and abused by the ship's first mate, Whitmarsh. One day, the boy summons the courage to tell the mate, '*You'll be sorry yet for every time you've laid your*

hands on me.'[14] Eventually, the boy falls to his death after being sent up to the top of the mast by Whitmarsh in a fierce storm while he was suffering from fever. On the return journey, another fearsome storm arises and the sailors who attempt to climb the mast to secure the sail encounter Kentucky's ghost who urges them back down to the deck. When Whitmarsh begins to climb, the ghost-boy calls him up, however, and the narrator, a sailor on the ship, declares, 'Next I knew there was a cry, – and next a splash' (632) and both first mate and ghost were never seen again. Whether the fright or a push from Kentucky killed Whitmarsh is unclear, but the intent to cause harm is clearly present. As discussed in my article on Phelps's story, folklores around the sea and sailing are combined with those about the child spirit, and with contemporary accounts about the mistreatment of stowaways and children working on ships, to produce a multifaceted cultural response to child welfare.[15]

M. R. James also employs folklore for his setting and spirits in 'Lost Hearts', but the intent is far less geared towards child welfare than effect. For instance, the orphaned Stephen hears the 'strange cries as of lost and despairing wanderers sounded from across the mere' that mirror John Fiske's record in *Myths and Myth-Makers* published in the same year, of how 'to this day the English peasantry believe that they hear the wail of the spirits of unbaptized children, as the gale sweeps past their cottage doors'.[16] James also plays with the theme of ambivalent tangibility: Stephen sees two ghost-children outside his window and notices that when the boy raised his arms 'the moon shone upon his *almost transparent* hands, and Stephen saw that the nails were fearfully long and that the *light shone through* them' and, like Gaskell's child, he bears the marks of horrors inflicted on him in life; 'On the left side of his chest there opened a black and gaping rent' (646; emphases in the original). In another moment, however, 'this dreadful pair had moved *swiftly* and *noiselessly* over the dry gravel' (646; emphases added). And yet they have enough corporeality to make visible scratches in the door, in Stephen's nightgown, and finally, to pierce through the chest of the villain – Stephen's cousin and guardian Mr Abney – in order to tear out his heart as he did theirs. This act of revenge allows them to rest peacefully because not only had Abney murdered them, but he had dumped their bodies unceremoniously. 'Lost Hearts' reflects an already established concern with the scruples of the scientist that had concerned writers of nineteenth-century Gothic, but also the horror of the child ritually sacrificed to gain power. In doing so James highlighted that it was the notion of 'childhood' as sacred that made it desirable and thus the catalyst for the harming of the child. When Stephen arrives at Abney's house, he becomes the intended next victim because he is approaching 'adolescence'. This was a concept being developed as a serious branch of study by psychologists in the 1880s and 1890s, who began investigating the abilities and behaviours of young people from the onset of puberty and considered adolescence a threshold over which the child changes significantly – noting its advent had long been celebrated with 'feasts, ceremonies, and mystic rites' around the world.[17] Abney's experiments have yielded that 'supernatural' powers can be achieved through the 'absorption of the hearts of not less than three human beings below the age of twenty-one years' (646). He times his experiments to coincide with the Spring Equinox, which he informs Stephen 'had been always considered by the ancients to be a critical time for the young' (643). The power

produced through the burgeoning sexuality, or perhaps spiritual transformation of the child between two distinct worlds of childhood and adulthood, is a commodity Abney identifies for harnessing. As Hilary Grimes observes of late Victorian Gothic writings, 'Science was haunted by the possibility that the very techniques it used to eliminate the supernatural potential actually evoked it.'[18] Yet, as indicated by Abney's consultation of pagan tomes, 'Lost Hearts' also builds on centuries of folkloric belief pertaining to the power of the child body in various forms. For instance, Sabine Baring-Gould noted that in Kingswear, Devon,

> in 1845, the church was pulled down, when under the foundation was discovered a cavity cut in the rock filled with infant bones and quicklime. There is but too much reason to believe that we have here one of the many instances that remain of the old heathen belief that no building would stand unless a man or child were buried under the foundation.[19]

The reason for Abney's murder of the children is, however, fairly unique for the period. In most stories, the motive for child murder is cruelty and an abuse of power, often combined with greed over inheritance. As here, and in the stories by Hoyt, Riddell, Gaskell, Phelps, it is more often perpetrated by men on older children (aged roughly 4–7), whereas in folktales and ballads women were the key culprits, guilty of the murder of infants and very young children for reasons the tales often did not outline, but which historically were connected to societal pressure, shame, poverty, mania and, less commonly, revenge on a spouse.

