



## Time and again: Anachronism and the Gothic in Vonne van der Meer's *Spookliefde*

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**Abstract:** This article examines Vonne van der Meer's *Spookliefde. Een Iers verhaal* (Ghost Love. An Irish Tale, 1995) with a Gothic frame of interpretation. Taking my cue from the suggestion made by Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall (2000) that Gothic criticism should pay more attention to historical and geographical references, I argue that *Spookliefde*'s Irish setting is a realistic setting for exploring the tensions and parallels between sexual desire and religious desire, between determinacy and surrender. The analysis of anachronism in *Spookliefde* shows the potential connections between historical context and modernisation processes at the time of publication. At the same time, *Spookliefde* contests Baldick and Mighall's argument that Gothic novels confirm modern values through anachronisms.

**Keywords:** Vonne van der Meer, Gothic Criticism, Anachronism, Sexual Emancipation, Secularisation, Modernisation

When the Dutch writer Vonne van der Meer (b. 1952) published her short novel *Spookliefde. Een Iers verhaal* (Ghost Love. An Irish Tale) in 1995, several literary critics wondered about the meaning of the subtitle. Why was it called 'An Irish tale'? One critic connected 'Irish' to the narrative structure. *Spookliefde* is an embedded story 'which gives it a somewhat old-fashioned, saga-like cachet', he wrote; and, he continued, 'Ireland, that is something out of a legend itself, isn't it?'<sup>1</sup> Another critic thought that the location might have been chosen because 'an old belief says that the islands of the blessed people are situated west of Ireland', or that the 'Celtic landscape' offers 'the necessary *couleur locale* for so much romanticism'.<sup>2</sup> And a third critic wrote that she would not know what an Irish tale was 'apart from some obvious clichés', which she did not illustrate any further and, apparently, assumed to be well-known; 'but if [an Irish tale] is a bit of a fake, Phil's obsessional horniness is very real'.<sup>3</sup> These quotations indicate that in [69] the Dutch reviewers' imagination Ireland is primarily associated with legend, as well as romanticism. The reference to an existing country, which could be understood as a reference to reality, actually leads these critics to expect non-realism. It is an interesting reaction, especially when we consider that *Spookliefde* bears many characteristics of the Gothic novel, a genre which is frequently read in a similar, non-realistic way, despite its often concrete geographical or historical references. This makes it all the more surprising that none of the Dutch critics came up with this particular frame of reference. In this article, I will argue that reading *Spookliefde* as a Gothic novel is a productive interpretation strategy to highlight the conflicting cultural norms and values at work in the novel, especially regarding secularisation and women's sexual autonomy.

Literature is only one of many media in which the Gothic manifests itself. The Gothic thrives, not only in literature, but also in film, fashion, games and pop music. In the past decades, the field of Gothic studies has boomed as well. Obvious Gothic classics like *Dracula* or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* are studied in all their (re)mediations, and many new Gothic texts – to limit the discussion to literary criticism – from different periods and different countries have been added to the ‘Gothic canon’. Analyses of popular fiction, from nineteenth-century ‘penny dreadfuls’ like *Varney the Vampyre* to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005-2008), feature alongside those of high-brow authors like Henry James and Virginia Woolf. This proliferation and variety makes it difficult if not impossible to conceive of the literary Gothic as one genre, defined by essential characteristics or tropes. By and large, the conventional generic genealogy of the Gothic novel – from Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820) – has been expanded with a multiplicity of definitions and approaches, helpfully listed by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy:

... Gothic has been defined according to its emphasis on the returning past (Baldick 1992, Mighall 1999), its dual interest in transgression and decay (McGrath 1997), its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear (Punter 1980) and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy (Jackson 1981).<sup>4</sup>

My own angle, in this article and elsewhere, is to understand Gothic as a way of staging the ambivalences caused by modernisation processes.<sup>5</sup> This view is inspired by the work of the aforementioned Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, which I will discuss in more detail below.

In the Netherlands, early waves of Gothic literature seem to have passed without leaving many traces. Although German, French, and some English Gothic novels were translated into Dutch in the first half of the nineteenth century, there were scarcely any Dutch writers who wrote original Gothic work, apart from the odd writer of ghost stories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> However, the twentieth-century picture is a different one. Especially from the [70] 1980s onwards, Dutch literary authors wrote novels in a Gothic vein, including Gerard Reve (1923-2006), Helga Ruebsamen (1934), Frans Kellendonk (1951-90), Renate Dorrestein (1954), Thomas Rosenboom (1956), and also Vonne van der Meer.<sup>7</sup>

Van der Meer made her debut in 1985, with a collection of stories praised by critics for their lucid and subtle style. Since then she has published a dozen novels, novellas and collections of stories. Her books have been translated into several languages, including German and Spanish, while some of her short stories have been translated into English and published in anthologies.<sup>8</sup> Van der Meer’s narratives are usually about ordinary people who transgress the boundaries of convention. Something excessive is bound to happen in her stories, however small the transgression may seem: a woman fakes a pregnancy or an elderly lady buys erotic lingerie. *Spookliefde*, Van der Meer’s sixth book, is the clearest example of an appreciation for Gothic imagery.

