Hors thème

Spectrality in the Short Story ‘The Fly’ by Katherine Mansfield

Le spectral dans la nouvelle « The Fly » de Katherine Mansfield

Jacques Sohier

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RÉSUMÉS

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Le spectral est une dimension centrale de la nouvelle « The Fly » de Katherine Mansfield. Le spectral renvoie aux spectres et autres apparitions inquiétantes, à tout ce qui est relié à la mort et à la façon dont l’être humain s’en accommode. La notion de spectral est commentée en lien avec les analyses de Jacques Derrida qui portent sur une ontologisation des vestiges. L’essai de Sigmund Freud « Le Deuil et la mélancolie » offre des éléments pour saisir une phénoménologie du processus de deuil que la nouvelle décrit avec minutie. Les écrits autobiographiques de Katherine Mansfield permettent d’établir un lien entre la mort au champ d’honneur du frère de Katherine Mansfield et la mise à mort d’une mouche par le protagoniste. La nouvelliste dépeint une économie sacrificielle qui se défait à mesure que le deuil devient une tâche immaîtrisable.

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Mots-clés :

K. Mansfield, J. Derrida, S. Freud, “The Fly”, autobiographie, deuil,nouvelle, ontologisation des restes, sacrifice, spectrality

Keywords :

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TEXTE INTÉGRAL

1The short story ‘The Fly’ written by Katherine Mansfield is deeply concerned with spectrality, with spectres and phantoms (Mansfield 353–358). It is not a horror story, in so far as it does not depict horrible deeds that instil fear and terror in an innocent victim and vicariously in the reader. Nevertheless, the short story has its awe-inspiring moments, its ‘spectral moments’, for example when the main character who is simply referred to as ‘the boss’ methodically proceeds to assassinate a fly that has fallen into his inkpot. This excruciating moment in the life of the boss and his hapless victim takes place just after the boss has contemplated his son’s photograph which is described as being ‘spectral’, ‘one of those spectral photographers’ parks’ (354). Spectrality is first attached to a picture showing a boy in uniform who died in the Great War.

2The father whose much-loved son died six years previously is shown as being at odds with himself and with his son. He dislikes the look that the son gives back to him in the photograph in a truly uncanny fashion:

He wasn’t feeling as he wanted to feel. He decided to get up and have a look at the boy’s photograph. But it wasn’t a favourite photograph of his;
the expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking. The boy had never looked like that. (354)

3In the statement, ‘He wasn’t feeling as he wanted to feel’, ‘a logic of spectrality’ is introduced. This logic is defined by Jacques Derrida as a suspension between ‘the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (“to be or not to be”, in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity’ (Derrida 1994, 12). J. Derrida is commenting upon Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* whose protagonist sees the ghost of his father enjoining him to kill his step-father. In the same spirit, I will read ‘The Fly’ as a text haunted by an absence, that of an absent son, a ghost, haunting his father, the so-called ‘boss’ and remonstrating with him from beyond the grave, preventing the father from laying the past to rest. The absence that underpins the short story will also be referred to the pain felt by Katherine Mansfield when she lost her beloved brother, Leslie Heron Beauchamp, during the Great War.

4Reading the spectral in this short story implies an entanglement with the production of meaning, with the way words have of not being quite themselves, flying like flies writing out everything they write in their acrobatic flights and thereby causing spectrality effects. I shall focus on the underlying work of mourning which is consistently suggested in the short story and I shall make sense of the killing of the fly by the boss by referring to Freud’s famous essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917). Lastly, I shall consider the sacrificial economy and its work of substitution which result in the triumph of a deathly economy.

5In ghostly fashion, the return of the dead is already inscribed in the structure of the sentence: the boss 'did not draw old Woodifield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform' (354). In the negation, 'he did not draw', surfaces a traumatic memory that literally haunts the character who later groans, 'My son!' Spectrally in the picture, the 'grave-looking boy' is already six years ahead of his time, a boy who looks grave, sees the grave ahead, a being-to-the-grave. For the boss, the news of his son's death came as a deadly blow:

For it was strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep forever. 'My son!' groaned the boss. But no tears came yet. In the past, in the first months and even years after the boy's death, he had only to say those words to be overcome by such grief that nothing short of a violent fit of weeping could relieve him . . . Other men might recover, might live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible? (356)

6The work of mourning is a strange process. How is it made possible? On the face of it, it seems a normal process of mourning is described in the short story. In 'Mourning and Melancholia' Freud dwells on 'the work' to be produced in mourning:

In the first place, normal mourning, too, overcomes the loss of the object, and it, too, while its lasts, absorbs all the energies of the ego . . . . Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the questions whether it shall share this fate . . . We may perhaps suppose that this work of severance is so slow and gradual that by the time it has been finished the expenditure of energy necessary for it is also dissipated.
(Freud 255)

7With Freud, 'normal mourning' means accepting a 'verdict', performing 'a severance', energies 'running their courses', accepting both the death of the object and one's own death. At the end of the process, in due time, there is 'triumph' for the mourner who has overcome grief and then a more problematic phase of 'dissipation'.