Ellen Glasgow's 'The Shadowy Third' similarly follows suit. The narrator is a nurse employed to help the wife of her employer, Dr Maradick. When she first sees the 'airy little form' of 'quiet and sweet-looking Dorothea', she does not realize the child is dead.[20] She does notice, however, that, despite her 'peculiar lightness and grace' (661), the child had a 'singular look in her eyes […] not the look of childhood at all' but one of 'profound experience, of bitter knowledge' (662). She then learns that the girl died two months previously of, apparently, pneumonia, but that the child's mother, who can also see the ghost, claims that Maradick (Dorothea's stepfather) murdered the child for money. The woman is sent away to an asylum and dies, and a few months later Maradick is about to remarry. The nurse, still in his employ and unsure of his role in the deaths, sees the ghost-child again, playing outside with a skipping rope, and later that day she sees that rope again 'loosely coiled […] in the bend of the staircase' (671) moments before the doctor descends, trips and dies. The juxtaposition between the overall sweet and charming appearance of this child of 6 or 7 with the maturity written in the young girl's form – 'a curious prim dignity' like that 'of a very old person' (661–62) with 'enigmatical eyes' (662) – is a particular trope exploited by monstrous versions (both living and dead) of children later on, such as the 8-year-old serial killer Rhoda Penmark of William March's novel *The Bad Seed* (1954), Henry Evans (played by Macaulay Culkin) of psychological thriller *The Good Son* (1993), directed by Joseph Rueben, or, more pertinently here, the ghosts of the Grady twins in Stanley Kubrick's 1980 filmic adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining*. As I will discuss in the next section, the ghost-child trope outlined so far has become a familiar trope of historical fictions, or those with a Victorian or Edwardian flavour, in

recent years, with particular attention paid to its strange corporeality, its tension between innocence and experience and the danger that is attached to its presence.

3. Reprints: The Wrath of the Child

Demonic, murderous, possessed, undead and downright weird children are a staple component of realist and supernatural fictions of the period post World War II, and in contemporary fiction and culture the ghost-child is far more prevalent and is malevolent more frequently, easily comprising a subgenre of their own. Examples such as the eponymous child in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1984), Samara of the *Ringu* franchise (1991–2002), Samantha in David Koepp's *Stir of Echoes* (1999), Santi in Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), the siblings in Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), Tomás of J. A. Bayona's *The Orphanage* (2007), Susan in Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009) adapted for cinema in 2018, the toddler in Susan Hill's *The Small Hand* (2010), Nick Murphy's *The Awakening* (2011) and Agatha of Sam Fell and Chris Butler's animated horror-comedy *ParaNorman* (2012) are just some which employ the figure for various cultural, artistic and political effect.[21]

Although these examples cover a range of periods and cultures, the past 20 years have seen a correlation between the rising popularity of neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian impressions and the use of the child as revenant or ghost. Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson explain that 'just as the contemporary investment in neo-Victorian fiction doubles and shadows the canon of original works, the child character contained in such fictions is often a double or is multiplied in some other way', therefore producing numerous overlapping imprints of 'the child' which emerge in the very positioning and construction of the past, as well as within the past.[22] Not all portrayals utilize the periods directly, but films such as Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* and J. A. Bayona's *The Orphanage* have demonstrated, and the directors and screenwriters have professed, strong affiliations with Henry James's infamous ghost-story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), particularly for their connections with lost, uncanny children and the atmosphere, tension and ambiguity of the Victorian/Edwardian period and its ghost stories.[23] Yet the original stories featuring the ghost-child are, in many ways, far less 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' than their neo-reappropriations, caused partly by the recreation of those eras through collective impressions and indicative of a desired construction and exaggeration of the aesthetic of the past. Once the 'ghost-child' is incorporated, a portrait is produced in which the child is a composite of various fears concerning the disruption of the domestic ideal, social decline, the guilt of the middle and upper classes and the failings of the self that is a distorted reprint of the original tropes. Susan Hill's well-known neo-Edwardian Gothic novel *The Woman in Black* (1983), for instance, features a brief scene in which Arthur Kipp sees the ghosts of around 20 little children with 'pale, solemn faces […] great round eyes' and 'little hands' standing at a Churchyard's railings 'quite silent, quite motionless'.[24] Their deaths have been caused by a vengeful woman as punishment to the local village for her ostracization and the loss of her own illegitimate son in an accident, but those ghosts have no individuality or agency. In the remainder of the chapter I am going to concentrate on three examples – Waters's *The Little Stranger*,

