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# Haunting and Satire in the Short Fiction of George Saunders

Amélie Moisy

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- 1 George Saunders's many short stories featuring ghosts and revenants can be read in the light of the studies on spectrality that popularized the terms "hauntology" and "the spectral turn" at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Central to spectrality studies is the concept of the liminal, inspired by the figure of the ghost, and comprehending what is either off-center and marginal, or on the threshold and implicit, as well as what may overlap or cross boundaries between two zones and is thus characterized by imprecision or fluidity.
- 2 Saunders is something of a boundary-crossing figure. Born in Texas, raised in Illinois, he earned a BS at the Colorado School of Mines and worked as a field geophysicist and technical writer; he was also awarded an MFA in creative writing, which he now teaches, at Syracuse University; and he has travelled the world in connection with his scientific and writing careers. Brought up a Catholic, he is studying Buddhism. He works in various forms—the essay, the short-story, children's literature, and the novel—and has received many distinctions, most recently the Booker Prize for his 2017 novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and an induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2018. His work is consistently funny, yet it is a biting reflection on the hubristic defects of the individual (his self-centeredness and self-interest) and of society (its excessiveness, its various forms of violence over the individual and its arrogant imposition of an insane system). He also continually affirms the value of compassion in our measure of others and dealings with them.
- 3 There are short stories about ghosts, spirits or revenants in each of Saunders's collections: "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" and "The Wavemaker Falters" in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), "Sea Oak" in *Pastoralia* (2000), "CommComm" and "Brad Carrigan, American" in *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), and "Escape from Spiderhead" in *Tenth of December* (2013). His novel, too, provides insight on the effects of haunting. Saunders shows the liminality of satire as a genre, and the spectral dimension of his work gives it more force to promote action. The first part of this essay will situate his

work in both “Colbert’s America” of satire and the “Spectral America” of ghostly culture, and establish that, among other things, the ghost can be a useful metaphor in satire as it conveys questions of justice. Part two will show how Saunders initiates a reflection on just measure by presenting ghosts and living specters as marginals who reveal mainstream society’s hubristic madness. In part three, some aspects of Saunders’s liminal, dialogic satire will be studied: it emphasizes the need for connectedness by cutting through to essentials. Finally, the question will be posed of which outcomes may be envisaged from Saunders’s satire. It is in his ghost stories that his purpose of a restoration to sanity through the depiction of excess is clearest.

## Liminal Satire and the Ghost as Metaphor in Popular American Culture

- 4 Though Saunders is known as “a writer’s writer” and regularly publishes in that “highbrow US cultural magazine,” *The New Yorker*, his media profile is so high that he is by now a household name (see Colman, WARC and IMDb sites). He is an intrinsic part of popular American culture in which the satirical genre and ghostly themes are highly developed.
- 5 Long-running programs like *Saturday Night Live* and cartoons like Garry Trudeau’s Pulitzer-prize winning *Doonesbury*, which originated in the seventies, illustrate the American taste for lampooning and irony directed against the establishment, as do the relatively more recent animated series *The Simpsons* (produced since 1989) or *South Park* (since 1997); news satire is equally popular—*The Onion* has been publishing parodies since the eighties and Stephen Colbert, now host of *The Late Show*, was twice listed as one of *Time*’s 100 Most Influential People for his take-offs in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Saunders has regularly appeared on Colbert’s programs.
- 6 But for all its popularity, satire is a liminal genre, an aspect making it comparable to the specter. Its etymology, whether one derives it from the satyr, halfway between beast and man, or *satira*, a mixed dish, points to a destabilisation of norms (Matthews 17), and a disruption of the accepted in thought, style or practice—indeed, it employs many effects, and prompts rueful laughter as it exposes the ridicule of the reader’s own foibles or his leaders’. It is liminal as regards action, proposing none, or mock-solutions, and yet it is a genre geared toward improving its readers and society. How and even whether it does is debated. Justin Griffin has found no proof in recent studies that the reader is ever moved to virtue (171, 184), yet concedes that “by unsettling our convictions, [...] asking questions and raising doubts but not providing answers,” satire can ultimately have political consequences (159-60). And Sophia McClennen, professor of international affairs and comparative literature at Penn State University, analysing the effects of satire in her 2012 book *Colbert’s America*, has asserted its importance in keeping the democratic process alive, notably through its ability to stir activism as viewers “actively look into the issues” after a parodic production (qtd. in Penn State U). Her more general conclusion, expressed since in a study co-authored with Remy Maisel, that “satire’s job is to motivate us to try” (176), highlights the myriad possibilities attendant on the liminal.
- 7 Saunders’s frequent use of the liminal figure of the revenant can be seen as a part of the cultural *zeitgeist* which has led Julian Wolfreys to assert, after Derrida on Marx, “A

spectre haunts modernity, and the spectral is at the heart of any narrative of the modern” (3). In *Spectral America*, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes that although America has always loved ghost stories, there has been an increase in productions featuring ghosts dating from the period of the film *Ghostbusters*, Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* or Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*. Saunders’s ghost stories attest to this fascination with ghosts; some have been produced as plays, and “Sea Oak” was made into a TV movie in 2017. Weinstock ascribes this resurgence in ghostly matters, which he sees as encompassing the spectral discourse in criticism (most notably Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, and the recent preoccupation with trauma), to millennial anxiety (6). The ghost is, of course, taken as a symbol in the approach to cultural constructs: as Martin Scofield points out, “The ghostly and the figurative are closely connected; ghosts are already ‘figures’—whether in a supernatural, psychological or simply literary sense—and they can be seen as metaphors that suddenly become literal” (xi).

