

“Blood and land and ghosts:”
Haunting Words in Christos Tsiolkas’
Dead Europe

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Ah, do not ghosts prove—even rumours, whispers, stories of
ghosts—that the past clings, that we are always going back ... ?
Graham Swift, *Waterland* (89)

A past that clings and a sense of going back to old haunts are appropriate ways to describe Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*. Released in 2005 and recipient of both the *Age* fiction book of the year prize and the Melbourne Prize for literature (best writing award), the novel tells the story of Isaac Raftis, a Greek-Australian photographer in his mid-thirties who returns to Europe after a ten-year absence. Europe has changed since his last visit: the Berlin Wall has come down; community demographics have shifted with tides of migration; and American dollars (and child prostitutes) flood the marketplaces. Isaac travels from Australia to Greece, then through Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Holland and the UK. After wading knee-deep through blood, spew, shit, spit and semen, he returns home a changed man.

On his first trip to Europe, while in a Thessaloniki museum, Isaac photographs a photograph of Jewish resistance fighters, and he describes the image thus: “Blood and land and ghosts” (90). This short phrase captures three vital elements of the book and I will explore some of the ways—not always comfortable—that they intertwine in Tsiolkas’ most recent novel.

The novel was widely reviewed and often in colourful language: my favourite describes the novel’s world as “a Judeo-Christian devil’s jumping castle submerged in excrement, blood and foul vapours” (Rosenblatt 48). A number of reviewers were not sure what to make of it. Andrew McCann writes: “this is a novel that one reads through sleeplessness with an uncomfortable sort of craving” (28). Humphrey McQueen, reviewing the novel for Radio National’s *Book Talk*, states: “Three weeks after first reading *Dead Europe*, I

still don't know what I think of it. Yet I'm aware of what the novel has made me think about. 'Disturbing' is the word I've been using to tell friends what the book is like". For Robert Manne the novel is "ambitious and undeniably powerful but also perplexing and disturbing" (50).

I also read the work with mixed feelings, but found I could not stop. I tumbled through the text, speeding along as quickly as Isaac speeds through Europe (quite literally in his case, as he is propelled by copious amounts of drugs). Different aspects of the text made me feel simultaneously compelled, chilled, repulsed, disturbed and moved. Maria Tumarkin uses similar words to describe reactions to traumas: "coming across a trauma, even in the briefest of encounters, would give rise to a distinctive order of sensations—awe, unease, involuntary recall, *déjà vu*, epiphany, fear, delight, recognition" (233). Was Isaac's journey taking me through a literary trauma? Tsiolkas' own comments suggest that this might have been his intention: "What I actually want from a novel I read . . . is to actually go into dark places and difficult places because that's when I feel most alive and engaged by my interaction with the work" (Tsiolkas and Cornelius 20).

Even though these emotions conflicted, my desire to finish the story won out. Finish it I did, but the story had not finished with me. It lurked at the edges of my thoughts, calling me to think more about it. As Jodey Castricano writes: "When texts call to us, what do they say and in whose voice do they speak? What calls to us in secret takes the form of (a) haunting, especially if it concerns the other 'in us' living on—so to speak—as a spectral effect of the text" (4).

I found myself haunted by this novel just as the ghost of a Jewish boy haunts Isaac. Something of this text lodged itself in me and remained there, moving, disturbing. My article is an attempt to understand the "spectral effect" of this work. To do this I will explore two (out of many possible) main ideas, both of which involve a form of literary possession. These are:

1. The strategic use of the ghost story form to produce uncanny effects; and
2. The lingering and difficult question of whether or not this novel is anti-Semitic.¹

A number of reviewers described *Dead Europe* as a ghost story (Williams 45, McQueen). It is useful, then, to look at how the novel might be using traditional ghost story techniques to create readerly disturbance. In his essay, "The 'Uncanny'" Sigmund Freud comments on the role of "common reality" in uncanny stories (250). The author, Freud writes, "deceives us by

promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. We react to his [*si*] inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object” (250-51). Julie Briggs also writes of “the modern ghost story writer’s careful exploitation of realism to lend conviction to his [*si*] work” (17).

