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The inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but as dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living. – Jacques Derrida, “Fors”

The (Meta)Architecture of Henrik Ibsen’s *Gjengangere*

Walking through walls might be the movement par excellence of the ghost. Given to disregard for what the living usually deem concrete, the ghost gestures toward the continual failure or impermanence of architectural functions of containment and exclusion.

Henrik Ibsen’s *Gjengangere* is a highly architectural play; it is possible to argue that the construction site behind the home takes a certain “center stage,” despite the fact that it takes no part in the play’s scenery. In fact, this construction site is the central, unseen obsession of the play. Mrs. Alving is erecting an orphanage in memoriam to the late Captain Alving, and her primary intention for the structure is that it should *both* contain and exclude the ghost. The failure of this containment and exclusion becomes clear as the events of the play unfold and as all manner of walls part before the ghost of the father.¹

In this paper, I will address what I am calling the (meta)architecture of Henrik Ibsen’s *Gjengangere* using the psychoanalytical model of the crypt offered by Abraham and Torok in *L’écorce et le noyau* [*The Shell and the Kernel*], a figure greatly admired by Jacques Derrida.² Mrs. Alving’s orphanage mimics her crypt, a structure in which the deceased father is held after “incorporation,” a process of non-mourning that seeks to preserve a fantasized stasis of ideality –

¹ I’ve used the term ghost here, but it is important to note that *gjengangere* implies the “undead” (one who walks again), not unlike the term “revenant” in French.

² Of course, an “earlier” source for my use of the prefix meta- is Freud. Both “Mourning and Melancholia” and “The Uncanny” serve as “meta-texts” or specters of this paper.

in this case the Father³ (Abraham and Torok 113). The crypt can serve as a means of exploring the figures of the Father and the *gjengangere*. The crypt can also serve as a figure in which architecture becomes (meta)architecture, because it complicates the permanence and impermeability of walls and confuses the inside for the outside.

In conclusion, I will move from the (meta)architecture of the crypt to the architecture of the theater as imagined and described by Jean Genet in “L’étrange mot de...” [“That Strange Word...”]. Genet dreams of a theater built in close proximity to the cemetery, under the “stiff, tilting, phallic chimney” of the crematorium. Genet could be describing the very location of Mrs. Alving, who lives in the shadow of the Father. My suggestion is that Mrs. Alving – with her complex and even paradoxical performance of death, preservation and regeneration – be considered as a (meta)architecture of the theater. In “La Double Séance” [“The Double Session”] Derrida writes, “The crisis of literature takes place when nothing takes place but the place, in the instance where no one is there to know” (285). If the final scene of *Gjengangere* is interpreted as a taking place of place, Mrs. Alving might be conceived of as an architectural climax; she might be conceived of as a “no one” and as a potential, rather than as a wretched psychology with an ethical dilemma on her hands. Ideology and psychology often appear as institutional tendencies with stable walls, and yet, with the addition of the prefix meta- (what might be read, at least for the moment, as the prefix par excellence of psychoanalysis and literature) a decentering of their architecture takes place.

³ I distinguish between the ideal Father, a figure of fantasy, stasis and maintenance of the status quo, and the real father, the deceased Captain Alving who is held in *and* excluded by the crypt, by using a capital or lower case ‘f’. The distinction (which is similar to the distinction, in this paper, between the ghost and the *gjengangere*) cannot be utterly maintained, but the case used should indicate whether the ideal or real is dominant in a given reference.

In the second act, Mrs. Alving explains to Pastor Manders what she means by the “gjengangeraktig”:

Pastor Manders. Hva var det De kalte det?
 Fru Alving. Gjengangeraktig. Da jeg hørte Regine og Osvald der inne, var det som jeg så gjengangere for meg. Men jeg tror nesten vi er gjengangere alle sammen, pastor Manders. Det er ikke bare det vi har arvet fra far og mor som går igjen i oss. Det er alle slags gamle avdøde meninger og alskens gammel avdød tro og slikt noe. Det er ikke levende i oss; men det sitter i alikevel, og vi kan ikke bli det kvitt. Bare jeg tar en avis og leser i, er det liksom jeg så gjengangere smyge imellem linjene. Der må leve gjengangere hele landet utover. Det må være så tykt av dem som sand, synes jeg. Og så er vi så gudsjammerlig lysredde alle sammen (137)

In this passage, Mrs. Alving follows the “gjengangeraktig” from its place in her own body, psychology and foundation, all the way to the printed page. Like Ibsen, she is interested in the counter-institution, a fluid and living response to experience and a means of survival running counter to “undead” ideals. The space that Mrs. Alving takes up as a (meta)architecture of the theater, or, one might say, as a figure of the counter-institution in literature, serves to extend her critique.