- 8 Derrida has associated the specter with the future, seeing “revenants” as “arrivants” in a messianic sense, “to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome [...] out of a concern for justice” (211, 220). The limits of Derrida’s hauntology are a matter of debate. Some, like Kate Soper, say that it does not lead to action, since Derrida implies that to incarnate the spirit of an emancipatory politics “in any set of goods, institutions or strategies [...] is inevitably to betray the spirit itself” (27). On the other hand, Carlos Manrique gives examples of how Derrida’s hauntology is put into practice to restore justice by the Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartado in Columbia. Derrida writes that “There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility” (114), and his specter seems to call for responsible change. Weinstock follows Derrida in positing that ghosts, calling into question the possibilities of a future based on the avoidance of the past, serve as warnings. Yet he believes that for Americans, they are “comforting,” as they represent their desires for truth and justice.” Indeed, they “validate faith and show where we have gotten it wrong” (Weinstock 6). In Saunders’s satirical stories, ghosts have little agency, but are nevertheless comforting, as they validate the role of the temperate virtues of love and compassion in bringing about true justice; they warn and a force for change. The next part provides examples of how they show where modern society has “gotten it wrong.”

## Ghosts and Spectral Characters Reveal Established Excess

- 9 Saunders uses figures from the beyond and spectral characters to make minority voices heard and to suggest the excesses of society. This brings to mind interpretations of the spectral framed by Derrida, such as Avery Gordon’s view that stories about minorities, “concerning exclusion and invisibilities,” are ghost stories (qtd. in Weinstock 5); in *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, Esther Perea argues that certain categories of people, migrants, servants, or missing persons, may be compared to living ghosts. The trajectory of the figure defined by Lisa Kroger and Melanie Anderson in *The Ghostly and the Ghosted in Literature and Film: Spectral Identities* illuminates Saunders’s work well—they also see the phantasm as a metaphor for the desire for visibility, and posit that “The ghost is [...] the sign of [...] any person, or

- group, or cultural moment—that, largely ignored or repressed by the society in which it participates, refuses to be marginalized any longer, but pushes to be recognized” (xii).
- 10 Both Saunders’s ghosts and his working-class characters who struggle to make their shaky footing in society more secure raise the questions that, according to Derrida, the specter brings the living to formulate: “What is ours? In what way is it historical? And what does it have to do with so many ghosts?” (63). For they reflect a variety of ills symptomatic of the *hubris* of those who possess greater social, economic or political power. To illustrate this contention, Saunders’s ghost stories are briefly summed up below, and compared to the pattern identified by Kroger and Anderson—particular stress being laid on “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline.”
- 11 As were many of Saunders’s revenants, his narrators are downtrodden “losers,” the ignored which he recalls to the affluent readers of his stories. Kroger and Anderson point out that “Like the traditional ghost, [living characters in these texts] struggle to make their presence known as they learn to manipulate the liminal spaces they inhabit” (xii). Only the harried narrator in “CivilWarLand” sees the ghosts of the McKinnon family who haunt the historical theme park in which he works. Real ghosts and living specter try to work with, and are frustrated by, a maleficent reality. The attempts of the McKinnon girl to find a beau from among the visitors to the theme park are doomed. And the narrator will fail to keep his place, though he uses a degree of manipulation, “lifting ideas from the McKinnons” (12) and exploiting the violent potential of Sam, the Viet Nam Vet, to defend CivilWarLand from teen gangs.
- 12 In “CivilWarLand,” as in other stories, the narrator’s ghostly standing in society is contrasted with the excessive, insistent presences in his life of those pictured as returning from the grave. The violent ghost of Mr. McKinnon who advises wife beating, is “enthralled by blood” (19) and murders his family again and again mirrors the violence of society, for he was a Civil War veteran. Dana Del George argues that Saunders’s joint use of “the marvelous artificial” and the supernatural in such stories is a form of magical realism, “offering resistance to the bewildering and dehumanizing forces of late capitalism” (121, 127).
- 13 One might call Saunders’s specters an aspect of his *fantastique social*, the term Pierre Mac Orlan applied from the 1920s to art in which ghosts were replaced by the living, and the disturbing effects of social change were evidenced. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the continuance of human losses in the Civil War is envisaged while white and black ghosts fight in a segregated cemetery at the height of the conflict. In the short stories, Saunders’s specters reflect the excesses of the world in which his living ghosts suffer, and underline social change by haunting housing projects and suburban bungalows encroaching on fields, morphing backyards, and especially theme parks. Saunders’s predilection for theme park narratives has led Sarah Pogell to liken him to Baudrillard, arguing that Americans have replaced history with simulacra (461, 464), and Michael Walonen to assert that “for Saunders, the contemporary theme park is symptomatic of not only the leisure obsession of a workaholic culture and a changing spatial and epistemological order, but also of the increasingly precarious and disempowered state of the American worker” (163). Saunders’s microcosmic settings suggest that in the overreaching and hubristically irresponsible macrocosm, the social system, man cannot act virtuously.
- 14 Saunders’s social specters follow the pattern identified by Kroger and Anderson: a “tug-o-war” between the social ghosts and society ends in confrontation (Kroger and

