

Response to Elena Anastasaki's "The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*"*

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The *revenant* presents an insolvable figure in discourse, disturbing boundaries, disrupting and confusing the difference between the dead and the living, even the difference between death and life. Elena Anastasaki's engaging paper, "The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*," contends with this ineluctable, irresolvable boundary disturbance that attends the *revenant*, and unearths the psychic rupture within the *revenant* him or herself. Anastasaki refreshingly is concerned not with the apparent effect of the *revenant*, her/his role as disruptor of boundaries, but rather with the internal grief and psychic dislocation that the *revenant* bears because of his/her position as always out of bounds. In a nicely original move, Anastasaki considers the fragmentation and fracture *within* the *revenant*.

Comparing and differentiating Mary Shelley's from Théophile Gautier's handling of the *revenant* is an inspired choice on Anastasaki's part. Shelley and Gautier, though roughly contemporaneous, wrote from importantly different traditions and positions: Gautier a celebrated Parisian journalist and Shelley the once scandalous mistress, and later wife and widow, of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, Shelley and Gautier shared in common a most salient position *vis a vis* literature.¹ Both earned their livings by their pens, Shelley cranking out short shorts for the annuals and Gautier producing journalism. Writing prose, with its propensity towards coherent narrative and,

*Reference: Elena Anastasaki, "The Trials and Tribulations of the *revenants*: Narrative Techniques and the Fragmented Hero in Mary Shelley and Théophile Gautier," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 26-46.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanastasaki01613.htm>>.

moreover, its structuring principle that does *not* depend on line breaks, was financially necessary for these late Romantics.

Anastasaki eloquently describes the narrative technique of fragmentation, signifying internal disruption, shared by Shelley's and Gautier's *revenant* tales. I would like to extend her insight to suggest that these writers embed within prose the poetic fragment revived and that this gesture shapes and informs the character of the *revenant*. In Shelley and Gautier, the *revenant* becomes a privileged sign for the poem lost within prose. For example, Gautier describes the face of the *revenant* courtesan Clarimonde as reflective not just of poetry but most specifically of poetry that has been lost, her expression like that of "a poet who has let the sole manuscript of his finest work tumble down into the fire" (21). Along similar lines, in Gautier's "The Opium Smoker" the female *revenant* "speak(s) in a marvelous form of verse that no poet alive will ever equal" (99).² Notably, Shelley and Gautier had close bonds with Romantic poets. Shelley's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Gautier's great friend, Gerard de Nerval, influenced the prose of their survivors, generating that fragmentary figure, the *revenant*. Importantly, Anastasaki emphasizes the *revenant's* fragmented characteristics and reminds us that Schlegel offers a paradigmatic notion of the poem as participatory in the aesthetic of the fragment. The *revenant*, then, can be interpreted in Shelley and Gautier as a prose gesture that signifies poetry. The figure of the dead returned to life and the attempt to regain a lost poet or poem entwine and strategically are embedded in both Gautier's and Shelley's tales of *revenants*.

In Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" the half immortal Winzy may be read as a figure for the poet, whose work, as Percy and Mary believed, aspired to immortality but whose body, as Mary plainly saw upon claiming the drowned body of her spouse, was mortal. Percy Bysshe Shelley, in Mary's idealized vision, is a fragmented figure, split into the immortality that she interpreted as his soul's flight in the language of his verse and the body drowned and burned. In Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal," not only is poetry's ability to reach beyond the

mortal claims of the body figured as a kind of magic potion, it is positioned as a dangerous, not entirely effective, and painful magic. Shelley's half immortal hero, as Anastasaki points out, suffers a fragmented interiority because of his dual status: he has drunk only half a draught of the elixir, earning only half immortality. He remains apparently youthful but evacuated internally, a fact that Anastasaki rightly links to fragmentation not *between* the *revenant* self and the living other but rather *within* the *revenant* himself. Poetry, in the Shelleys' idealization of it, became a signifier for flight and release, free of the logical trappings of prose. But Mary Shelley used prose to explore and expose the risks of the Romantic poem, risks indicated by tropes of fragmentation.

Similarly, Gautier's "The Priest" depicts adult responsibility—the job of shepherding a congregation—as a force of entombment. Anastasaki insightfully points to the fragmentary quality of the young priest's dreamed encounters with Clarimonde, his *revenant* mistress, by noting that dreams always have a fragmentary form. This trope of fragmentation within the story plays on the motif of the erotic dream and signifies links between the fragmentary qualities of the dream and the Romantic poem. Like dreams, the poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley and the poems of Gautier's dear friend Gerard de Nerval are fueled by vivid imagery and tend to tropes of release. Indeed, describing Nerval, Gautier writes that "his winged spirit carried his body forward and he seemed to skim over the surface of the earth. One could almost say that he soared above reality itself, sustained by his dreams" (152-53). Likewise, the fragmentary nature of the dream in Gautier's tales of *revenants* reminds us that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue for the fragment's importance to Romanticism: "The fragment is the Romantic genre *par excellence*" (40). Moreover, Agamben conceives of the poem as definitively fragmented, asking "what is left of the poem after its ruin" and answering that after its end the poem "joins itself [...] to pass definitively into prose" (114). For Agamben the poem is shaped by its difference from prose: its ruin is the return to prose.

