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## *The Ghostly Presence: William Trevor's Moral Device*

By RICHARD BONACCORSO

THE TYPICAL WILLIAM TREVOR story builds through concealment and partial apprehension until a linkage between past and future emerges, and the reader senses the protagonist's destiny, truth, or more precisely, his or her question about truth. The beginnings provide familiar surfaces; the endings approach the exotic by way of moral intrigue. Ted Solotaroff remarks on this movement from "the quotidian" to "the extravagant and the extreme," adding that Trevor "wants to reach us at a deeper level than our assent."<sup>1</sup> Over his thirty-five year career of writing stories, Trevor has refined several subtle methods for achieving moral depth. This essay considers an often-used device, one that he continues to deploy with great virtuosity.

A hidden, sometimes indirect, relationship with an apparently peripheral person, or someone from the past, or one who may even now be dead, disturbs a protagonist's moral character. This effect may be consciously suppressed or somewhat subliminal. The reader, at first unaware of the significance of this relationship, is gradually led to it by the protagonist's peculiarities or obsessions. He or she is so profoundly moved by what seems innocuous circumstance, or is so destabilized in present relationships, that the reader feels compelled to examine what is given of the protagonist's emotional history. Someone emerges from the past, perhaps as an inherited influence, and the character's destiny is defined, not simply by that emergence, but by the manner of his or her reaction to it. Therein lies the essence of the story. This device not only serves Trevor's revelations of motive and character but ultimately provides means for speculating upon the moral indelibility and consequence of emotional experience. Some characters are corroded forever by a memory suffered in silence. Some are chastened by a sense of having failed, and, in some lonely way, climb to a higher moral level. In either case the story is finally internalized, the arena of action encompassed by the character's inner battlefield.

Early and late, numerous examples of this third-party device appear in Trevor's fiction. In the title story from *The Ballroom of Romance* (1965), an aging spinster fantasizes so obsessively over memories of a long-lost love interest of her youth that she unwittingly counterfeits her present-day desires and emotions. The title character of "Mr. McNamara" (*Angels at the Ritz*

1. Solotaroff 34.

1975) is no more than a husband's fictional disguise for a woman with whom he has had a long-standing affair. For years, he regales his wife, son, and three daughters with stories of a "barroom friend" who does not exist. The son, the tale's protagonist, stumbles upon the disturbing truth after his father has died, and, attempting to protect the rest of his family from it, becomes the reluctant keeper of what is for him an embittering deception. Recent examples of this device include the novel, *Felicia's Journey* (1994), in which a dead mother proves to have authored the original perversion in the psychic witches' brew that is Mr. Hilditch, the marvelously realized serial killer of the novel. Tormented by memories of her abuse of him, he pretends to himself that he is parenting his own victims. In two stories from *After Rain* (1996), memories of dead spouses dominate the present moral action. In "The Piano-Tuner's Wives," the title character's second wife becomes deceitful as she capitulates to her jealous obsession with her dead predecessor. In "Widows," two sisters who otherwise feel devoted to each other become alienated over a present-day quandary because they have such variant feelings about their dead husbands. In all cases the absent figure emerges, as does moral intrigue, as the story develops.

Trevor's continued use of this absent but abiding shadow figure lends a surreal aspect to his work, but more importantly, it is a signature device for his vision, one that has evolved increasingly into the realm of moral mystery, asserting the existence of the unaccountable or the transcendent in a world that, pretending to be sure of itself, has only apparently abandoned it. Three stories, "Death in Jerusalem" (*Lovers of Their Time* 1978), an uncollected tale, "Old Flame" (1991),<sup>2</sup> and "A Friend in the Trade" (*The Hill Bachelors* 2000), illustrate interesting variations.

In "Death in Jerusalem," first impressions deceive. The tale concerns two middle-aged Irish bachelor brothers whose lives have been shaped by their familial situation. But secrecy prevails, for the brothers, through whom the omniscient narrative flows, have suppressed or deeply concealed the truth. Gregory Schirmer has remarked upon this unusual effect of omniscience, that is, allowing the characters to define themselves "by their own subjectivity."<sup>3</sup> In this story's case, that self-definition temporarily misleads the reader.

This is especially true of Paul Daly, the older brother. Aged fifty-one, he is a worldly priest, well-traveled, hard-drinking, and especially effective at raising money for his many church ventures and charitable promotions. Though cheerful in manner and dutiful toward his old mother, Paul's choice of vocation appears to have been a rejection of her domineering ways. This is revealed indirectly through Paul's obsessive interest in his thirty-seven-year-old layman brother, Francis, who, remaining at home with the old woman, seems in every respect more priestly. He uncomplainingly fulfills the role once intended for Paul, never leaving the small Tipperary town, tending to

2. Trevor, "Old Flame" 37-42.

3. Schirmer 9-10.

the overbearing old woman and running the inherited family hardware store. Though his life has been imposed upon him, he has made himself content in it. Francis has long admired his dynamic older brother and has also indulged a pious fantasy in his withdrawn life. For thirty years he has deferred a desire to pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In effect, then, a first impression of these two men concerns the circumstantial irony that seems to have freed the cleric and cloistered the layman. Yet, as the story reveals, it is Paul, not Francis, who is most frustrated. And, while Francis's fate seems the story's ostensible subject, its ending shows that its ultimate subject is Paul's.