This approach fits *Dead Europe*. Tsiolkas uses what McQueen calls “kitchen-sink naturalism” to set up a recognisable and familiar world (particularly for Melbourne readers, who can play “spot-the landmark”). In this world superstitions belong to ignorant “peasant[s]” (5), like Isaac’s mother, who is accused of being “[s]cared of everything she doesn’t know” (5). Otherworldly elements are introduced into the narrative in a second thread, set in alternating chapters, which are “cast in the language of fairytale and fable” (Syson 4) and “mythical and timeless” (McCann 26). These two threads eventually merge, and the ending is firmly in the old world, but at first they are quite separate. In the mythic realm ghosts and curses are evoked, like Lucia’s attempts to ward off the evil eye (20), but the style of the writing suggests that they belong to the old world and have no bearing on Isaac’s first-person and realist narrative.

The choice of point of view is an important consideration here and will feature in the second part of the discussion. The use of the “I” in the novel encourages readers to identify with and so believe in the narrative, “establishing an immediate, intimate link between narrator and reader” (Macris 69). Isaac is a particularly sceptical narrator who uses modern logic to challenge and discount a number of strange things that occur in the early stages of his journey. Oddly enough, this seems to increase the believability of the storyline. Briggs suggests that in ghost stories the “narrator’s scepticism may act as a disarming anticipation of that of his [*si*] audience. If he himself voices their objections or reservations, then they may be more willing to accept his testimony without question” (17). This is true frequently in *Dead Europe*. Early on, Isaac returns with his camera to the flat of the Russian woman, Elena, and her sons. He is told by a neighbour that “Elena is dead” (52). Peculiar, I thought as I read it. How can she be dead when he was just talking to her? But Isaac’s logic addresses my questions (at least on the first reading). He says: “I had turned down the wrong street, crossed the wrong alley, entered the wrong building” (52). Of course!

Determined rationality also wins out when ghost images first begin to appear in Isaac’s photos. The text has already introduced some ghosts in the museum photographs: “There were phantoms, and I had found them in the

Jewish History Museum of Thessaloniki” (88). For Isaac, these “had not been unfamiliar to [him]: the stark black and white images of destitution, of misery and death” (88). These are phantoms in the way that Jacques Derrida describes the relationship between the living and the dead in his discussions of Roland Barthes’ writing on photography (35–67). For Barthes: “there is in every photograph: the return of the dead” (Barthes 9, qtd. in Derrida 41). Exploring this concept, Derrida states that the “spectral arrival” of the dead “in the very space of the photogram indeed resembles that of an emission or emanation” (54).

The ghost images appearing in Isaac’s photographs, however, are literal manifestations of the dead:

But it wasn’t anything technical I first noticed when I studied the photographs spread before me. What I first noticed were the ghosts . . . What I could not understand were the shadows that dotted my landscape. In one of the fields, a thin strip of roughly ploughed land, a figure crouched and stared furiously at the camera. The boy’s face was haggard and lean, and even though he was simply an element in the background, his eyes shone brightly. I peered closely at the black ink of his eyes. Everything about him—his body, his face—was blurred and faint, except for the violence in his eyes . . . All I knew was that they had not been there when I clicked the shutter . . . (132-33)

At this point, as Derrida says in a different context: “The image looks at us” (160), and it is disconcerting. Here is an apparently otherworldly presence in what had been the contemporary, realist thread of the text. The bald photographic evidence, what Derrida calls “the immediate proof given by the photographic apparatus” (53), made me blink. The photograph of the ghost boy suggests he is something real, something scientifically proven, rather than a possible manifestation of Isaac’s subconscious (or a drug-induced flashback).

