

BURNT ISLAND

Intro

Novelist Alice Thompson was born and brought up in Edinburgh. A former keyboard player with relatively famous band of the 1980s (The Woodentops), she was the joint winner with Graham Swift of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Scottish Writer of the Year¹ for her novel *Justine* (1996)); she has also received other awards afterwards. Among her works we could also mention *Pandora's Box* (1998), *Pharos* (2002), *The Existential Detective* (2010) and her last novel, *The Book Collector* (2015).

After *Pharos: A Ghost Story*, praised by Stephen King himself, she returns to a Scottish island as the setting of another horror novel, but this time with a more original, ambitious and satisfying work: *Burnt Island* is the funny at times, but mostly anguishing story of Max Long, a writer who has run out of inspiration, and tries to recover it on a solitary island off the north of Scotland. He is offered a kind of fellowship, a three-month sabbatical, from an unknown benefactor to write a novel, which Max hopes will become a blockbuster and boost his creativity. This benefactor, around whose identity there is a lot of secrecy, happens to be a successful novelist, an author of bestsellers who lives on the island.

Burnt Island relies heavily on the unbalanced personality of its protagonist. It actually begins with a session of psychoanalysis where Dr. Hoffman² (a female psychiatrist) seems to be dealing with Long's suicidal ideas. He claims to have seen his *doppelganger* (an omen of death). We glimpse his stagnant career and his unsuccessful family life (recently divorced, he has lost contact with his son). There is,

¹ This prestigious prize, established in 1919, is Britain's longest running literary award.

² It is impossible not to think of E.T.A. Hoffman, author of "The Sandman" (1816), who inspired Freud. Thompson has admitted that she is interested in Freud, dreams and the unconscious.

as well, a weird sense of *déjà vu* in her seeming to know her patient's story in advance: "It was as if she had known everything before and everything he'd said had simply been confirming what she already knew" (p. 2). Thus, the framing device (a session of psychoanalysis) invites the reader to interpret it all as some kind of dream (or nightmare!), as part of a therapy to bring to the surface what lies buried in his subconscious; in other words, a projection of his subconscious.

After this Prologue, chapter 1 is misleadingly comic, with a series of accidents happening to Max on the ferry and on arriving at the island, which shows us a character verging on the grotesque. We also realize Max has a rather unstable personality, susceptible to people's opinion of him, and with an acute perception of himself and his innermost feelings –like, for example, a brooding sense of resentment which he tells himself to stop. Max gets secretly angry with people who state the obvious, probably because of his sensitivity with language: "Does the cave have a name?" Max asked. 'Prometheus' cave,' the ferryman replied. 'After Prometheus.'" (p.6). When, on the ferry to Burnt Island, the boat veered suddenly, sending his suitcase overboard (it slid over the side), the ferryman asked: "Had you not stored it properly? [...] It's always best to store things properly' [...] Why did people insist on stating the obvious" (p.5). Later on, we perceive his lack of confidence, his fear and his sense of guilt about the blank page; he feels unsuccessful and a failure, despite having already published seven books –they are merely "like the charred bones of a ritual sacrifice" (p. 23). Max needs certainties in his life. Thompson has explained the symbolism or significance of the protagonist's surname: "I was looking at the word 'long' as in 'longing' –he is deeply romantic and dissatisfied [...] He is longing for success in his career, longing for love, and longing for some kind of resolution to his lack of contentment." ("In Conversation with Alice Thompson", *The Gothic*

Imagination, 1). He could be simply exhausted after a long period of hard work and further estrangement from his family, but, as the plot advances, we grow more and more convinced that he suffers from paranoia.

The novel is full of ambiguities and mysteries; above all, perhaps, the doubt whether the story is the product of Long's deranged mind or not. The relatively recent theoretical framework known as Haunting or Spectrality seems to be relevant to approach the novel; it has two sources, both of which will be useful here, with their respective implications:

- a) Jacques Derrida used the term *spectre* to refer to what is neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent, thus blurring borders, knowing no barriers between past, present and future. The spectre moves undetermined between concepts, destabilizing them because it's a concept without concept, and thus, impossible to define.