The process of incorporation is a remarkable fit when it comes to analyzing the events and themes of *Gjengangere*. There is an emphasis on stasis and negative preservation, on the undead, on the guilt and shame associated with pleasure or thwarted pleasure. Simply put, Abraham and Torok’s crypt is an expansion on the clinical diagnosis of melancholia via a specification of the terms introjection and incorporation. A secret ‘occasioned by loss’ is entombed (or incorporated) in the subject, and, among other things, an “internal psychic splitting” occurs that confuses the subject with its lost object, making the work of mourning (introjection) impossible (Rand 100-103). The trauma embodied by the mechanism of incorporation, the swallowing of the love-object, is related to the ambiguity of relationships and to the “crime of having been overcome with desire” (Torok 110). Torok writes the patient’s

request, the question that he or she is asking the analyst: “Help me find that moment [of crime: “the orgasmic moment experienced upon the object’s death”] so that I can come out of the interminable impasse of my mourning” (Torok 122). In order to get beyond the suffering of the impasse, one must achieve a certain fluidity. It is the undead fantasy as such that must be acknowledged, so that the dead – and the living condemned to identification with the dead – can pass out of the prison of non-mourning.

When *Gjengangere* begins, Mrs. Alving can easily be located at an impasse of mourning. Pastor Manders has arrived by boat with the deeds to the orphanage, and Mrs. Alving, who has been holding the secret of Captain Alving’s ‘unseemly behavior’ for years now, is looking to the finalization of the orphanage as to a moment of magic, when the tomb of her secret will be forever sealed by architectural proof of the good Father. Torok writes, “[...] incorporation is invariably distinct from introjection (a gradual process) because it is instantaneous and magical” (113). The project of the orphanage is not a ‘reckoning with spirits’⁴; it is, rather, a magic exorcism, an external architecture that mimics the internal crypt by simultaneous exclusion and containment of the dead. The building of the orphanage has taken place in place of and as a substitution for the work of mourning.

Before the action of *Gjengangere* commences, all topographical shifts relating to reality and to introjection have been deferred in the name of maintaining a fantasy of the Father. Mrs. Alving has constructed a safe house inside of herself, and no one (save Engstrand) seems to remember Captain Alving as anything more than an ideal man. In “Fors,” the introduction to Abraham and Torok’s book, *Cryptonomie: Le verbier de l’homme aux loups* [*The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*], Derrida writes, “What the crypt commemorates, as the

⁴ This phrase is taken from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.

incorporated object's "monument" or "tomb" is not the object itself, but its exclusion [...]" (xvii). Mrs. Alving's monument involves a "utopian wish": (I quote Abraham and Torok here) "[...] that the memory of the affliction had never existed or, on a deeper level, that the affliction had had nothing to inflict" (Abraham and Torok 134). Because a stasis is sought – topographical stability being associated with fantasy rather than reality – Captain Alving has remained in the space of deferral, the un-mournable dead. For Abraham and Torok, (and I think this resonates with Mrs. Alving's definition of the "gjengangeraktig": "vi kan ikke bli det kvitt") fantasy is defined as "[...] all those representations, beliefs or bodily states that gravitate towards "preservation of the status quo" (125). The fantasy of the Father dooms Mrs. Alving's son, Oswald, to a kind of repetition without difference: later, the reader learns that Oswald is syphilitic, himself a kind of living dead, or rather, a dead living. While still in France, he was described by a doctor as "vermoulu," or riddled with worms.

Mrs. Alving might be reading "radical" books, but she is in many ways interested in the status quo, in maintaining a more or less "*secretly perpetuated*" topography of possibility for her son. Stage directions: "på bordet ligger bøker, tidsskrifter og aviser" (Ibsen 117). Responding to Pastor Mander's disapproval over her reading material, Mrs. Alving remarks, "[...] der er egentlig slett ikke noe nytt is disse bøker; der står ikke annet enn det som de fleste mennesker tenker og tror. Det er bare det at de fleste mennesker ikke gjør seg rede for det eller ikke vil være ved det" (Ibsen 122). What is it that people "ikke vil være ved"? The implication that collective beliefs or monumental 'realities' might be no more than implemented fantasies, that a movement of the 'non-present variety' occurs (particularly that ghostly movement which traverses walls), that institutionalized 'duties' can be questioned? Unfortunately, Mrs. Alving can't fully accept her own philosophy, and she is never opened up to the work of mourning.

Although she is introduced as a kind of ‘free thinker’ at the opening of the play, she sticks with the fantasy of the ideal Father, which involves the denial of ghosts, until the very end (and one might ask, is there really another option?). In the third act, she states, “Skulle ikke et barn føle kjaerlighet for sin far allikevel” (Ibsen 153). Here, love is conceived of as a “debt” to the ideal Father, even though Mrs. Alving knows very well that Captain Alving was less than “ideal.”