The compelling influence and the key to the story's ultimate revelations is the old mother herself, absent though she is from the present action. In fact, she dies while the brothers finally travel together to Jerusalem.

Paul, who has long urged Francis to make the journey, accompanies his timid brother as a would-be liberator. He is not only taken aback but embittered by the telegram informing him of their mother's death. ("She'd known what she was doing by dying when she had."<sup>4</sup>) He delays telling Francis, puts off the funeral, and attempts to extend the trip. Ironically, materialistic Jerusalem has already offended Francis's pious sensibility, and, when he hears of the death, regrets having left the old woman and resolves to return to his habitual life. It is at this point that we realize that Paul's solicitation toward Francis grows out of his heretofore hidden antagonism against his mother, and not only for his brother's sake. He feels personally defeated by the old woman when he thinks of Francis's fate:

In his brown cotton coat he would serve customers with nails and hinges and wire. He would regularly go to Mass and to Confession and to Men's Confraternity. He would sit alone in the lace-curtained sitting-room, lonely for the woman who had made him what he was, married forever to her memory.<sup>5</sup>

In failing to free Francis, he has failed to free himself, for it is he who feels Francis's oppression. Clearly, Paul should never have become a priest but had done so in order to escape from an even more confining existence. Full of convivial bravado, he has compromised his real nature, unwittingly evading himself, even while apparently seeking his satisfactions. The immanence of his unjustified life assails him, and the best he can do is express his pain in drunkenness, intimating a freedom of expression he has missed:

At midnight he rose to make the journey to bed and found himself unsteady on his feet. People looked at him, thinking it disgraceful for a priest to be drunk in Jerusalem, with cigarette ash all over his clerical clothes.<sup>6</sup>

It is a perfect ending, for here the story's inner and outer realities merge. The hotel guests, only seeing a drunken priest, do not see the real Paul. And yet at this moment he is showing himself most clearly to us.

4. Trevor, *Lovers of Their Time* 188.

5. *Ibid.*, 192.

6. *Ibid.*, 192.

An old infidelity is the subject of "Old Flame," a story concerning an aged couple, Zoe and Charles. She, now seventy-one, has weathered forty-odd years of wounded curiosity over Charles's old flame, Audrey, for whom he had once openly declared his love. Zoe, the protagonist and point of view character, vividly recalls the intensity of her pain, long after "love came back into the marriage" and "skin grew over the wound." Her thwarted love for Charles remains intense, and we find her at the story's opening steaming open one of Audrey's letters to Charles, a bit of espionage she has conducted since the end of the affair. As affairs go, it is not much now. Zoe knows that Charles and Audrey occasionally meet for lunch, a form of gallantry on his part, for, she senses, he has lost interest in the woman. It is ironic but entirely plausible that the betrayed Zoe is still passionate while the adulterer, Charles, has become indifferent. Though she intuits much, she feels that she has missed some truth about the old affair. Indeed, she has never before realized that her most passionate rival was not Audrey at all.

"Grace died." These are the first words of the intercepted letter and of the story. Recalling the many references to "Grace and I" in the letters she has read, Zoe senses for the first time that it was Grace, the unattractive housemate and confidante of Audrey, who was the instigator and imaginative sustainer of the affair:

"It's time you saw Charles again," Zoe knows Grace used to say in that house, and guesses Audrey's reply: that Charles has his own life now, that Charles had made his choice. Grace always pressed, gently, because she loved Charles too, but had to keep it to herself.<sup>7</sup>

Now, "suddenly and without warning," Grace is gone and Zoe senses that the threat of Audrey has at last been lifted. Charles goes to her for the final lunch meeting, making one last, tired gesture to his vague old emotions and, as Zoe now imagines her, to a rather colorless Audrey. Without the more vital Grace to stir her, Audrey will sit and wait for Charles to contact her again, and he, without the stimulus of being asked to meet, will gratefully allow the relationship to die. But, nevertheless, Zoe is not consoled. She tries to free herself from bitterness. After all, two of her three tormenters are defeated by age, and the other, the most deliberate and sinister one, is dead: "Yet, for a moment, before she turns on "Barefoot in the Park," tears sting her eyelids. A trick of old age, she tells herself, and orders them away."<sup>8</sup> And so the story ends, with every external circumstance resolved, and every moral, internal one, unsettled and likely to remain that way.

Trevor's protagonists rehearse their lonely travails with a great deal of imagination. They improvise what they cannot directly know, or they deliberately construct a subjective version of the truth because they do not wish to know it whole and entire. In effect, the story measures their ability or inability to transcend subjectivity, the honesty or dishonesty of their imaginings. In

7. "Old Flame" 38.