Anderson xii), but they remain excluded. The plots go from bad to worse, as no amount of manipulation works. In “CivilWarLand,” the narrator’s wife leaves him because Sam, the crazed vet, endangered the children, and the investors catch on to the shootings of innocents and withdraw financial support from the theme park. As his ruined employer turns arsonist, the rampaging McKinnon ghosts testify to the excesses of the past that condemn them to liminality and reenactment, and the brutality of the world is driven home when the mad veteran kills the narrator: “Sam comes for me with a hunting knife. ‘[...] You know a few things I don’t want broadcast.’ I’m madly framing calming words in my head as he drives the knife in” (26). Although at the end the narrator, all spirit, sees Sam’s past as an abused child and continuance as a murderer, he can effect no change in him despite his newfound powers.

- 15 Living ghosts confront an excessive society in Saunders’s other ghost stories, as in “The Wavemaker Falters,” where the narrator, Mr. Guilt, feels responsible for killing a child at his amusement park because he did not ensure all the bolts were in working order. He has to cope with a society which destroys the weak as it has nature, he is haunted by the ghost of the child, and is nearly shot by the child’s father. The ghost’s constant complaining about what has been taken away from him is commensurate with society’s excessive alienating power—both cause desolation within and around the narrator.
- 16 In “Sea Oak,” marginal characters are also plunged in an ever-worsening situation, but the living might get away with their manipulation of society; the specter does not. The narrator is a male stripper; his loving Aunt Bernie helps him support his sister, cousin and their little boys. They live in fear of gangs on their housing estate, Sea Oak, where Bernie is killed by a robber. She comes back from the grave as a specter who, no longer nice, bullies her family, applying her powers so that she can finally enjoy the good life; yet the disintegrating specter finally “dies again,” after warning them that one of the boys will soon be killed in a gunfight. Her leitmotiv and final words to the narrator are “Show your cock” (123), which the rules forbid him to do, but, seeing no other way to save the child than to move to a better neighborhood, he follows her advice in order to earn money.
- 17 “CommComm” also features a “silenced” narrator, a ghost-in-life repressed into deceit. A PR person for the Air Force from an underprivileged background, he hopes that when the base closes, shortly, he can be hired by the only employers in town, “the Dirksen Center for Terror [,] the town’s great hope” (331), and stay in his house in Omaha with the ghosts of his murdered parents. The ghosts’ anxious love continues to stifle their son even as they reenact their violent murder every night, reflecting the dysfunctions in an excessive society. To get the local position at, the narrator goes from twisting the truth daily to participating in a cover-up and burying unearthed corpses, but balks at murder and is killed for it. But the narrator’s spirit frees the lingering specters of his parents by telling them that they are dead, and finally fuses into a glorious whole.
- 18 In “Brad Carrigan, American,” Brad is a participant in a “reality” TV program in which the setting morphs and his standing is unsure. He is the only person to show compassion for the “dead Belstonians,” the war victims who have suddenly landed in his backyard. These zombies show the excessive violence of society, and, Michael Trussler believes, “what American imperialism has repressed;” all the other participants on the show can ignore them, illustrating “the iniquity produced by America as a blithe superpower” (Trussler 211, 210)—but they haunt Brad as he is

ejected into “bland gray space” for caring and trying to act, and as he is made to forget (*Persuasion* 272).