In *Burnt Island*, we find ourselves on the liminal territory betw sanity & madness, also between reality and dream, and more importantly, between reality and fiction –reality and fiction in a double dimension: not only reality vs. the fiction of *Burnt Island* by Alice Thompson, but also vs. “Burnt Island” by Max Long, both of which are and are not the same thing. Besides, “[n]arrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feeling, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (cited in Royle, *The Uncanny* p. 256). The book Max Long is writing (and we are reading?) could be created by the ‘Twilight Zone’ of his subconscious.

- b) On the other hand, the *phantom* is the trope used by Hungarian psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok to represent the return

of an element that had been repressed (precisely because it was embarrassing); the phantom indicates the return of trauma. Since it involves awkward secrets, the mind tries to keep them concealed. Max Long is haunted by feelings of insecurity, frustration and guilt, which keep on reappearing once and again. Psychoanalytical sessions and the very act of writing bring to the surface what remains hidden or unsaid. In psychology, the return of the repressed is considered “an experience of haunting, the return of that which should be (psychologically) ‘buried’” (Defalco 773); it undermines identity. One way or another, Thompson’s interest in Freud becomes evident in most of her novels.

Quite a number of the shapes spectrality may adopt, according to Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, are present in *B.I.*; among others: madness, epilepsy “or other forms of what might appear merely mechanical or automatic life” (Royle, *Uncanny* 1), such as sleepwalking, or states of trance (Bennet and Royle 38), the fear of being buried alive, related to claustrophobia (39), telepathy (uncanny “not least because it involves the thought that your thoughts are perhaps not your own, however private and concealed”) (39-40), the impression of *déjà vu* and, in general, “strange kinds of repetition, including the idea of the double or *doppelganger* (37). In the novel there is also plenty of silence, solitude and darkness –something one doesn’t know one’s way about in, or in Freud’s words, what is “concealed and kept hidden” (132). It is no wonder, then, that Alice Thompson has dedicated the novel to Nicholas Royle. All of these forms adopted by the uncanny question what one is or feels; in other words, they undermine identity. Max has visions which become more and more terrible, his self, seeming to vanish somehow; he experiences a crisis of identity.

Spectral and gothic elements merge in *Burnt Island*, creating a sinister atmosphere. When, in desperation, Max decides to waste his talent writing a horror blockbuster, determined to succeed this time using the most gruesome elements of Gothic stories, he begins to have terrible visions, which are incorporated to the novel he is writing: doppelgängers, mysterious shadows, strange disappearances, bird attacks... They all appear in *Burnt Island*, which seems to be the novel that Max Long eventually writes. The shift from scenes of almost slapstick humour at the beginning, to others full of mystery and even terror contributes to the readers' disconcert as to how to interpret the events in the novel, helping them tune to Long's frail mental condition. Throughout the novel, we monitor Max's reactions and evolution (or rather, involution, since his fears and obsessions grow in number and intensity). One of the most uncanny elements in the novel is the protagonist's feeling of uncertainty about the things that happen around him and the way he perceives them; in the words of Nicholas Royle: "feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (*The Uncanny*, p. 1). The very humour of the early scenes (apparently out of place) is itself uncanny, since "the uncanny is never far from something comic" (p.2), perhaps because it is something familiar in an unfamiliar context.

The mental condition of the protagonist appears to be paranoia. Paranoia is described as an extreme or unreasonable feeling that other people have a bad opinion of you, do not like you or are going to harm or criticize you. Max feels that the islanders, who behave strangely, are particularly hostile and nasty with him. He seems to be losing contact with reality. This mental disorder makes the relationship with others very difficult; it is normally associated with egotistical people, with a clear narcissist behaviour, a strong lack of self-confidence and symptoms of an inferiority

complex (a feeling that you are not as good, attractive, intelligent, etc. as other people); a person with an inferiority complex is prone to depression; thus, Long's inclination to suicide fits in.

At the same time, Fairfax is a sinister character whose very fame makes Max feel even smaller: he shrinks when he learns that the owner of the impressive house on the island is the well-known writer James Fairfax; when he eventually visits him, he feels overwhelmed; the house itself is pervaded by a disturbing atmosphere. Both Max and the readers perceive some sort of weird mismatch between Fairfax's hiding from the exposed life of success, and his evident worldly self-confidence. A clear contrast is immediately established between the two characters: Max is human in all his weakness and vulnerability, while James seems almighty and in full control of life, despite the fact that his wife and the previous writer staying on Burnt Island, Daniel Levy, have disappeared. Like in earlier novels, we find a pair of contrastive characters, male in this case. Nevertheless, and perhaps more importantly, both Max and James, are ambitious and vain, and both seem to have paid a high price in their search for success—their very similarities highlighted by their being so different from each other.