Hill's *The Small Hand* and Murphy's *The Awakening* – in which the 'child-ghost' is far more present and active; think about how they reform the popular trope. None of these are actually set exclusively in the period already discussed (c. 1840–1920), but each plot engages to some extent with the effect of that period on the present, some utilize the aesthetic of the period, but all engage closely with the cultural history and traditions of the ghost-child, as well as the composition and narrative attached to it made typical in the long nineteenth century.

Sarah Waters's novel *The Little Stranger* is set shortly after the end of World War II and begins with the narrator, Doctor Faraday, reminiscing about his first visit to Hundreds Hall in 1919 as a poor village boy when he was about 10 years old and meeting Mrs Ayres and her daughter Susan. The characters, the setting and the haunting that occurs pivot around the idea of clinging on to the past and being unwilling to let go. Beyond the history of the house – built c. 1733 but renovated during the Victorian period – little is told of its earliest days, apart from remnants of a superstitious haunting that originates from the erection of the building. The Victorian features are merely remnants themselves. As a grown man, Faraday becomes the attendant physician to the Ayres family at the now crumbling and struggling Hall – Susan died aged 10 from diphtheria over 30 years previously, and Mrs Ayres lives there with grown-up children Caroline and Roderick, who were born after Susan's death. Over the course of the novel, the characters and the reader are led to suspect that the identity of the ghost is that of Susan; an inscribed letter 'S' in a childish hand on the wall, the repeated ringing of bells and tapping sounds, pushing objects off tables and the location of much of the haunting in what had once been her nursery where she had died. All of these motifs recall those typical of ghost stories and of spiritualist practices which had revived around the time of World War II. The ghost is never seen; its physicality is explained only by the marks it makes and the transference of its physicality to the objects it moves. There is only one scene in which a child-like impression is formed, when Mrs Ayres finds herself locked in the nursery, and hears

> the swift, soft patter of footsteps. And in the inch of murky, milky light that showed at the keyhole, she saw movement. It came […] like a flash of darkness, as of someone or something passing very rapidly along the corridor.[25]

Pattering footsteps are a central motif in nineteenth-century narratives of child death more widely and feature in some of the stories discussed earlier. For instance, in Riddell's 'Walnut-Tree House', a former servant declares that she still often wakes in 'a fright, fancying I still hear the patter, patter of his poor little feet upon the stair'.[26] In Catherine Crowe's *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848), a semi-fictional, semi-factual collection of supernatural stories and encounters, Crowe relays the tale of a woman who rented a house and soon found herself 'perplexed by hearing feet in the passage, though […] she could hear nobody'.[27] The woman 'could not go to sleep for the noise of a child's rattle' followed by 'sounds of feet, and of a child crying, and a woman sobbing'. She does not solve the mystery, but a later tenant investigated and 'having taken up the floor […] the skeleton of a child' was found – a typical example of a murdered child's spirit wishing to be buried.[28]

Waters plays off these typical motifs to bring a truly unsettling passage, the atmosphere of which is exacerbated by the source of the sound and movement never being as clear as it is in the original tales.