8This is not to say that Freud's argument is not to the point, but that in Derridean fashion, pathological mourning haunts normal mourning, as death is present in life. In Katherine Mansfield's short story, we may even have to recognise that it is 'normal' mourning that haunts a pathological dynamics of overcoming grief. After six years of grief caused by the loss of his son, the boss is depicted as drawing narcissistic satisfaction from being alive. He has refurbished his office and is proud of having it admired by his friend:

'I've had it done up lately', he explained, as he had explained for the past—how many?—weeks. 'New carpet', and he pointed to the bright, red carpet with a pattern of large white rings. 'New furniture', and he nodded towards the massive bookcase and the table with legs like twisted treacle. 'Electric heating! He waved almost exultantly towards the five transparent, pearly sausages glowing so softly in the tilted copper pan.' (353–4)

9This description has an oneiric quality as it conjoins the narrative voice and the direct speech of the character to different elements that undergo extensive transformations. Objects are oddly proportioned. As in a dream, the bookcase assumes an uncanny 'massive' size while the bars of the electric heater are metamorphosed incongruously into sausages. On the face of it, the boss is all aglow with the newness of his furniture but these pieces of furniture have metaphoric values. The pattern of large white rings on a red carpet seems a potent symbol to evoke the attempt to encircle, to circumscribe the immensity of redness, itself suggestive of the blood-bath of the First World War.

10This character is portrayed as deceptively believing that the past can be laid to rest while on the contrary the rest of the story shows he is mired in it. The boss is depicted as hallucinating sausages that are far from appetising as they are the stuff that dreams are made on. In a fantasmatic way, the pearly and transparent sausages suggest that a fantasy has been constructed to form an immense white screen put up to hold a trauma at bay. As Slavoj Zizek puts it, 'if what we experience as 'reality' is structured by fantasy and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real, then *reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*. In the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality, and it is in dream that we encounter the traumatic Real' (Zizek 57). Beyond the transparency of the fantasmastic desire for sausages something has gone horribly wrong.

11In contradiction to Freud's theory, the character is made to sound triumphant as if he had succeeded at long last in mastering the severance that Freud makes indispensable in the work of mourning. The moment of triumph comes after six years of grief when the boss takes stock of his life and comes to realise that wastage has occurred. Compensating for the loss, he is presented as making up for lost time by an expenditure of energy on himself, an expenditure of wealth on his working environment. It seems as if the boss had come to terms with 'the verdict of reality that the objects no longer exists' as Freud puts it. The boss is described as seemingly having accepted his son's demise which was traumatic, 'But all that was over and done with as though it never had been.' The day had come when Macey had handed him the telegram that brought the whole place crashing about his head:

'Deeply regret to inform you . . . ; And he had left the office a broken man, with his life in ruins. Six years ago . . . How quickly time passed! It might have happened yesterday.' (356)

12The 'mental pain' derived from mourning remains forever in the near present. It becomes 'an open wound', as Freud says in his analysis focusing on the 'complex of melancholia'. However, more than differences between 'melancholia' and 'mourning', it is rather differences between 'normal' mourning and 'pathological' mourning that are relevant in the story. Katherine Mansfield haunts Freud's essay because in her portrayal of grief she unsettles the categories Freud tends to see as clear cut. Freud writes about pathological mourning:

Where there is a disposition to obsessional neurosis the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, *i.e.* that he has willed it. . . . If the love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—takes refuge in

narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.
(Freud 251)

13In the short story, the obsessional state is not depression but mourning which is shown as not being worked through because the character in effect is depicted as 'deciding' against it. The boss keeps making 'decisions', about his business, about the refurbishing of his office, about his son's life, but in the sphere of his emotions he encounters a field of resistance:

The boss covered his face with his hands. He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep . . . But no tears came yet. . . . Other men might recover, might live their loss down, but not he. (356)

14In spite of the decision to remain a life mourner, a mourner for life, for the duration of his life, time has produced an imperfect, imbalanced, uncertain work of mourning against the very will of the mourner, countermanding the will to mourn.