- 19 In “Escape from Spiderhead,” the narrator, Jeff is another social specter, a convict involved in sexual and drug experiments, at the mercy of excessive “reformers” who pass off violent sadism as humanistic science. Though he has killed in the past, he refuses to inflict more suffering and in the end, he chooses to commit suicide by tricking his captors, and “escapes” as a spirit.
- 20 In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a novel written entirely in textual citations, practically all of whose authors are now deceased, Saunders’s ghosts are in the purgatory-like Bardo of Tibetan lore, a liminal, in-between state; they do not know that they are dead, any more than did the parents of the narrator in “CommComm,” and like them, have little agency. Though many were social specters in life, they unite to make a stand when Lincoln’s son dies and the President comes to hold his body in the cemetery, his grief compounded by worry over the Civil War. Together they realize the excessive violence involved in any “solution:”

We must, to do the maximum good, bring the thing to its swiftest halt and—  
 hans vollman  
 Kill.  
 roger bevins iii  
 Kill more efficiently.  
 hans vollman (306)

- 21 But they see their way to freeing the boy from malevolent forces that would overtake him in the Bardo. Revealing that they have died, the boy frees them in turn to go on to an unknown future state. And some will make history by haunting that most powerful figure, Abraham Lincoln.
- 22 Saunders uses ghosts to highlight social and societal dysfunctions, and his intersecting and overlapping themes of exploitation, violence, love and loss drive home the point that the ambient hubristic madness must be countered with just measure, the virtue the Greeks called *sophrosyne*. The next part focuses on how the liminality of his satirical short stories contributes to a restoration of sanity.

## Satire that Cuts Through to Essentials

- 23 Saunders’s liminal satire is effective as it raises questions and allows for multiple interpretations, in a tone and style that destabilize the norm, transcending the brevity of the short story by much that is implicit: he makes full use of the liminality of the form to return the reader to the essential, temperate virtues, restoring their attractiveness even through his literary allusions to other texts.
- 24 Scholars today point out that if it ever did exist, satire centering on—in Dryden’s words —“One vice to castigate” in order to press upon the reader a moral alternative is dead and gone, a product of what Graham Matthews terms the “fantasy of the One” after Lacan (Matthews 14, 18). As Griffin remarks, clear moral standards are not always at the heart of satire:

The reader’s interest is not in rediscovering that greed is a bad thing or that deceit is to be avoided but in working through (with the satirist’s help) the implications of a given moral position (how far do you have to go in the public defense of virtue?), the contradictions between one virtue (justice) and another (forgiveness), or the

odd similarities between a vice (brazenness) and a virtue (steadfastness against censure). (37-38)

- 25 In “CivilWarLand,” the narrator’s loyalty can be seen as self-serving. He and his employer condone violence when it seems a way out of difficulty, which links them to Sam, the veteran’s violent parent, and to the country that sent him to Viet Nam where he saw death and learnt to kill, just as Mr. McKinnon learnt to kill in the past. As Pogell points out, the vet’s rampaging is truer to the historical spirit of CivilWarLand than anything else in the park. Posing conundrums such as Griffin describes, in satire which has the reader test a truth through dialogues or the destabilization of the authority in the narrator’s voice (an approach Mikhail Bakhtin termed dialogical or polyphonic—Griffin 41), Saunders shows that responsible action and ethics are confusing on more than the individual scale, and moves the reader, while realizing the distortions of his tales, to reflect on personal and collective dysfunctions and sound his own core.
- 26 The reader questions the narrator of “CivilWarLand” when he denies his own responsibility in helping to cover up Sam’s murders of gang members and of a solitary candy thief: “It doesn’t say anywhere thou shalt not bury some guy’s hand. By the time I got involved the kid was dead. Where his hand ended up is inconsequential” (20), while even the manager of the strip restaurant who dismisses the narrator in “Sea Oak” for not dancing with enough vigor has a point: “I’m sorry for your loss. [...] [O]nly don’t take it out on our Guests, they didn’t kill your dang aunt. [...] Why don’t I put an ad in the paper for all sad people who need money? All the town’s sad could come here and strip. Come back when you feel halfway normal” (111). Saunders, who believes all of the characters “Are Us, on a Different Day” (“An Interview”), makes us see our weaknesses, and the commonality of our failings, of our precarious fate, as well as of our better instincts. In so doing, he cuts through to our basic understanding, as Nyingma Buddhism seeks to reach the essential purity of the mind.
- 27 The desolate Mr. Guilt protests, “enough already, enough, this is as low as I go” in “The Wavemaker Falters” after he has been “low” in mood and in deeds, introducing a note of resolve and suggesting that self-forgiveness is necessary for individual survival and sensible action (44). But the spirit of the land haunts the story as does the dead child. The theme park unsafely recreates an America that has been ruined, a land littered with garbage and franchises (“The moon comes up over Delectable Videos” [43]). And the story resonates with collective guilt: it is as easy to overlook a fatal bolt in the Wavemaker as to ignore what is being done to the environment, to take that example. In “Sea Oak” the working class “loser” characters are reminded that “Anybody can do anything” (106). But the story questions the American dream of hard, honest work crowned by success. Bernie, the excessive specter, reflects society as it is: “The world ain’t giving away nice lives” (122). She preaches overstepping boundaries into the unethical, as others have transgressed against them. When is it reprehensible to do all that one can for one’s children? In the end, Bernie haunts the narrator’s dreams, reminding the reader that fate is arbitrary and the distribution of riches indiscriminate. Reason and sympathy suggest that anyone might share something of their plight, and might take a different view of the moral norm and of the American Dream.
- 28 Though Saunders’s plots are extravagant and his inventiveness Dionysian, they are regulated by just measure so as to produce a flow of fellow feeling. His distinctive voice can be said to act upon the reader, and light or dark humor merges into passages in