Yet the level of malevolence enacted by the spirit – causing a girl's disfigurement which leads to the euthanasia of the family dog, the fire that nearly kills Roderick Ayres and his subsequent incarceration in a mental asylum, causing Mrs Ayres to put her hands through glass and her subsequent deterioration and death, and causing the death of Caroline Ayres – seems disproportionate to the childhood illness that took Susan; a child her mother describes as 'my one true love'.[29] It also does not follow the literary pattern, for in Victorian and Edwardian stories, death by simple disease does not equate with malicious haunting. Mrs Ayres, initially surprised by the indications, because she 'didn't suppose there was any trace of her left, you see', suggests the marks and bruises she receives from 'Susan' are because the child is jealous and impatient to be reunited with her mother, but there is disparity between that explanation and the suggestions of the narrative.[30]

Partly due to the apparent invisibility of the ghost, Caroline Ayres is not completely convinced as to the cause either and begins reading through her father's old books for explanations. She shows Faraday extracts from Crowe's aforementioned tome and from Edmund Gurney's *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), real nineteenth-century studies on spirits and the afterlife. She suggests that the disturbing occurrences in the house might well be a poltergeist, not as a ghost, but as negative psychic energy or energies:

> The subliminal mind has many dark, unhappy corners, after all. Imagine something loosening itself from one of those corners. Let's call it a – a germ. And let's say conditions prove right for that germ to develop – *to grow like a child in the womb*.[31]

Though initially incredulous, once he leaves the house, the narrator wonders whether it is indeed negative energy and whether it is perhaps Caroline's frustrated sexual desires that might have produced it. Yet, even after her mother has died and supposedly 'joined' (and therefore potentially appeased) Susan, the subsequent death of Caroline by falling from the top floor, coinciding with Faraday's strange transportive dream to the hand, along with the title of the text ('stranger'), suggests that the traces of the little girl are tricks to distract from a different malevolent source: the persistent childhood desires of Faraday. During that childhood visit to the Ayres' house, long before he knew the current inhabitants, he breaks away one of the decorative representations from the plaster border with his pen-knife. He insists that this was not simple vandalism but something more personal:

> In admiring the house, I wanted to *possess* a piece of it – or rather, as if the admiration itself, which I suspected a more ordinary child would not have felt, *entitled* me to it. I was like a man, I suppose, wanting a lock of hair from the girl he had suddenly and blindingly become enamoured of.[32]

Though perhaps unrealized by Faraday and never quite confirmed to the reader, even as the story ends, this passage – as his confession of a specifically desperate act – encapsulates

the relationship he has (or wishes to have) with the house in future years. As a boy from a very humble background who struggled to become a doctor due to his social standing, he desires to possess not only a piece, but the entire house, its lifestyle and privileges, and his own psychic imprint demands revenge on those who did possess it.

Susan Hill's novella *The Small Hand* is far less ambiguous about the origin of the haunting and explores the darker side of 'the child'. Set in the contemporary period, with a traumatic event taking place around 30 years earlier in an Edwardian house, it is the actions of a living child that cause the hauntings in later years. In the final chapter, a letter, written by the narrator Adam's brother Hugo shortly before he drowns, reveals that the reason the two brothers have been haunted by a malevolent being is because in a childhood visit to the Edwardian 'White House' (of which Adam has no memory), Hugo pushed a small boy into a pool and ran away, leaving the toddler to drown. He pleads, 'Please remember that we were children. I was a child. At eleven years old one is still a child. I tell myself so.'[33] The hauntings begin for Adam when he loses his way on a journey home, much like the narrator of Rudyard Kipling's short but benevolent ghost-story 'They' (1904), and happens upon an old, charming house in the middle of the countryside which draws him back repeatedly despite (or because of) the ghostly presence of a 'small hand'. Whereas Kipling's narrator finds comfort in the group of ghost-children playing in the garden, Adam's story switches between false hope and paralyzing fear. While revisiting the White House he encounters a strange, seemingly demented old woman living in squalor, who is later revealed to be the proprietress of the house and gardens, and grandmother to the boy Hugo pushed into the pool. The woman invites him into the house and shows him a series of photographs, one of which is a black-and-white picture of three boys on a bench in the garden. He realizes that two of the boys are himself and his brother Hugo, but he does not know the third. When he mentions the photograph to Hugo (at this point oblivious to the full extent of his brother's role), his brother declares that there was no other boy; it must have been the ghost of a child who died there: 'ghosts do that, don't they, so the tales go? Return to the place where whatever happened – happened' (149). Adam insists the boy was real because he was much older than the boy that died, but his brother retorts, 'How do you know what a ghost looks like? White and wispy? […] He was growing up like a real boy' (149).