15Katherine Mansfield wondered in her journal: 'how is it possible to mourn "normally", if at all?' It is noteworthy that she lost a beloved brother in the Great War, Leslie Heron Beauchamp, and that the spirit of this younger brother hovers about the description of the boss's dead son. In November 1915, Katherine Mansfield wrote in her diary:

I think I have known for a long time that life was over for me, but I never realized it or acknowledged it until my brother died. Yes, though he is lying in the middle of a little wood in France and I am still walking upright and feeling the sun and the wind from the sea, I am just as much dead as he is.
(Murry 38)

16How is it possible to be alive and yet to feel dead inside? It is strange for a mourner to mourn in spite of himself as is shown in 'The Fly'. In this short story, the boss is described as keeping alive the ghost of his son:

It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodifield sprang the remark upon him about the boy's grave. It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he had seen the boy lying there with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. For it was strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever. (356)

For the boss, his son is 'unchanged', 'unblemished' and 'asleep'. Besides a denial of death, a fantasm of seeing the dead son 'stared' at by Woodifield's daughters transpires. It all sounds as if the body of the son had just been laid in an open grave and Woodifield's daughters were the only ones to bury the dead, the father being nowhere near. About mourning and burial J. Derrida writes:

It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning . . . Nothing could be worse for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is

buried where—and it is necessary (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, he remains there. Let him stay there and move no more!
(Derrida 1994, 30)

17Among other things, the difficulty in localising the dead undermines mourning in the short story. Woodifield has for all appearances 'overcome' grief, since he says to his friend, 'they're quite near each other, it seems', intimating a proximity in death that may not have been present in life. The boss, on the other hand, lacks certainty in the matter of localisation. Woodifield asks him whether, in effect, he has buried the dead:

'You've not been across have yer?'
'No, no!' For various reasons the boss had not been across.
'There's miles of it,' quavered old Woodifield, 'and it's all as neat as a garden. Flowers growing on all the graves. Nice broad paths.' It was plain from his voice how much he liked a nice broad path. (355)

18Woodifield has made some sense of death which has undergone a metamorphosis. Death is shared by many, 'there's miles of it'. It covers a whole space that receives his approval. He likes the proper, the neatness of paths and flowers that euphemise death and spectres. Unlike Woodifield, the boss has kept away from this side of the work of mourning. In his case, the 'work' of mourning is delayed or even replaced by his own work, the business that remains undefined in the short story but which is his life purpose: 'Ever since his birth he had worked at building up this business for him; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy. Life itself had come to have no other meaning' (356).

19What the boss has lost is a form of a methodically constructed perfection. The father 'possessed' the ideal son in many ways: 'The boy had been in the office learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they had started off together, they had come back by the same train. And what congratulations he had received as the boy's father!' (356) The word 'possession' in its indeterminacy is apt to suggest a logic that leaves no room for difference. The father made 'a large expenditure of psychical energy' on his perfect son, as Freud puts it, and engendered a spectral son. However, the investor is deprived of 'the right' return from the only one who could say the 'right word'. The continuation of the self-same is broken and the promise of the future is not kept, 'How on earth could he have slaved, denied himself, kept going all those years without the promise for ever before him of the boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off?' This work of calculation involved in slaving, denying oneself, without the right promise ahead conjures 'the logic of sacrifice' that J. Derrida comments upon in his *Giving Death* (Derrida 1999, 12).

20Before coming to that aspect it is necessary to quote from the passage where the boss 'gives death' to a fly. This turning point occurs when the boss looks at his son's photograph and becomes the prey of an uncanny feeling:

Help! Help! said those struggling legs. But the sides of the inkpot were wet and slippery; it fell back again and began to swim. The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a piece of blotting paper.
For a fraction of a second it lay still on the dark patch that oozed round it. . . .

All the same, there was something timid and weak about its efforts now . . . The last blot fell on the soaked blotting-paper, and the draggled fly lay in it and did not stir . . . 'Come on', said the boss. 'Look sharp!' and he stirred it with his pen—in vain. Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead. (357-8)

21Katherine Mansfield weaves a very intricate pattern in the text. She invites the reader to experience this moment from dissymmetrical and irreconcilable points of view. On the one hand, there are the perceptions of the fly that gradually sees its chances of survival coming to nothing. On the other hand, there is the boss playing at God and experimenting with a life form. Within this pattern, the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham can also be read. Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac to show his faith and because he trembled before the Almighty. God acknowledged his trembling subject and saved Isaac, leading Abraham to sacrifice a goat in his stead. This also evokes the sacrifice of Christ for the love of his father who is in heaven and sees all in secret.