which a truth is revealed with clarity, recalling one Latin acceptance of *sophrosyne*, or temperance, from *temperare*, “to mix” (North 10-11). Saunders’s stories are always humorous in tone. The ghosts are characterized by zany detail. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century ghost of Mrs McKinnon likes the narrator of “CivilWarLand” because he bought her a Rubik’s cube; for her husband he has “brought [...] lighters and *Playboys*” (13). The ghost of Clive in “The Wavemaker Falters” is still childlike, and exits “producing farts with a hand under his armpit” (40). Aunt Bernie’s specter in “Sea Oak” borrows her niece’s bras: “‘I never had a nice sexy bra,’ says Bernie. ‘And now mine are all ruined,’ says Min. ‘They got this sort of goo on them’” (119). This play on codes, where the reader recognizes an existing phenomenon (Rubik cube mania, older women longing for the beauty of the young) and the humorous twist, gives pleasure.

- 29 The same dynamic is behind Saunders’s witty use of language. When he suggests all that one will miss in the nether world, he uses the limited working class vocabulary to its comical full expressiveness; as the ghosts of the narrator’s parents in “CommComm” remember their youth, the father dwells on his erections: “‘He’s always talking about boners,’ says Mom. ‘Having a boner is a great privilege,’ says Dad” (349). He often spoofs the newspeak of the living, inserting humorous details that reflect the alienating corporatism of contemporary society. The narrator of “CommComm” spends his time at Community Communications “PIDS-”ing what “Jillian from Disasters” notifies him goes wrong (323). He describes what goes on at his job in the capital letters of standard procedure, suggesting that the system is a machine which humans can only try to propitiate: “He shows me Rick’s Daily Historical-Resource Assessment Worksheet. [...] Under ‘Evidence of Pre-Existing Historical/Cultural Presence,’ he’s written: ‘Not that I know of’” (334). Saunders pokes fun at the commercial New Age self-help therapies his lonely characters resort to as anger and guilt management techniques: “I turn on Tape Nine [...]. When sadness inducing events occur, the guy says, invoke your Designated Substitute Thoughtstream,” says the narrator of “CommComm” (325).
- 30 Such humor can create sympathy. In “CivilWarLand,” the devoted narrator, abandoned by his wife and children, is asked for his savings by his ruined employer. In the passage below Saunders ironically places “personal development” in the employer’s vocabulary and furnishes proof of the narrator’s caution; but he also leads the reader to feel for the narrator who reigns himself into insignificance, from hoping against hope: “He says that just for the record and my personal development, he’s always found me dull and has kept me around primarily for my yes-man capabilities and because sometimes I’m so cautious I’m a hoot. [...] I want to hit or at least insult him, but I need this week’s pay to find my kids” (24).
- 31 Often such black humor is offset by the characters’ clear realization of what they are reduced to, leading to a poetic sincerity and vision which, appealing to the higher emotions, the aesthetic sense, or filled with a sense of the presence of divinity, attain the numinous. As the dying narrator of “CivilWarLand” thinks of his children and wife with regret, the accent is on love—“Never again to sleep and wake to their liquid high voices and sweet breaths? Sweet Evelyn, I think, I should have loved you better” (26). Love is exalted by contrast in the final passage: “Possessing perfect knowledge I hover above [Sam] as he hacks me to bits. [...] I see the pain I’ve caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam’s body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone” (26).