Throughout his encounters with the spirit, its malevolence is manifested through its physicality and its actions. Distracted by a freak storm as he drives across winding mountain roads, for instance, Adam suddenly he sees a small boy run out in front of him, and although he swerves, he believes himself to have hit the boy. However, there are no signs of impact, no body, and getting out of the car he calls out but thinks the child must have narrowly escaped. Looking over the edge he sees there is a sheer drop and steps back in terror, nearly falls but regaining balance observes:

> As I did so, I felt quite unmistakably the small hand in mine. But this time it was not nestling gently within my own, it held me in a vicious grip and as it held so I felt myself pulled towards the edge of the precipice. […] The strength was that of a grown man although the hand was still that of a child. (60)

Adam manages to escape the magnetic grasp and get back into his car and as he shuts the door he hears a distinct noise – not the sighs and sad wails of the folkloric spirit, but 'a howl of pain and rage and anguish combined, and without question the howl of furious child' (61). When Adam sees the child reflected in a pool of water, he tries to relate the eerie ambivalence its image produces:

> It was not easy to guess at his age but he was perhaps three or four. He had a solemn and very beautiful face and the curls of his hair framed it. […] It was not a dead face, this was a living, breathing child, though I saw no limbs or body, only the face. […] The child's eyes had a particular expression. They were beseeching. (77)

Like Glasgow's child Dorothea, or Freeman's unnamed ghost-child, or Jacques with his flaxen curls, the lovely-looking child's eyes convey its need for help and disarm the narrator because he equates beauty with innocence. And yet, it seems nothing short of vengeance will appease it. Hugo – who had ignored the child for so long that it had begun tormenting Adam – succumbs to its pull in order to save his brother and drowns in a nearby river: 'The last hand that other small hand will take hold of will be mine' (167). Hill thus subverts the trope of the small gentle hand of a child that frequents Victorian depictions, even the ghostly one as found in Arthur Quiller-Couch's 'A Pair of Hands: An Old Maid's Story' (1900), in which the narrator is comforted by the feeling that 'two little hands stole and rested – for a moment only – in mine'.[34]

Nick Murphy's *The Awakening* also uses a specific, individual and repressed traumatic event as the reason for the haunting upon the present-day narrative, but the ghost-child is characterized by the ambivalence of its predecessors.[35] Set in 1921, Florence Cathcart's career is built on exposing fraudulent spiritualists in London, and, due to her reputation, she is hired to travel to a boarding school for boys in Cumbria where one of the boys has died the night after apparently seeing a ghost. As in the stories by Gaskell, Oliphant, James, Waters and Hill, the run-down house, once grand, is set in isolation amid the wild countryside. The ghost seen by the victim is purportedly that of a boy who was murdered in 1902 when the building – a stately home – was a private residence. Mr Mallory, a teacher at the school, shows Florence a series of school photographs in which the blurred and faded image of a ghost-boy stands at the side of the other boys. Although Florence immediately expresses incredulity, and explains how such an impression can be manipulated, Mallory shows her the latest school photograph in which all the boys are present and the distorted face of the boy is, this time, at the window behind them. As the haunting presence gets stronger and she is confronted by unexplained brief scenes that play out and disappear, Florence uses photography, footprint detectors and heat sensors – all examples of burgeoning technologies – to detect the physical presence of the ghost (although she claims it is to catch the trickster). The Victorian penchant for post-mortem photographs to provide a memorial of the deceased was employed frequently for the dead child, who, Audrey Linkman explains, 'represent by far the most numerous group of post-mortem subjects' because the expense of photography meant that for many families this was the only picture they had.[36] Nicola Bown further suggests that

photographs themselves, as objects, invite touch, and became miniature substitutes for the dead child whose image they recorded. As such, they filled the empty hands of the bereaved parents who mourned their dead children.[37]

Whereas in Hill's work, the photograph reveals what *should* have been had the child not died, the distortion of the ghost-child's face, and Florence's inability (or reluctance) to see it, subverts the tradition and its positive connotations, and it is the photograph, rather than the ghost itself, that reveals physical harm done to it in life, as the distortion is owing to the gunshot wound that is later revealed to have caused his death. And it does not match that of the ghost as normally encountered on screen – a boy called Tom whom Florence does not realize is dead. Tom later explains that while he can manipulate his image back to its living form, he sometimes loses control of it.