Isaac blinks too at this point and begins to doubt his conviction that the old stories of curses are fairytales. He wavers in his belief that he would be able to “bring this place [the village] to clear rational modern life with my flash and camera, though film and chemicals” (134). The waver does not last long: Isaac’s earlier determined rationality wins over and he discounts the photographs as a developing error. Tsiolkas writes:

I let out a slow, relieved laugh. Not a curse, not magic: a technical error. Superimposed. They fucked up my bloody film. They fucked up my mother’s memories. I’d got someone else’s memories superimposed on my film . . . This was a technical, scientific world. There was no evil eye. I was not cursed. (134)

Interestingly, “ghost” is the name given to exactly this kind of technical error that produces a double image (*Macquarie Dictionary*), and Isaac later uses this technique to hide the ghostly reality of the images from his old teacher (361), letting the teacher believe that “they’re montage” (361). Isaac as the sceptical narrator lets me believe in the ghosts for a moment, then brings me back to “realism”.

Of course, this changes and readers soon come to accept the presence of these and other photographic ghosts as real, when the two threads in the text move closer together and finally merge. But even this did not prepare me for the shift that occurs later in the story.

Isaac is contacted by an old friend of his father’s, Gerry, who is also known as “the Hebrew” (267). Isaac visits Paris and spends a few days with Gerry, his wife Anika, and a woman called Sula who seeks refuge in Australia (266-302). In the last section of the book, however, we learn from Isaac’s mother that Gerry “killed himself, a long time ago” (406). He was the man described at the beginning of the book, who was buried by the church against his wishes (8, 408). Yet somehow Isaac’s mother holds in her hand Isaac’s photograph of a man she knows to be long-dead (406). As before, the photograph provides scientific proof of a ghostly presence but this time without a rational explanation.

The revelation of Gerry’s death during Isaac’s childhood destabilised the entire narrative for me. I had accepted the presence of ghosts, as described earlier, but even then they were in their own domain and evident in the photographs, not taking the form of flesh-and-blood living people. I had read the scenarios with Gerry as if they had really happened, but that could not be true, unless Gerry was a ghost. The novel’s narrative logic now forced me to accept this. But if Gerry is a ghost, who else might be?

At this point in my reading, I found myself sliding between two worlds, the real and the ethereal, in an uncanny oscillation. Like the Berlin Wall, the walls separating the two worlds had tumbled, and both sides mingled. I found it impossible to say who was living and who was dead. On my second reading this ambiguity affected all of the characters I came across. It made me re-think the photos Isaac takes of apparently real people—the men in Gerry’s warehouse (284) and the old man on the train (333)—which reveal only demonic or tortured presences when developed (303, 337). I began to wonder if Isaac was the only living man in Europe, if everyone he meets is, in fact, a ghost. Derrida’s words about Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* fit well here:

“this ‘air’ that becomes more and more dense, more and more haunted and peopled with ghosts” (66).

Although Tsiolkas warns readers not to take the title literally (Tsiolkas and Cornelius 22), a number of landscape descriptions through the book suggest Isaac might be travelling through a world empty of living people and populated only by ghosts. On the way to the village Isaac states: “I spent my time looking outside [the bus] at the yellowing, dry world. Goats and fields of olives, gypsy encampments and the roadside dotted with memorials to the dead” (66). In Agrinion, “A wind was blowing through the streets and gusted dust into my eyes. No one stirred . . .” (67). In the village Andreas says: “Look at the old houses abandoned and falling down. Look at the dry earth with nothing growing on it. This place is dead” (106). While taking photos of cityscapes in Berlin, Isaac states: “I rid Berlin of its people and capture instead the evidence of their passage” (261). At one point Isaac’s mother imagines her son as having been on a trip through the underworld (406), where heroes traditionally commune with the shades of the dead, and it is striking how much of the journey takes place under the ground, literally, on the Metro and the Tube. Indeed, Gerry, the “people smuggler” (281), is later described as “Charos” (303), the angel of death, who is linked to Charon, the ferryman of the dead in Greek mythology (“Charon”).