Concini Palace, the ruined edifice that stages the erotic dream to which Gautier's young priest nightly returns, is an elaborately gorgeous domain—an ancient palace in which sonnets have been built into pretty, indeed beautiful, rooms (22). In “The Priest,” prose, which carries us through the story's narrative, also functions as a kind of verbal vestment enclosing the fragmentary freedom of the erotic dream, that dream alone within which the young priest feels he is alive. Prose, then, is set in a position analogous to that of the responsible life that the pious priest at last chooses to lead. Prose, which definitively is *not* shaped by line breaks, renders the diegetic content of the story accessible. But only the fragmentary erotic dream brings the young priest pleasure. The erotic dream functions as the young priest's great desire, and as that which fragments him, that which he ultimately sacrifices for the prosaic wish to sleep at night.

Here it is important to return to Anastasaki's invocation of Schlegel's emphasis on the fragment as verbal strategy. For Gautier and Shelley, tending the ashes of Romanticism, the aesthetics of the poem and of the fragment merge powerfully. Meanwhile, devalued tropes of prose—continuity, closure—permit us to follow the story lines of “The Priest” and “The Mortal Immortal.” The poem is pointed to by the figure of the *revenant* as that which disrupts the temporality of prose. In poetry, time is fragmented by line breaks and enjambment. Likewise, the *revenants* in Shelley's and Gautier's stories represent fragmented time and a kind of temporal enjambment, each *revenant* inhabiting a time not his or her own. By the figure of the *revenant* ironically standing for a desire for life so vivid as to overcome death, the Romantic poem is signified in Shelley's and Gautier's short stories. The *revenant*, that vulnerable, valorized fragment of life-force, cloaked in prose, figures Shelley's and Gautier's struggle with Romantic poetry and poets, the poetry they did not successfully write, the poets who pre-deceased them—Shelley's beloved husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Gautier's lifelong friend, Gerard de Nerval.

Ambivalence is reflected in the *revenant's* position as that which it is impossible to stop mourning but also that which if wholly mourned

will consume the life of the living speaker. Importantly, Anastasaki compares a male and a female writer, and Gautier and Shelley in their turn emphasize gender as that boundary across which the desire that motivates *revenants* is enacted. For Gautier, the dream is not only a fragment within prose but also it evokes the erotic, the dreamed female body revived because it is desired. Different and the same, Shelley envisions her male *revenants* as either given meaning, in the case of Valerius, or deprived of meaning, in the case of Winzy, by the presence or absence, respectively, of the female beloved. Both Gautier and Shelley conceive of *revenge* as inextricably bound up with erotic desire, and gender division, and each envisions *revenge* as a condition attributable to the other sex—for Gautier *revenge* is a womanly quality, for Shelley it adheres to male characters. Gautier's *revenants* trouble the ideal of the female muse. He deploys the *revenant* muse as ambiguously destructive. Clarimonde's dreamed body offers the only earthly joy the priest experiences but also Gautier draws her with marks of the Satanic, ambiguously ironic. His exquisite prose framing the *revenant* as poetic fragment, Gautier figures the Romantic poem as the beautiful and damned body of the *revenant*.

Gender, the body, and the fragment come together in Gautier's *revenant* Arria Marcella whose excessively fragmented remains—preserved in the outline of volcanic stone—call forth Octavian's desire. Here, the body of the *revenant* at once is evoked and evacuated in the emblem of volcanic ash molded around the woman's literally sublime form. For Gautier, the formal perfection of the woman's body mirrors the desired formal perfection of poetry and also mirrors his sense of the complete poem as unattainable.

Anastasaki rightly contends that only the open-ended fragmentary gesture with which Shelley closes "The Mortal Immortal" permits the idea that Winzy may bring good to the world. Only by shattering prose, by fragmenting narrative closure, does the revivifying possibility of poetry reassert itself. But the representative of poetry, the *revenant*, in Gautier and Shelley is deeply ambivalent, at once signifying supreme erotic pleasure (Winzy thinks he is drinking a love-potion

when he consumes Agrippa's unhappy gift) and the collapse of all pleasure. Anastasaki brilliantly alerts us to the way that these late Romantic *revenants* play through the aesthetic of the fragment. As coda, I add to Anastasaki's interpretation of the *revenant* the idea that within Shelley's and Gautier's belated Romantic prose pieces the *revenant* as fragmentary poem, or the fragment as poetic *revenant*, is buried.

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NOTES

¹Throughout my response, Shelley indicates Mary Shelley unless otherwise specified.

²In referencing Gautier's stories, I am referring to the titles that Richard Holmes offers in his 2008 translation of Gautier's work, entitled *My Fantoms*.

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