Upon her wanderings through the house Florence also encounters a doll's house that is a replica of the stately home and which replicates the people who live in the house, and scenes that are happening and have already occurred. As she looks into the attic room, she sees a doll of herself looking into another miniature house, and behind her a little boy doll; though when she turns there is seemingly nothing there. This echoes stories such as M. R. James's 'The Haunted Doll's House' (1923), in which the scene of the events leading up to and the murder of two children by their grandfather's ghost as vengeance for being poisoned by their parents is replayed every night while the owner of the object stands by helplessly. Taunted by events, sounds and images she cannot reconcile, Florence enters the cellar where the doll's house now stands. The murdered boy is then revealed to be Tom, who encourages Florence to look in the doll's house, so that she will 'remember', for this, he urges, 'is the only way we can be together, again'. When she does look, the doll's house is re-enacting a traumatic event – one that she repressed from her own childhood. Then, as in Gaskell's text, the scene is imprinted around her in the main rooms of the house and she relives the moment her wealthy drunken father shot his wife and then, aiming for Florence, accidentally shot Tom, her illegitimate half-brother, before killing himself. The adult Florence is, all this time, both present and absent in the scene, herself an imprint on a scene from her childhood, and eventually finds herself sitting alongside her childhood self on the stairs. Tom wishes for his sister Florence, and his mother, the housekeeper Maude, whom Florence had not previously recognized from her childhood, to join him. Out of apparent love, and loneliness, Maude has poisoned both herself and Florence so that they may be with Tom – but in the end he seemingly saves his sister by giving her something to make her sick, exonerating him from any culpability, and leaves to join his mother's soul.

5. Mending the Rift

Speaking of children (both living and dead) in Victorian Gothic, Kohlke and Gutleben suggest that 'even when violently angry' they 'are more sinned against than sinning' but that in neo-Victorian texts, 'children themselves may become the actual or suspected *progenerate* source of potential corruption and wrong-doing'.[38] As I have proposed in this chapter, this increased monstrosity across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century

(and the effect of it) can be linked to its corporeality. Whereas in British folklore the dead-child spirit lacked body and agency, and the tales were more about the wayward mother than the child itself, the ghost-child from the nineteenth century onwards is often a more tangible presence (able to touch, bearing wounds) as evidence of the wrongs committed on its body in life and a more targeted concern for the child itself. More specifically, as Julian Wolfreys notes,

> One of the sites of uncanny contestation is the adolescent body or the figure of the child, a figure, arguably for the Victorians, viewed communally as uncanny or unnatural because double, being both self and other: *the same, yet not the same*.[39]

In this sense, the child is potentially not 'the child' at all; rather it is a composite of the fears of the Self, and the corporeal ambivalence of the ghost-child is specifically indicative of the fragmented self, not only doubling, but consistently repeating, the haunting of what cannot be whole – our own childhoods as a safe and innocent space. Yet those stories are also about 'the child' as a societal figure. In both the original texts and the reappropriations, the child's increased malevolence in contemporary narratives is indicative of its agency, an agency that society gave to the child in the late nineteenth century by producing laws, spaces, literature, material goods solely for their benefit that attempted to keep them safe, but also tried to control them. What is achieved by the ghost-children of the narratives of Waters, Hill and Murphy is the reaffirmation of the possibilities of the child to exact revenge and haunt long after trauma takes place; the imprint does not fade, rather it is reprinted and distorted in every generation. However, whereas the ghost-children of the Victorian and Edwardian periods were always appeased, even if by revenge, contemporary versions that exploit the past and a long history of child abuse layer these repeated motifs on our present to perhaps suggest that society had its chance but has not learnt its lesson. They therefore oscillate between ambiguity and appeasement to afford the possibility that the wrath of the child is not so easily placated.