22Concerning 'the sacrifice of Isaac', J. Derrida makes the interesting point that Abraham gains *misthos*, a noble return one obtains by a disinterested sacrifice or by a gift, as opposed to *merces* which is a terrestrial, mediocre retribution (Derrida 1999, 143). About this economy of sacrifice Derrida further writes:

It is sometimes Christian *versus* Judaic, sometimes Judeo-Christian.
It always supposes a calculation that pretends to reach beyond calculation, beyond the total sum of what is calculable, as the finite sum of the self-same. . . . In the space opened by this measureless economy, a new teaching of the gift or of charity calls for a giving back, an efficiency, not to say productivity, but which is uncalculable for creatures and which is left to the judgement of *the father in so far as he sees all in secret*.
(Derrida 1999, 145. My translation)

23In the story 'The Fly' something seems to have gone wrong. Katherine Mansfield may be in a ferocious mood at the atrocities of the First World War and God is not in heaven. In a letter, she intimated that human beings can only live by choosing to forget some things and by keeping relevant others:

We only live by somewhat absorbing the past—changing it. I mean really examining it and dividing what is important from what is not (for there is waste) and transforming it so that it becomes part of the life of the spirit and we are *free of it*. It's no longer our personal past, it's just in the highest possible sense, our servant. I mean that it is no longer our master.
(Murry 67)

24In the short story there is no forgetting or forgiving, but perhaps a 'sacred debt', 'the debt of love', she alludes to when she says in a letter that writers have this ability to bring the dead back to life again:

Yes, I want to write about my own country till I simply exhaust my store. Not only because it is a 'sacred debt' that I pay to my country because my brother and I were born there, but also because in long to renew them in writing. Ah the people—the people we loved—of them, too, I want to write. Another

‘debt of love’.
(Stead 65)

25What Katherine Mansfield portrays in this story is a sacrifice that breaks down in its economy, making the work of mourning impossible and the sifting of the past an unmasterable task. The fly comes to stand as a spectral substitute for the son who gave his life for king and country. As it is bombarded by a deluge of inky blots that conjure up shells falling on trenches, the fly becomes anthropomorphised and assumes Christ-like proportions. The fly begins its progress as an insect, but it is quickly compared to ‘a minute cat’. Then all the thoughts and emotions that are imagined or imparted to it make this progress a Passion that never seems to end. At first, the fly experiences joy at having survived, ‘Now one could imagine that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully’ (357). Then as another shell explodes, ‘The little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next’. The fly is experiencing hell on earth as ‘painfully, it dragged itself forward’. As the last drop of ink is about to fall its forces are fast ebbing away, ‘there was something weak and timid about its effort now’. The death of the fly is finally pronounced: ‘it did not stir’, ‘the fly was dead’. Its corpse ends up in the waste-paper basket.

26The dramatic tension reaches a climax because during the agonising process the victim never knew the reason of it all. In the biblical story, Isaac was saved by divine intervention that stayed his father’s hand. In Katherine Mansfield’s short story the hand is relentlessly sadistic in its death dealing. Indeed, Katherine Mansfield rewrites the sacrifice of Isaac, writing against the grain of it to point out the immense regression that has happened as fathers sent their sons to their deaths in an impossible substitution. As J. Derrida argues, one can give everything to the other, including one’s death, but it will never be the gift of immortality as one cannot die in the place of the other. One cannot free the other of their own death: ‘death is without possible substitution’ (Derrida 1999, 68. My translation). It does seem this impossibility haunts the text as well as its protagonist.

27In the short story, there is regression because the sacrifice does not substitute an animal for a human being and there is no God to mediate between the boss and his sacrificial victim. God is dead and along with it died the old economy made of promise, redemption and grace. In the new deathly economy, the boss takes on the attributes of the Almighty and engages in a sadistic power relation, ‘As the fly tries its wings down came a great heavy blot. What would it make of that? What indeed!’ When the victim seemingly acknowledges God’s awesome power, it only evinces applause at the resilience of instinctual life, ‘The little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next. He’s a plucky little devil, thought the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly’s courage’. The man with god-like powers places the fly in a double-bind. He expects, wants and admires the fight for survival but, at the same time, this fight to endure is deliberately undermined by further experiments, ‘the fly had again finished its laborious task, and the boss had just time to refill his pen, to shake fair and square on the new-cleaned body yet another dark drop. What about it this time?’
A ghastly parody of God instilling the spirit in life in his creatures is proposed, ‘And he actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process.’ The writer’s masterful irony surfaces as Katherine Mansfield is giving free play to her indictment of ‘phalogocentrism’.