8. *Ibid.*, 42.

this respect, the protagonists of “Death in Jerusalem” and “Old Flame” inspire pity rather than admiration. Clione, of “A Friend in the Trade,” however, is one whose imagination leads her to the threshold of an objective truth. Like Father Paul and Zoe, her imaginative undertakings isolate her, but she is more equal to their threats.

This subtle tale concerns levels of honesty in human relationships. It seems at first to be about marital fidelity, the middle-aged Clione and James having weathered the storms of youth, their love even “surer than before”: “She is glad she did not marry someone else and could not ever have considered being unfaithful. She knows—she doesn’t have to ask—that her husband has not been faithless either.”<sup>9</sup> But the story’s ultimate example of the test of honesty emerges from Clione’s tangential relationship to a seemingly absurd third party, a constant visitor named Michingthorpe. A twenty-odd year professional acquaintance, he is humorously referred to as an “unrepresentable friend,” as likely to be in the house as “familiar items of furniture,” accepted like “a cat which does not belong.” He is also a ludicrous figure to the couple’s children; “Oh, God, that man!” they remark. Pale, fat, gray, egotistical, he seems sublimely inattentive to others, and, though treated kindly by Clione and James, is apparently immune to slighting innuendo:

... Clione has heard her waggish son likening Michingthorpe to a New Testament disciple. Had Michingthorpe himself heard that, he would not have minded but possibly would have recalled that as a schoolboy he wrote an essay on the subject of the Last Supper and was awarded a prize for it. He welcomes it when he is spoken of, adverse comments being rarely recognized as such.<sup>10</sup>

He is an innocent, an overgrown adolescent London bachelor who “has apparently never had with anyone—man or woman—what could be called a relationship.” Though often present and very much alive, he is the story’s ghostly presence, marginalized and abstracted as he is. Through all the years of his visits he has never “met her eye,” nevertheless, Clione has long realized something amazing about him—that he is in some odd way in love with her. Bemused by this intuition, she is too embarrassed to share it with James until she becomes uneasy with Michingthorpe’s presumptions relative to the couple’s moving plans—they are to buy a country home and move away from London. Her secret admirer travels down to the country, talks to the seller, and even broaches the possibility of living on the grounds. Clione finally lets the evasive Michingthorpe know that this is out of the question. Nothing of an emotional nature is said between them, but Clione “confesses” her awareness of Michingthorpe’s feelings to James, who, though sympathetic to him, is decisive in refusing “to play fantasies with a fully grown man.” They both know that with their move he will drop out of their lives.

Clione’s sympathy, however, strikes deeper, and her feeling transcends pity alone. Though being “a shadow suits him, as being a joke once did,” she is oppressed by the thought of his strange and utter loneliness:

9. Trevor, *The Hill Bachelors* 90.

10. *Ibid.*, 92.

Who will listen to him now? Who will watch him talking to the air? Who'll not want to know what a splendid find he has come across at another auction? Who'll not want to know that oysters don't agree with him?

He is there when they drive off but does not wave, as if already he does not know them, as if he never did. "Oh, he'll latch on to someone else," the children have said, each of them putting it in that same way. "He won't mind your going much." She cannot guess how he'll mind, what form his minding will take, where or how the pain will be. But the pain is there, for she can feel it.<sup>11</sup>

Clione has never before taken Michingthorpe seriously, but having begun to do so, she cannot cease. Her imagination takes on the weight of a responsibility, and knowing that her understanding is hers alone, she will in a sense be haunted by it:

Their unpresentable friend won't come, not even once. Because he does not drive, because there is no point in it, because the pain would be too much. She does not know why he will not come, only that he won't. She does not know why the pity she feels is so intensely there, only that it is and that his empty love is not absurd.<sup>12</sup>

Though she may never see him again, nor act upon her moral response, Michingthorpe will remain in her as an affecting presence.

Trevor uses figures like old Mrs. Daly in "Death in Jerusalem," Grace in "Old Flame," and Michingthorpe in "A Friend in the Trade" as objective correlates to the buried life of the protagonist's conscience, the unshared but utterly vital essence of a person's humanity. One should also add that Trevor employs other aspects of this device to serve these kinds of revelations and speculations. A living, vital character may descend into a ghostly presence. Dervla of "The Wedding in the Garden,"<sup>13</sup> for example, exacts vengeance upon her former lover who has married another by remaining as a servant in his household, silently rebuking him by her perpetual presence. The ghostly figure can also be something of an actual ghost, an imagined presence with whom the protagonist communes, such as in "The Raising of Elvira Tremlett."<sup>14</sup> And, of course, the device need not always be a person. It can be an event, such as the Great Famine in "The News from Ireland,"<sup>15</sup> which, though never witnessed directly in the story, dominates the moral action between and within the characters. Ultimately, the use of this fictional device, offstage as it were, suggests the presence of a concealed truth, a third party in all present relationships. Trevor's stories continue to uncover a region of the psyche where the hidden sources and the even more hidden consequences of emotion exist.

11. *Ibid.*, 105.

12. *Ibid.*, 105-06.

13. Trevor, *The News from Ireland*.

14. Trevor, *Lovers of Their Time*.

15. Trevor, *The News from Ireland*.

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