- 32 In “The Wavemaker Falters,” the narrator’s final realization that he can take no more loss comes as he is watching starving longhorn: “Lightning strikes the slaughterhouse flagpole and the antelope scatter like minnows as the rain begins to fall, and finally, having lost what was to be lost, my torn and black heart rebels” (44). This American scene, where the flag flies on the slaughterhouse, evokes by contrast the famous lyrics of “Home on the Range,” where what is evidenced is the gift of life on earth: “I would not exchange my home here to range / Forever in azures so bright” (Higley). But gratitude and wonder were perceived by the narrator at gunpoint: “The sound of our home’s internal ventilation system is suddenly wondrous. The mole on [the gunman’s] cheek possesses grace. Children would have been nice” (*CivilWarLand* 44). And the story will be read an affirmation of life and a re-engagement with it, despite loss.
- 33 In “CommComm,” the narrator’s spirit sets things right for the murdered man’s wife by telling her the truth, and the two spirits blend. “I was wrong in life, limited, shrank everything down to my size,” say the murdered Christian and narrator together, after setting examples of intercession and liberating truth. Saunders nullifies the margin as they “join something [they] can only describe as Nothing-Is-Excluded” (358). He highlights the possibility of communication and communion with others and the life force.
- 34 Even “Sea Oak,” which is hardly poetic, has the monstrous Aunt Bernie advocate for learning along with cock-showing: “So many wonderful things in life and where’s your mind? [...] What fun is life when you don’t know nothing?” (119) This ill-expressed desire for soundness and beauty has the clarity of truth; and the comic anticlimactic proof that her nieces are marked by it when she finally goes back to the grave is that they study in their World Books unasked (124).
- 35 The ordinary words that Brad Carrigan uses to formulate what “the hundreds of ears of corn growing out of the furniture, floors and ceilings” and other events on the show inspire in him have the ring of a beautiful truth that makes sense to the reader, unlike the pronouncements of the other actors who appear comfortable in the series’ mad world: “There’s so much suffering. We have so much, and others have so little. So I was just thinking that, you know, if we took a tiny portion of what we have, which we don’t really need, and sent it to the people who need it...” (*Persuasion* 244, 247).
- 36 “Escape from Spiderhead” has Jeff gifted with vision and eloquence in death, seeing his “unwashable transgression” of murder. But as he flies among the birds outside, filled with “life nectar,” he sums up the cleansing effect of the purity at the heart of life which he joins in the afterlife: “[T]hey did not recognize me as something apart from them and I was happy, so happy, because for the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would” (79-81).
- 37 In “Language between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders’s New Sincerity,” Adam Kelly has argued that Saunders not only critiques the neoliberal capitalistic parlance and the dominance it represents, but also thinks that poetic contemplation and its pleasures can stand in the way of action, and parodies “the modernist priority given to aesthetic perception in the subjective processing of an event” in “Escape from Spiderhead” and in an earlier story, “The Falls” (52). Kelly equates modernist subjectivity with “thematics of [...] social fragmentation and alienation” [Jameson qtd. in Kelly 58]. Contrarily, such action as the characters can take, though it serves no purpose, is the mark of a sincerity that is typified by fellow-feeling. However, the

numinous passages cited earlier, typical of Saunders's fiction, and of heightened transcendence as his characters become spirits, may move the reader to act.

- 38 Saunders's satire destabilizes the norm and asserts the possibilities of life, creating conditions conducive to openness, empathy, and connection between all living beings, rather than a hubristic sense of exceptionality. The end of his essay "The New Mecca" insists on how "powerful" the perception of such universality is, yielding a now famous quote in which he admonishes himself: "Anything is possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen" (55). If, as Kelly suggests, such openness is sincerity, just measure would seem to rule out inconsiderate action. For Saunders, though he appeals to our sympathy, makes us consider our acts.
- 39 Saunders's ghosts plead for a restoration to sanity. Achilles and Bergmann note that the liminal short story depicts "transitional situations and fleeting moments of crisis or decision" (4, 22). Saunders's recurrent burlesque ghost figures are transitional, in the wrong world, and moments like those in which the stripper decides to "show his cock" reflect untenable socio-economic situations that show the wrongness of this world. The ghost-in-life protagonists, on the threshold as concerns ethics, provide a glimpse of spiritual truths. Saunders's stories are appealing because the characters' inglorious quotidian arrangements in a hellish society are a foil that sets off the Good, in the Greek sense of unity within diversity. In "Everyday Zombies: Ethics and the Contemporary in 'Sea Oak' and 'Brad Carrigan, American,'" Trussler argues that Saunders's "undead" are "allegorical instances of social critique that signal a utopian desire for improved social conditions based on empathy and political justice" (206). Moreover, Saunders makes use of allusion as a possible resolution of conflict, and intertextual connections, as Griffin points out, enable play with moral ideas that do not have the same status as in philosophical discourse or essays (64).
- 40 Saunders's ghost tales rework traditional narratives such as folk tales or fairy tales, and reflect haunting questions. For Kroger and Anderson, "The ghost is a useful metaphor for the uncertainties of life and death settled deep within the psyche of human beings" (xv). Ghosts point back to the lore of humanity in different places and times and encourage consciousness of our common lot; memories of historical, amusing or poetic tales play upon the readers' expectations and lead them to search for "a way" to orient themselves in their uncertainty.
- 41 Saunders reworks ghost sightings in oral folklore, as related throughout the world. The Haunted Places website for Virginia lists some that may have inspired the McKinnons, such as Parker's Battery, with its apparitions of "very unhappy or very confused" Confederate soldiers, or the Natural Bridge Hotel, whose "former owner went mad and killed his wife and children [...]. [V]arious members of the family have been seen around the grounds in the night." Saunders's tales incorporate various beliefs pertaining to ghosts—in parts of Asia, specters are thought to feed on a person's life fluids, as the dead child Clive does on Mr. Guilt's (see Dessaint and Ngwama 589, for example). His specters conform to the classical requirements for the return of literary ghosts: Mr. McKinnon in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," who murdered his family, could well have to atone for some sin or guilt, but cannot help repeating his crime; the Aunt in "Sea Oak" must warn the living that Troy will be killed; the child Clive in "The Wavemaker Falters" is seeking vengeance on the narrator; and the spectral parents in

“CommComm” live with the narrator as they have unfinished business, thinking they are still alive and protecting him (Briggs qtd. in Kroger and Anderson ix).