Burnt Island, which appears initially as Max Long's haven, offering him the possibility of salvation from literary sterility, becomes, in fact, his death-place. However, the effects of setting the novel on an island go far beyond the topic of literary inspiration implicit in the plot, and point at more profound issues (almost existential), such as the consequence of living today in a dehumanized world: in the words of Nicholas Royle, the uncanny “has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves” (6). In this respect, and putting aside political questions related to nationalism (which would perhaps oversimplify the picture), I think it would

be more fruitful in the case of *Burnt Island* to look at the demands of the literary career as reflected in Max Long: do you have to split yourself to live other lives, the lives of your literary characters, to be a writer? Do you have to isolate yourself on an island (metaphorically or symbolically) to be a writer? Challenging Donne's words "No man is an island", aren't we islands ever more? Max is desperately yearning for completeness, longing for unity.

More generally, is our world too rational? Have we lost our capacity for vision? Are we forced "simply" to produce in a dehumanized world where success is all that matters and death remains a mystery?

Finally, a small consideration about the setting. Thompson has admitted that she normally begins her books with a sense of place, which works out fine for her. She likes islands –*Pharos* is set on one. As an artist, Thompson knows that this type of solitary environment is ideal for writers to carry out a process of introspection. In her own words: "I think a sense of being on your own is paramount [...]. An island allows you to fall back on yourself" (*The Island Review*, p.4). She has a very strong sense of place, which makes the most of islands, to which she has always felt particularly attracted. But it was her stay as a Writer in Residence in the Shetlands that marked an evident high point, giving her the opportunity to gain a new perspective.

Generally, islands stand for isolation, confinement and some sort of solipsism. Many literary works take place on one (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Robinson*, *Treasure Island*, *Island*, etc.). The island is the topographical parallel of the psychological crypt of the mind (which contains terrible secrets that must remain hidden): the confinement imposed by the 'insularity' of this small isle, scarcely inhabited, where feelings become intense, deepens the whole experience. According to

Abraham and Torok, the mind becomes a crypt which hides a secret that should never be known. Burnt Island becomes the topographical equivalent.

Spectrality merges nicely with the Scottish supernatural, which, in the words of Monica Germanà, challenges “the stable boundaries of seen and unseen, real and imagined, same and other” (p.2). Max is trapped in the prison of his own mind, he is half-dead; at least, he isn’t fully alive, as we perceive from the beginning, when in one of his sessions he admits that the island where he visualizes himself represents not exactly a kind of death wish, but “a living death wish, a perpetual sense of living doom” (p.1). On the island, he only becomes a victim of another character’s plans to take advantage of his work. In the novel, the barely inhabited Burnt Island becomes Max’s death place. Burnt Island becomes a nightmarish place where distinctions between reality and dream, self and other, life and death disappear.

CONCLUSION

In this modern Gothic novel, Alice Thompson uses conventions from different genres (e.g. mystery, satire, gothic, irony...) to create an uncanny work which, because of its very evanescence, builds up several layers of meaning.

My focus has been primarily the psychological plane: the paranoid condition of the protagonist reveals a crisis of identity; he is split or torn between his aspirations and what he perceives as the sordid reality of his life (of which we don’t have real evidence). He is quickly losing contact with reality, isolating himself on an island in order to write –the very act of writing becoming a long session of psychoanalysis by means of which he tries obsessively to free himself from his anguish, writing the story of his life to its end.

The novel he eventually writes is very likely the one we read. We are never quite sure (as Max is never too sure, either) whether what he recounts is happening in front of him, or is just a figment of his imagination.

Spectrality has proved, I hope, a useful theoretical framework to approach *Burnt Island*, suggesting, at the same time, liminal territories such as those between sanity and madness, or fiction and reality, with Derrida's *spectre*, on the one hand, and also the return of trauma (the *phantom* of Abraham and Torok), on the other, secrets being kept within the crypt of the mind/island.

With *Burnt Island* Thompson turns her interest in Freud and psychoanalysis into a literary work of art. Hauntology is an interesting theoretical framework which allows the study of liminal spaces like those between sanity and madness, reality and illusion or fiction and reality.

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