As Isaac walks through these realms, the ghostly past is then very much part of his present. Tsiolkas’ Europe might again be described as a traumascapes following Tumarkin:

Traumatised people have to live with the past that refuses to go away. Similarly, at *traumascapes*, which is the word I have been using to describe places across the world marked by traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss, the past is never quite over. Years, decades after the event, the past is still unfinished business. Because trauma is contained not in an event as such but in the way this event is experienced, traumascapes become much more than physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time. Full of visual and sensory triggers, capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions, traumascapes catalyse and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events. It is through these places that the past, whether buried or laid bare for all to see, continues to inhabit and refashion the present. (12)

In Tsiolkas’ Europe, then, the dead, and especially the traumatised dead, co-exist with the living to “inhabit and refashion the present”. At times they appear only as images in Isaac’s photos. At other times, as described above,

they appear as corporeal beings, with whom Isaac unknowingly interacts. Like Isaac I found it impossible to tell the difference between the living and the dead.

Rosemary Jackson suggests that ghost stories “imply the return of the dead as the undead” and “disrupt the crucial defining line which separates ‘real’ life from the ‘unreality’ of death” (69). For James Bradley, reviewing John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer*, this disruption can have a powerful effect on readers:

Ghost stories draw their energies from the tension between our rational minds and the suggestive power of the unknown and, as long as that tension can be maintained and we are suspended in a state somewhere between the two, we are moved out of the everyday and into another place where sublimated desires and irrational fears are made frighteningly tangible. This state of possibility has a frisson that is seductive and unsettling. (5)

For Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle this uncertainty is one of the key triggers of the uncanny effect: “The uncanny has to do with making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they might appear, that they may challenge all rationality and logic” (34). They suggest that these uncanny effects can infect the reader: “[T]he uncanny has to do, most of all, with effects of reading, with the experience of *the reader*. The uncanny is not so much in the text we’re reading: rather, it is lodged like a foreign body within *ourselves*” (39). The uncanny effect of the ghostly shift might be one reason why the text lodged inside me, a kind of literary possession, where the text causes the body of the reader to react and incorporate something within.

Bodily possession also occurs within *Dead Europe*. Its ghosts are not just haunting places or photographs; they also spill out into bodies. When Isaac returns to his mother’s village, a restless spirit (the boy in the photographs) attaches itself to him. This ghost has a strong corporeal connection: he haunts those connected by blood to Lucia Panagis, Isaac’s grandmother and the instigator of the Jewish boy’s murder. Her husband, who actually murders the boy, says: “The crime will be on you” (120). His wife replies: “Yes, let his blood be on me” (120). This agreement creates the central ghost in *Dead Europe*: a powerful figure, a sinewy and seductive presence whose body doesn’t rot (172) and whose spirit haunts successive generations of Lucia’s family because of the injustice of his death.

The ghost’s initial interactions with Isaac are gentle: “On my first night back in Athens, trying to fall asleep on Guilia’s narrow sofa, I had closed my

eyes and felt a touch on my face. I'd opened my eyes sharply to find myself alone in the room” (135). The ghost then seems to inhabit Isaac's body: a literal example of Derrida's “Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same . . . the completely other, dead, living in me” (41-42). Many writers use this concept to explore how our processes of bodily memory and incorporation allow some aspect of the dead to live on. Kate Holden writes of the way her body absorbs and re-animates the gestures of people from her past: “Today I found myself laughing the laugh of a woman who has been dead for 13 years” (3). In Gail Jones' *Sixty Lights*, orphans Lucy and Thomas go through their parents' belongings and are moved to tears by the sensory connections triggered by these objects, raising the memory of the dead in them (43-46).