Notes

1   Anne O'Connor, 'Infants Killed before Baptism Haunt Mother (ML4025)', *Béaloideas*, *Iml. 59*, *The Fairy Hill Is on Fire!* (Proceedings of the Symposium on the Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends, 1991), 55–66; See also Jacqueline Simpson, 'The Folklore of Infant Deaths', in *Representations of Childhood Death*, ed. Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 11–28.

2   E. O'Donnell, *Translation of the Divina Commedia of Dante Alighieri* (London: T. Richardson, 1852), 226.

3   Cf. Martin Millett and Rebecca Gowland, 'Infant and Child Burial Rites in Roman Britain: A Study from East Yorkshire', *Britannia* 46 (2015): 171–89; Marianne Hem Eriksen, 'Don't All Mothers Love Their Children? Deposited Infants as Animate Objects in the Scandinavian Iron Age'. *World Archaeology* (2017): 1–19.

4   Juha Pentikäinen, *The Nordic Dead Child Tradition* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1968), 62.

5   O'Connor, 'Infants Killed before Baptism', 56.

6   Ernest Dowson, 'The Cult of the Child', *Critic*, 17 August 1889, reprinted in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson* (London: Desmond Flower & Henry Maas, 1967), 433–35.

7 Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds, eds, 'Introduction', in *Representations of Childhood Death* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 1–10.

8 Jeffrey P. Brosco, 'The Early History of the Infant Mortality Rate in America: A Reflection upon the Past and a Prophecy of the Future', *Pediatrics* 103.2 (1999): 478–85.

9 Mrs J. H. Riddell, 'Walnut-Tree House', in *Weird Stories* (London: J. Hogg, 1882), 1–47 (8, 22).

10 Margaret Oliphant, 'The Open Door', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 131.795 (January 1882): 1–30 (17)

11 Anna Hoyt, 'The Ghost of Little Jacques', *Sharpe's London Magazine* (October 1864): 98–207 (199).

12 Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 44.

13 Elizabeth Gaskell, 'The Old Nurse's Story', in *Gothic Tales* (London: Penguin Group, 2004), 25.

14 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, 'Kentucky's Ghost', *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1868), 624–33 (628); emphasis in the original.

15 Jen Baker, 'Spectral Stowaways: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's' "Kentucky's Ghost" (1868)', *Gothic Studies* 19.2 (November 2017), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.0028.

16 M. R. James, 'Lost Hearts', *Pall Mall Magazine* 7.32 (1895): 639–47 (645); John Fiske, *Myths and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions Interpreted by Comparative Mythology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 32.

17 William H. Burnham, 'The Study of Adolescence', *Pedagogical Seminary* 1.2 (1891): 174–95 (174).

18 Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 161.

19 Sabine Baring-Gould, *A Book of the West*, vol.1 (London: Metheun, 1899), 331.

20 Ellen Glasgow, 'The Shadowy Third', *Scribner's Magazine* 60.6 (December 1916), 658–71.

21 For further discussion of ghost-children in contemporary works and culture, see Karen J. Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

22 Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, 'The Secret Sharer: The Child in Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 5.1 (2012): 1–13 (2).

23 Brian Tallerico, 'Interview with Juan Antonio Bayona and Sergio G. Sanchez', *Deadbolt*, archived from original location 7 October 2008, accessed 3 February 2020, http://bit.ly/2ggQisq.

24 Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black* (London: Vintage, 2016), 56.

25 Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009), 343.

26 Riddell, 'Walnut-Tree House', 33.

27 Catherine Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost-Seers*, vol. II (London: T.C. Newby, 1848), 111.

28 Ibid., 111–13.

29 Waters, *The Little Stranger*, 220.

30 Ibid., 317.

31 Ibid., 380; emphasis added.

32 Ibid., 3; emphases added.

33 Susan Hill, *The Small Hand: A Ghost Story* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 165.

34 Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'A Pair of Hands: An Old Maid's Story', in *Old Fires and Profitable Ghosts: A Book of Stories* (London: Cassell, 1900), 65–84 (84).

35 *The Awakening*, dir. Nick Murphy (CA: FilmFour, 2011), DVD.

36 Audrey Linkman, 'Taken from Life: Post-mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910', *History of Photography* 30.4 (2006): 309–47 (312).