The structure of the orphanage is meant to stand solid, in place of the incomprehensibility of life without ideals, and Mrs. Alving’s own life is kept at a distance through this architectural cover-up. She becomes, as she herself states, a kind of *gjengangere*; she exchanges herself for the ghost. Of course, in her confessions to Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving does acknowledge the real Captain Alving, and this acknowledgement points to a crack in the crypt. As the play rushes to its climax, the crack widens, leading to tragedy for its characters, but possibly serving as a certain liberation for readers and spectators.

The remarkable fit of Abraham and Torok’s theory of incorporation, which I have just worked through in brief, is also a bit deceiving, because a diagnosis of melancholia would be out of place in this paper. A diagnosis would assume Mrs. Alving as a patient and as an individual psychology, whereas I am trying to read her as a figure of the counter-institution of literature and as a (meta)architecture of the theater. In a very literal sense, Mrs. Alving is made of no more than words; her architecture is her syntax (and the careful reader is aware of the permeability of this syntax, of the way in which, despite – and because of – Ibsen’s careful constructions, ghosts make their way through). I do not deny that Mrs. Alving also takes place as a complex individual psychology; in fact, her psychology and her syntax take place “at once” and are not strictly at odds with one another. However, it is interesting, and I would argue liberating, to dwell momentarily in the potential and fluid aspect of (meta)architecture – Mrs. Alving’s

“architecture-as-syntax” – rather than in a definitive and comprehensible figure of sympathy or identification (or, alternatively, condemnation).⁵ The architecture that interests me most in this reading is what I would call the deconstructive⁶ architecture of Ibsen, his amazing production of characters in “the double bind.”⁷ Ibsen, with his constant recourse to irony and his refusal to simplify or idealize characters, is always aware of an “on the other hand” (which is not to imply that *Gjengangere* dissolves into complete “meaninglessness”; this would be both an ahistorical take on Ibsen’s work and a misreading of deconstruction).

When one shifts from Abraham and Torok’s description of the crypt to Derrida’s consideration of the same structure, the crisis of psychoanalysis and the crisis of literature begin to share a common vocabulary of doubles and of miming, of non-categorical hieroglyphs (texts in texts) and originary penetrations or violations: “all linear correspondence being thus effectively shattered” (“Fors” xxvi). “Fors,” Derrida’s introduction, is not only a description of the uncanny structures of incorporation; it is also a work of praise for the style and reading practices of Abraham and Torok: “[...] the pulsing, rhythmic, step-by-step tale of the act of deciphering, decrypting, itself dramatic, the tale of a tale, of its progress, its obstacles, its delays

⁵ This conception flips a normal understanding of writing as the ‘black and white,’ the available and permanent, as opposed to the ephemeral reality of performance (the living body in time). I am suggesting that the text itself offers a fluidity – and my suggestion is heavily influenced by Derrida’s understanding of the way in which texts are read and re-written – while an understanding of Mrs. Alving’s character can sometimes function as the undead: the unquestioned stasis of recognizable and classifiable (diagnosable) psychology.

⁶ I am aware that some readers might object to the application of the term “deconstructive” to Ibsen (for both historical and personal reasons). I use this term because deconstruction has served as my point of entry into *Gjengangere*, and I find Derrida’s theories of reading instructive for approaching the radical aspects of Ibsen’s texts.

⁷ Derrida borrows the term “double bind” from Gregory Bateson. In Derrida’s texts, the double bind can indicate a “catch 22” situation: the inherent contradictions of living. The double bind suspends the moment of decision. In my opinion, the term is particularly suited to many of Ibsen’s “realist” (as opposed to idealist) characters, always ironized in relation to *les idées fixes*, struggling with the insoluble contradictions in which they find themselves and conscious of the unethical aspects of ethical imperatives.

[...] its corridors, its angles” (“Fors” xxiii). Derrida’s praise for Abraham and Torok has something to do with their acknowledgement of the ghost and something to do with the “baffling” architecture that gives the (psychoanalytical) ghost its style:

And most important, the two notable structures of displacement and decentralization in the more recent writings – the *crypt* as a foreign body included through incorporation in the Self, and the *ghost* effect, more radically heterogeneous insofar as it implies the topography of an *other*, of a “corpse buried in the other” – these two structures did something more, and other, than simply complete or complicate the anticipations of a program. They introduced into it an essential unruliness [*déportement*]. (“Fors” xxxi)

I hope that there is a certain “unruliness” to my reading of *Gjengangere*. The play can, of course, be read as announcing the inevitable return of the Father: “Here comes the Father (with a capital F)! You’ve tried to deny him, but heredity and degeneration refute your claim!”