28The effects of such phalogocentrism are suggested throughout the short story as there seems to be a strong undercurrent of impotency that suffuses the whole scene when the boss stares ambiguously at a powerless fly. Logocentrism surfaces in the boss's behaviour who 'decides' about matters of life and death, 'and the boss decided that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen deep into the inkpot'. The phallic thrust with which the pen is dipped into the ink illustrates the enjoyment of sexual potency. But this potency is questionable as it amounts to an orgy of uncontrollable deathly drives. J. Derrida has created the term of 'anthérection', which condenses the phenomenon of erection and that of the flowering of buds (Derrida 1974, 109). In the story, Woodifield's daughters visit a cemetery in Belgium and the graves of the soldiers are described as 'it's all as neat as a garden. Flowers growing on all the graves'. Vital processes are out of joint as they are wrongly placed. They happen in the wrong place and on the wrong side of the grave.

29Logocentrism transpires when the boss voices his ideology of overcoming difficulties, 'That was the way to tackle things; that was the right spirit. Never say die'. In this deathly economy, the hollow slogan 'never say die' sounds nihilistic. In the face of conditions that allow the boss a supply of unlimited ink and bloating-paper to drown and absorb all life, this slogan might easily be replaced by an equally unsatisfactory one, 'live and let die'.

30Katherine Mansfield proposes a scene of writing that degenerates into overwhelming violence. As the pen is dipped into the ink we would expect a writing process to occur, but instead the pen and the ink become instruments of torture wielded by a demented experimenter who keeps the fly under his powerful eye. But even deathly representatives of a broken sacrificial economy have their anxious moment, 'The boss lifted the corpse on the end of the paper-knife and flung it into the waste-paper basket. But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt positively frightened'. In another short story entitled 'A Cup of Tea', Katherine Mansfield has an impersonal narrator who asks, 'Why be so cruel as to take anyone to pieces?' (Mansfield 345). Why be so cruel indeed. The protagonist of the story is made to feel guilt-ridden, but he is above all in the grip of death-anxiety that does not speak its name.

31The boss is a mourner whose work of mourning is unfinished since he has lost a son, a life without a price. Concurrently, as Freud sees it, the ego may wonder whether he shall share this fate, that is to say death. The highly tense moment of the assassination of the fly is underpinned by the anxiety of death. The fly itself is an ambiguous reminder of death, the Great Reaper, that is in wait, 'it began the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings. Over and under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under the scythe'. The to and fro movements of the fly are suggestively compared to a scythe being sharpened for the work ahead. From a narrative point of view, the boss is the focaliser at this moment in the story. This comparison can be read as the impact on the character's conscience of what is lying in wait for him. It amounts to a representation of a death that lies in wait for the boss. The sadistic killing of the fly exemplifies a will to have it out with death. His son has been shown as having given his life for his country in a priceless sacrifice of his life. The boss finds himself in the position of meditating upon his son's death and upon his own death. J. Derrida calls *melete thanatou*, a meditation on the best way to die, to receive death (Derrida 1999, 29). Ironically, the boss performs death on the fly to approach death itself in a tragic attempt to master the unmasterable. But death, as J. Derrida adds, is

‘without possible substitution’ (Derrida 1999, 68). A son may die, but the father cannot be freed of his own death nor exchange it in any way.

32On the face of it, the intent with which the boss performs the sacrifice of the fly acquires significance. The fly itself, displacing anxiety, becomes the factor of death. The whole scene represents an attempt to assimilate death by a close watch of its manifestations, of its possible coming, ‘“Come on,” said the boss. “look sharp!” And he stirred it with his pen—in vain’. This very expression is repeated at the end of the story as the deathly economy is about to be re-launched. The self-assured master tyrannises over his subordinate, but the expression ‘look sharp!’ does not sound quite the same as before. Instead of an order that is other-oriented, the looking sharp seems destined to be a self-reminder to a very uncertain self:

He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey. ‘Bring me some fresh bloating-paper’, he said sternly, ‘and look sharp about it’. And while the old dog padded away, he fell to wondering what it was he had been thinking about before. What was it? It was . . . He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember. (358)

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