37 Nicola Bown, 'Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Postmortem Portrait Photographs of Children', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14.2 (2009): 8–24 (9).

38 Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds, 'The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothicm: Continuations, Adaptations, Transformations', in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3 (New York: Rodopi, 2012), 1–48 (13).

39 Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 26; emphasis in the original.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Nona. *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians*. London: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Avery, Gillian, and Kimberley Reynolds, eds. *Representations of Childhood Death*. London: Macmillan, 2000.

The Awakening. Directed by Nick Murphy. CA: FilmFour, 2011, DVD.

Baker, Jen. 'Spectral Stowaways: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "Kentucky's Ghost" (1868)'. *Gothic Studies* 19.2 (November 2017): 45–57.

Baring-Gould, Sabine. *A Book of the West*, vol. 1. London: Metheun, 1899.

Bown, Nicola. 'Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Postmortem Portrait Photographs of Children'. *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14.2 (2009): 8–24.

Brosco, Jeffrey P. 'The Early History of the Infant Mortality Rate in America: A Reflection upon the Past and a Prophecy of the Future'. *Pediatrics* 103.2 (1999): 478–85.

Burnham, William H. 'The Study of Adolescence'. *Pedagogical Seminary* 1.2 (1891): 174–95.

Crowe, Catherine. *The Night Side of Nature, or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, vol. 2. London: T.C. Newby, 1848.

Dowson, Ernest. *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*. London: Desmond Flower & Henry Maas, 1967.

Fiske, John. *Myths and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions Interpreted by Comparative Mythology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Gothic Tales*. London: Penguin Group, 2004.

Glasgow, Ellen. 'The Shadowy Third'. *Scribner's Magazine* 60.6 (December 1916): 658–71.

Grimes, Hilary. *The Late Victorian Gothic*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

Hem Eriksen, Marianne. 'Don't All Mothers Love Their Children? Deposited Infants as Animate Objects in the Scandinavian Iron Age'. *World Archaeology* (2017): 1–19.

Hill, Susan. *The Small Hand: A Ghost Story*. London: Profile Books, 2010.

———. *The Woman in Black*. London: Vintage, 2016.

Hoyt, Anna. 'The Ghost of Little Jacques'. *Sharpe's London Magazine* (October 1864): 98–207.

James, M. R. *Collected Ghost Stories*. London: Edward Arnold, 1931.

———. 'Lost Hearts'. *Pall Mall Magazine* 7.32 (1895): 639–47.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben, eds. *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-imagined Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3. New York: Rodopi, 2012.

Linkman, Audrey. 'Taken from Life: Post-mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910'. *History of Photography* 30.4 (2006): 309–47.

Millett, Martin, and Rebecca Gowland. 'Infant and Child Burial Rites in Roman Britain: A Study from East Yorkshire'. *Britannia* 46 (2015): 171–89.

Morey, Anne, and Claudia Nelson. 'The Secret Sharer: The Child in Neo-Victorian Fiction'. *Neo-Victorian Studies* 5.1 (2012): 1–13.

O'Connor, Anne. 'Infants Killed before Baptism Haunt Mother (ML4025)'. *Béaloideas*, *Iml. 59, The Fairy Hill Is on Fire!* Proceedings of the Symposium on the Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends, 1991.

O'Donnell, E. *Translation of the Divina Commedia of Dante Alighieri*. London: T. Richardson, 1852.

Oliphant, Margaret. *A Beleaguered City and Other Tales of the Seen and the Unseen*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000.

Pentikäinen, Juha. *The Nordic Dead Child Tradition*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1968.

Quiller-Couch, Arthur. *Old Fires and Profitable Ghosts: A Book of Stories*. London: Cassell, 1900.

Renner, Karen J. *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Riddell, J. H. *Weird Stories*. London: J. Hogg, 1882.

Smajic, Srdjan, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Stuart Phelps, Elizabeth. 'Kentucky's Ghost'. *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1868, 624–33.
Tallerico, Brian. 'Interview with Juan Antonio Bayona and Sergio G. Sanchez'. *Deadbolt*, archived from original location 7 October 2008. Accessed 3 February 2020. http://bit.ly/2ggQisq.
Waters, Sarah. *The Little Stranger*. London: Virago, 2009.
Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.