- 42 In tone, these stories resemble comical ghost stories in Irish folklore or in American campfire culture, with undignified ghosts throwing their bones around, as in “Daniel Crowley and the Ghosts” (Curtin), or dismembered ghosts, as in “Piece By Piece” and “Golden Hand” (Schlosser), and the Brothers Grimm’s humorous tales about missing limbs or visitors to heaven, such as “The Three Army Surgeons,” where “dead” hands, heart and eyes act independently, or “The Tailor in Heaven” where the dead man sees everything on earth and throws down God’s footstool in a rage. But their poetic aspects recall Hans Christian Andersen’s mystical insistence on fusion after death and God’s love and mercy. The end of “CommComm” brings to mind “The Little Match Girl,” who flies in brightness and joy above the earth with her grandmother, “The Angel,” who takes a flower and a boy to heaven where all sings, and “On Judgment Day,” which follows the soul after death: all is mercy in heaven, and the proud believer realizes that he was wrong; as the chorus of angels sings, all bask in the infinite love of the heavenly father.
- 43 Saunders says reading Thomas Wolfe started him writing: “Maybe it was the first time that a literary writer got under my skin. [...] I would do a lot of imitations of him, you know—try to write in that sort of lyrical voice” (“George Saunders”). In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe’s famous “ghost” refrain, “O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again” (2, 58, 296...) arises when his characters are beset with questions which defy understanding, about the human condition and its inevitable suffering, grief, desire and loneliness.<sup>1</sup> Saunders’s ghosts, too, point to questions concerning life and death, good and evil, the injustice of fate, suffering and alienation, and love.
- 44 Saunders’s stories, which entertain and interrogate, create group feeling among the living by cutting through to their sympathy. They leave open questions, making readers ponder the answers at their disposal. Figures such as Socrates, Buddha, or Jesus have seen love and justice, based on equality (before the law of the city, of karma, or of God) as the guides to all action (Lenoir ch.14, 15). But Vladimir Jankélévitch opined that equity, which involves love, and verges on injustice, is fairer than legal justice. For Jankélévitch, love and appropriate individual acts rather than set moral or legal rules are necessary for change to bring true justice (Collin). Saunders’s work illustrates the power of compassion and love as the measure that leads to harmony, much as the Greeks imagined *sophrosyne* (North 17, Snow 84). Whether the stories portray the afterlife as more confusing than his dystopic renditions of the present, or uphold divine love as an ideal, they work to restore harmony and connectedness, validating action.

## Active Virtues and Kindred Spirits

- 45 Saunders fosters sympathy and compassion and his ghost stories increasingly make a case for their agency. The ghosts of the McKinnons and of the narrator’s parents are confused in “CivilWarLand” and “CommComm,” little Clive is sad about his curtailed life in “The Wavemaker Falter,” Aunt Bernie’s specter sees more than her family does but is a tragic figure, decomposing without attaining satisfaction in “Sea Oak,” and the zombies in “Brad Carrigan” are well-nigh powerless. And human specters can do very little. But in the later stories, “CommComm” or “Escape from Spiderhead,” individuals take responsibility and try to act justly and lovingly. There is no justice or reward for

them in this life, but they become conscious in death of a love that perceives value and reflects it until all is made pure. This is the love that is greater than legal justice, according to Jankélévitch. The employer in “Sea Oak” may be legally just toward the narrator, as her associates had been legally just toward Bernie, and Brad Carrigan is dealt with legally by the bizarre society that Saunders sets him in. But the reader can surmise that equitable treatment, as tolerant and decent as they have been, would promote a saner society.

- 46 Plato has Socrates pronounce *sophrosyne* to be the virtue of moral “sanity,” of men who act “rightly and beneficially” (qtd. in Taylor 248-49). In his essay “Manifesto,” Saunders’s spokesperson states that to attain the blessed state of social sanity the individual need do little but observe the decencies of everyday life. *Lincoln in the Bardo* goes further, upholding the view that killing may be required of politicians, but that individual hopeful and kind action is the only answer when besieged with evil.

So the President left his boy in a loaned tomb and went back to his work for the country.

In “Lincoln: A Story for Boys,”

by Maxwell Flagg.

[...]