However, *Gjengangere* does not only concern the coming of the Father.⁸ The play is also a social cryptonomy or cryptography, a production of language un-opened but “leaking,” making room for the ghost. The notions of a “ghost effect” and of a “topography of [...] ‘a corpse buried in the other’” suit *Gjengangere*’s themes and its effect on its reader or spectator. In her own “unruliness,” Mrs. Alving might be looked at as a structural flaw of sorts (which is not to imply that the play itself is poorly constructed: the (meta)architecture of literature stands tallest as it crumbles, continuing to take place only at the expense of *les idées fixes*.) She makes way for the return of the ghost by acknowledging the nature of the *gjengangere*, the (undead) corpse buried within her.

In Abraham and Torok’s writing, the desire is to save, to save by acknowledging the decentered, the foreign and the “radically heterogeneous,” all of which amount, in a certain

⁸ In another sense, you could say that the play *only* concerns the coming of the father (lower case f); sperm certainly plays a role here: Lamarckian transmission, insemination and heredity, and, to add another Derridean element, dissemination, the play of chance against the “ni jousse, ni perisse” required of the phallus (the Father’s penis).

sense, to the “gjengangeraktig.” But Derrida asks: “To save whom, to save what? Not the Wolf Man: It is too late” (“Fors” xxiii). “The ultimate *cryptophore* was lost, but his analysis can be saved, and this is the drama, the stage on which the “we” of Abraham and Torok speak” (“Fors” xxiv). What about Helene Alving’s drama? It is possible to say the same thing about Mrs. Alving: she cannot be saved: It is too late. The question, then, is whether the theater can still have, via her architecture, its liberation.

After the orphanage burns to the ground, Oswald and his mother are left alone, and Oswald bars the doors, sealing the *unheimlich* space of secrets that their home has become: “Du kommer ikke ut. Og her kommer ingen inn. (*en nøkkel dreies om*)” (155). Whether or not Captain Alving returns with the sun as the Father claiming his “truth,” the answer to my question – whether the theater can still have, via Mrs. Alving’s architecture, its liberation – must be both yes and no. Derrida writes, “Is this strange place *hermetically* sealed? The fact that one must always answer *yes* and *no* to this question [...] will have already been apparent from the topographical structure of the crypt [...]: the crypt can constitute its secret only by means of its division, its fracture” (xiv). As the play closes, in the suspense of Ibsen’s unresolved resolution, both Oswald and Mrs. Alving take place as instances of theatrical and textual architecture (and can be read in “institutional” ways); but they also take place as an uncanny fracturing of institutions (the father slipping through the cracks of the Father). Endless readers and spectators, now moving like ghosts, can pass here.

In “L’*étrange mot de ...*” [“That Strange Word...”], Jean Genet draws theater and death together, suggesting that the theater be built either in the cemetery or in the shadow of the crematorium. For Genet, a dead-free zone might well be a theater-free zone (103). In this closeness of theater and death, Genet predicts a liberation from social convention, from

theological time, from the didacticism of politics, morality and religion (106). He writes, “Do you see where I am heading? The theater will be placed as close as possible, in the truly tutelary shade of the place where the dead are kept, or in the shadow of the only monument that digests them” (104). This particular digestion, unlike incorporation, would require the theater to perform a certain work of mourning; its monument would not be a monument to the Father, a figure of the social conventions mentioned above, but a ‘reckoning with spirits.’ In a paradoxical sense – which suits the inside/outside architecture of the crypt – Mrs. Alving’s impasse of mourning can function as precisely the work of mourning that Genet’s theater requires.

Mrs. Alving’s liberation is a question of (meta)architecture and a question of the uncanny, even cryptic, place of no place. She is, in the final moment of the play, suspended, set into whiteness and the space of writing (“The Double Session” 216). Having produced Oswald, she is now called upon to void her creation by administering a lethal dose of morphine pills, but because the conclusion of the play is less like a “wrapping up,” and more like dis-integration (or dissemination), Mrs. Alving is relieved of her identity. Neither mother nor murderer, she is a no-one, stretched out between both terms, placed and dis-placed at once. In this moment, Mrs. Alving achieves suspension as an unruly and decentered architecture, at a certain remove from “theological time, from the didacticism of politics, morality and religion.” The reader and spectator can impose what the play does not offer, or can they join in, remaining in the suspension of the final act. A figure of a certain crisis of literature, Mrs. Alving cries out: “Nei, nei, nei – jo! – Nei, nei!” (Ibsen 276). This *jo* between *nei*’s can be read as the mark of the counter-institution within the institution of literature. It alters the repetition of no’s that cling to

identification and points to the radical option, answering all questions posed with the “à la fois” that (meta)architecture demands.

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