The ghost boy who lives on inside Isaac, however, is more sinister. McCann describes Isaac as being “colonised . . . by the curse lurking atavistically within him” (27). The presence of the colonising spirit changes Isaac. After leaving the village Isaac begins “sensing the world though another's skin” (135). He finds the Greeks irritating and cannot “get settled back in the city” (134). When the tongueless man in Venice bites him “there [is] no blood” (153) and Isaac is “transfixed by the raw pink wounds” (153). Similarly, when an old friend, Sal, splits Isaac's lip in Prague, the blood doesn't flow (203).

After the arrival of the ghost, Isaac develops an inability to eat solid food and an insatiable hunger: “I had not been able to eat for what seemed like days. There was a hunger—a roaring, voracious hunger that screamed through my body—but it seemed no food could satisfy it and I could hardly keep anything down” (185). It turns out that the hunger is for blood: Isaac has incorporated the ghost's thirst. The blood-thirst is a kind of blood vengeance—blood drunk for blood spilt—satisfying another of the ghost story conventions, namely that “there must be a reason (if not a strictly logical one) for supernatural events” (Briggs 15). When Isaac finally gives in to his craving (257-59) he experiences a kind of communion (in what Stephen Abblitt calls “an almost unreadable passage”). The prose shifts from past tense into present tense (258), creating for the reader a heightened sense of immediacy. Eventually, after a cataclysmic, murderous frenzy in England (381-82), Isaac reaches the lowest point of his narrative. He cracks, and the narrative cracks with him, cleaving off into the past (385) and then into his mother's point of view (391). Isaac is near death, only sustained by transfusions of blood from his mother and his lover (398, 407).

The novel, on a number of occasions, hints that Isaac's own blood might be Jewish (Dowse 13, Manne 52). These hints include: Isaac's name itself; his father's early words that “Jews have my eyes and my nose and my hair and

my chin and we may all share some of the same blood” (4); a genealogy that seems at first to come through Christos (Lucia’s son with the Jewish boy) until he is killed and it is clear that Isaac is Reveka’s child; the suggested closeness between Reveka and Gerry (269), which offers the possibility that Gerry could be Isaac’s father (Manne 52); the tongueless man’s mistaken assumption that Isaac is Jewish (153); and Syd and Sula’s questions about whether Isaac is a Jew (199, 218, 275). Sara Dowse considers these hints as “fraught and complicating” (13), especially when we recall Isaac’s wish for the retrospective annihilation of the Jews: “For one deranged, terrified moment—I promise, only a moment; it passed, I willed it away immediately—I wished that not one Jew had ever walked on the face of the earth” (158).

The flirtation with the question of Isaac’s Jewish identity and his momentary desire to erase the Jewish presence return me to the niggling question that haunted my reading: is this text anti-Semitic or does it question the resurgence of this particular kind of racism? A number of reviewers were similarly concerned. Les Rosenblatt sees a familiar pattern in the “prevalence of repellent Jewish characters” (48). Manne likewise decries the repeated use of “some of the oldest and most consequential anti-Semitic libels—the vengeful Jew; the diabolical Jew; the bloated capitalist Jew; the Jewish curse; the world power of the Jews” (53). He describes the book as wobbling “unsteadily and disconcertingly between the problem of anti-Semitism and the problem of ‘the Jews’” (53). Tsiolkas’ stated aim was “to talk about history and politics and this out-of-control and horrifying resurgence of the most virulent racisms and hatreds” (Tsiolkas and Cornelius 20), but even after multiple readings I find it difficult to say whether he has achieved this or has simply propagated old stereotypes.

This is perhaps because few elements of the book can be considered clear-cut. Dowse suggests, “There’s no-one wholly good or bad in this novel” (13). Michael Williams sees “something unmistakably grimy and compromised about all the interactions in this book” (45). The ambivalent portrayals make it difficult to reach a firm judgement about the characters and their actions; unanswered questions remain after reading.