Imagine our surprise [...] when, passing by an hour or so later, we found the lad still on the roof, looking expectantly about, as if waiting for a carriage to arrive and whisk him away.

hans vollman

And pardon me for saying so—but that wild-onion stench the young exude when tarrying? Was quite thick already.

roger bevins iii

Something needed to be done.

the reverend everly thomas

(24, 33)

- 47 In the Bardo, the ghosts are not sure whether there is a fair or moral hereafter; the Reverend Everly Thomas fears that there may be some hellish punishment in store for him. Yet to save Lincoln’s boy from torment, he resolves to act and do his best, and ends up sacrificing himself for the lad; and Hans Vollman notes that in the imprint of the Reverend’s departed form, “his countenance now conveyed a sense of tentative hopefulness—as if he were going into that unknown place content that he had, at any rate, while in this place, done all that he could” (276). Vollman and Roger Bevins will pass out of the Bardo saving the spirit of another child.
- 48 Saunders links kindness to the question of action in his commencement address to Syracuse University’s graduating class of 2013 (published under the title *Congratulations, By the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*). In his latest appearance on Stephen Colbert’s *Late Show*, he calls for “radical tenderness” over the justice of rules and laws, citing the example of illegal immigrants as one in which liberals can effect change by sympathetic discussion with hardliners. As Matthews has noted, satirists often portray a machine-like system, representing individuals as mechanized to reveal the contradictions of the whole (20-22). Yet Saunders restores wholeness and connectedness as values by suggesting that the temperate virtues have the power to bring about righteous and beneficial acts.
- 49 Michael Faber, in a *Guardian* review, once said, “[T]here is something strangely uplifting about Saunders’s fiction, and not merely because of its quality and verve; there is a sense that the ghost of morality will continue to haunt the machine, in

defiance of attempts to exterminate it” (Faber 2006). The virtues he prefers may be termed ghostly, reflecting through the insane situations of his liminal stories, apparently calling for no specific action. Still, in asserting that it is in every individual’s power to establish saner, more harmonious relations with others, and in cutting through to essentials in his fiction, Saunders inspires readers “to try,” as McClennen defined the effect of satire. Saunders considers that “part of our moral responsibility” is keeping in mind “those whose lives are unsafe and insane.” “In this way, fiction can be like a meditation, a way of saying: Though things are this way for me right now, they could be different later and are different for others this very moment” (“An Interview”).

- 50 Saunders’s pieces can lead us, “like a meditation,” to stand up and take sympathetic action when it may be done, thus illustrating some of the powers that Victor Turner attributed to liminal or liminoid works. Turner saw the liminal as part of social or religious ritual that was rare in industrial societies, and spoke of the liminoid for entertaining, yet subversive productions that support alternatives to the *status quo* and foster a spontaneous solidarity that he called “*communitas*” through the revision of accepted social conventions. As Turner asserted in *From Ritual to Theatre*, “[W]here liminality is socially positive it presents [...] a model of human society as homogenous, unstructured *communitas*, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species” (qtd. in Achilles and Bergmann 9). In his satire that debouches on the numinous and sympathy with the characters, Saunders encourages “*communitas*.” In Buddhism, true perfection is emptiness—but as in Tao, where the aim in following the “open life” is to be all that one can be, opening up to Saunders’s spirits enhances our possibilities.

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- 51 In the final analysis, Saunders’s fiction cannot be summed up as simply a defense of any virtue, however desirable. What Saunders finds most “hopeful” is that readers enjoy his wit—the French “*esprit*,” or spirit:

The most hopeful thing in the stories, I hope, is wit. I make it up. If I make up a world in which we’re ruled by big talking turds, it doesn’t mean that we are. [...] [W]hat’s hopeful is this guy who is talking about it at least in a way that kind of lights you up a little bit when you read it. That would be the hopeful thing. Because everything else is just invention anyway. [...] [A]nd it’s hopeful because it’s one human being talking to another in a non-condescending, loving way, saying, “Isn’t this a pisser? Isn’t this amazing what we got ourselves involved in here when we were born? Isn’t it sweet? Isn’t it horrible, isn’t it funny, isn’t it terrifying?” And I think just that connection—saying that—is really what literature has to offer. (“George Saunders”)

- 52 The ghost, a metaphor in spectrality studies, is truly a *métaphore vive*, a “live,” effective metaphor in Saunders’s satire. It is a fun fantasy that “lights us up a little bit” as we connect, and tells us much about the human condition. There is a part of any work of art that is beyond interpretation, and, like the ghost, is ineffable. Though Saunders’s witty ghost stories do not preach that we should be as kind and helpful as possible as we experience the mystery of our passage on earth, reading them, we better perceive that kin can encompass the other. And if we are not moved to act virtuously at once, his

intimations of a measure fluid enough to include empathy may haunt us until they are realized in luminous deeds.

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

Cet article examine les nouvelles de George Saunders sur des revenants à la lumière des études sur la spectralité pour poser la question de leur effet en tant que satire. La liminalité de la satire rejoint celle du spectre. Les personnages de Saunders, fantômes sociaux, et sa satire variée et allusive mettant l'accent sur la compassion et l'amour plutôt que sur la loi, rappellent la vision derridienne d'un spectre transformateur. Les fantômes dans ces nouvelles montrent que la sophrosine doit réguler l'hubris, et que ses vertus sont nécessaires afin que le changement mène à l'acte juste.

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