The use of first-person point of view also means that the reader is forced to identify with Isaac and with his “compromised . . . interactions” (Williams 45). For Jeff Sparrow “The main narrative, written in the first person, encourages our identification with the intelligent, pleasant and tolerant protagonist, up to and including his transformation into an anti-Semite, sociopath and vampire” (in McCann, Sparrow and Cornell 28). For McCann, the novel “cunningly implicates the reader in the moral vacuity demanded,

at moments, by Isaac’s viewpoint” (27). Sally Blakeney suggests that the book puts the reader under a “chilly spotlight that acknowledges that we are all guilty of [racism’s] pitfalls” (par. 1). Our initial identification with Isaac, encouraged by the first-person narrative, means we are also forced to identify with what Isaac becomes. The reader is complicit, then, in Isaac’s experiences: his desires and his hatreds.

That sense of the book being “grimy” because of this complicity produces an almost visceral reaction. After talking to a number of people about it I noticed that their bodies reacted with a shudder. Anecdotally, I heard that one colleague passed the book to another, because she didn’t want her hands to touch it again or to have it “festering” in her flat. McQueen, in his *Book Talk* review, recounts an experience where he found Hitler’s signature in the copy of *Mein Kampf* he had retrieved from the library. He wanted to show the signature to two friends, but “No one would come close enough to touch the autographed copy. I sensed that they feared that the hand that had signed the paper could reach out from the flyleaf and contaminate them”. This visceral reaction suggests readers feel that something from this book can move into the reader’s body and lodge there long after the book has been put down, creating disturbing after-effects and changing or perhaps compromising the reader.

Dead Europe presents a powerful image of how ideologies can move between people through physical contact. When Isaac’s skin touches his boyfriend’s swastika tattoo, a relic of a neo-Nazi past, Isaac fears: “The ink [is] on [his] skin too” (255). Colin’s shameful history clings to him through the tattoo and becomes absorbed into Isaac when their skins touch. I suggest this ink does not remain contained within the narrative: some of the ink from Colin’s tattoo is transmitted through Tsiolkas’ pages to the reader (a form of textually transmitted disease), so that the stain of anti-Semitism is on our skin too. Discussing Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Ken Gelder observes: “The novel is ‘like’ a vampire in that it folds the productive author and the consuming reader into each other; the ‘perversity’ of *Dracula* lies precisely in the mingling of their fluids” (85). Might these mingled fluids be one of the reasons that Tsiolkas’ book disturbs readers so deeply? It forces us to ask: might I be contaminated and transformed by this into someone like Isaac, someone possessed, someone violent and vengeful?

Through the identification described above, and like the uncanny effect mentioned earlier, Isaac with all his complications seems to lodge “like a foreign body within *ourselves*” (Bennett and Royle 39). He is “The concept of the other . . . living in me” (Derrida 41-42), appearing to inhabit the reader as

he himself is inhabited by the ghost boy. The split in points of view towards the novel's end liberates readers in some ways as the troubling link between the "I" of the vampiric anti-Semite and the "I" of the reader is severed, but its ghost remains in the questions raised by this literary possession.

These lingering questions are vital for unsettling our own comfortable views. Dowse welcomes the experience of being disturbed by what she reads, as a catalyst for self-reflection: "[Literature] can shake you out of complacency, it can make you search your own soul to discover what's lurking there and what you really believe. And it can radically alter your view of the world, even if only momentarily" (13). Tsiolkas suggests that this study of the self was one of his reasons for writing the book: "I wanted to address anti-Semitism, which was the first racism I learned as a child. Writing the book was a way of addressing what was within me" (Lloyd W11). Reading the book compels us to address what we carry within.

Dead Europe can disturb readers on a number of levels. It uses traditional ghost story techniques and encourages reader identification with a confronting character to create a compelling literary possession not simply between characters within the book but between book and reader. In this way it provokes, but does not answer, multiple questions. Lodged in me, the novel's ghosts continue to provoke, unsettle and disturb, long after reading has finished.

NOTES

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