## *Spookliefde* as Gothic

Gothic, for lack of any easy definition, may be made visible only through intertextual relations, as Catherine Spooner writes about twentieth-century Gothic: ‘It is sometimes only by reading the[se novels] in the light of ... previous generations [of Gothic writers] that their Gothic aspect emerges’.<sup>9</sup> This, it could be argued, goes for Vonne van der Meer’s *Spookliefde* as well. The title *Spookliefde* is hinting at the Gothic’s engagement with the supernatural, but strictly speaking

the novella is no ghost story – no supernatural being makes its appearance –, nor does it engage in horror effects. Still, the novella echoes the Gothic in its choice of setting and themes, and it is my contention that actualising this Gothic 'potential' of the text produces specific insights into the central conflicts of the narrative.

The story is situated on a nameless, remote island to the west of Ireland where the only person with a telephone is the local priest. This is a typical Gothic setting: a desolate environment with a threat of violence and symbolically situated at the edge of civilisation. When seventeen-year old Phil, the main character of *Spookliefde*, arrives on the island to join her parents who have migrated there from the States, she is told that it is caving in and slowly disappearing into the sea, and she notices that everything is rusting: cars, rooftops, even the seaweed on the rocks and the moss on the walls have a rusty colour. The island itself is the crumbling Gothic ruin, which has some secrets to hide, as she soon discovers. Other Gothic elements are recurring references to a mysterious murder, a symbolically charged, black, bat-like shawl, uncanny doubles and distortions of time and place. Also in its themes – the innocent young girl who arrives in a remote place, the threat of sexuality, the discovery of unexpected family relations and the quest for romance – *Spookliefde* draws from the Gothic tradition. [71]

Phil tells the story of her first arrival on the island twenty-five years later to a nameless girl, who is the first-person narrator of the framing narrative. This seventeen year-old girl is a tourist who has just said farewell to her boyfriend Ian, and has lit a candle in the chapel to wish for his return. There she meets Phil, who warns her not to pray for requited love – because that is what she did twenty-five years earlier, with dramatic consequences. Phil tells the girl how she herself fell in love at seventeen with a man whom she discovered later to be two men, twin brothers.<sup>10</sup> One of the brothers, Seamus, was the bard-bookseller-teacher of the island, whilst the other, Michael, was retarded and barely able to speak. The young Phil falls in love with Seamus, but not receiving any response from him she turns to Michael, whom she first imagines to be Seamus. Gradually she starts loving him and his silence, instead of Seamus. When Seamus recognises the patient and loving way Phil deals with Michael, he falls in love with her after all, but this time she is the unresponsive one. In a dramatic climax, on the night of a village party, Phil takes Michael home with her to seduce him and finally have sex with him. They are followed by Seamus who fatally shoots Michael. After the dramatic incident Phil leaves the island, and starts a family, but returns to be a teacher and work in the bookshop – taking Seamus's place as it were. Having served his time in prison, Seamus also returns to the island. He never speaks again and thus in a sense takes his brother Michael's place. This is how the nameless girl finds him: a simpleton, sitting on the same barstool where her boyfriend Ian used to sit.

## Gothic Criticism

In 2000, Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall made a polemical intervention in a recurring debate in Gothic criticism, on the question whether the Gothic should be considered as inherently 'subversive' in the sense that it by definition transgresses dominant cultural norms.<sup>11</sup> In their article, Baldick and Mighall state that a lot of Gothic criticism, often inspired by psychoanalysis, has mistakenly read the Gothic as a purely fantastic genre, thereby reading too much psychological 'depth' and political 'subversion' into it. In their opinion the Gothic is deeply affiliated with enlightened bourgeois realism, and confirms the project of modernity rather than subverting it. Instead of emphasising the irrational and treating the Gothic novel as a dream-

like fantastic text, Gothic criticism should take ‘the motivations of Gothic fictional historicity’ seriously.<sup>12</sup>

British Gothic novels like Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* and Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) are set in the Catholic south of Europe (Italy, Spain), and not in a ‘truly’ exotic place like the Orient, Baldick and Mighall argue, because these countries, from a British perspective, ‘were firmly associated with the twin yoke of feudal politics and popish deception, from which they had still to emancipate themselves’.<sup>13</sup> Because the Gothic takes a ‘self-consciously Protestant approach to historical [72] representation’, these Gothic locations are not just a figure of escape, or fantasy, or nostalgia, but of *probability*.<sup>14</sup> The torture chambers and corrupt clergy were realistic rather than fantastic: with the Inquisition still active in southern Europe (in Spain until 1808), this region was the most probable location for the Gothic tales of terror, and the confirmation of modern, bourgeois, Protestant identity.<sup>15</sup>

Baldick and Mighall observe that the relation between past and present in the Gothic often takes the form of an anachronism, which forms a structuring aspect of the narrative. An analysis of these purposeful anachronisms and their effects would prevent the collapse of history into universal psychology.<sup>16</sup> An anachronism – according to the *New Oxford Dictionary* ‘a thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than in which it exists’ – can work two ways. It is an anachronism to say that Julius Caesar looked at his watch, but it is also an anachronism when an out-dated object appears in a modern age, as in ‘horse and carriage are an anachronism in this age of fast travel’. From the often-used shorthand characterisation of the Gothic as ‘the return of the repressed’, one might expect that the structuring anachronism in the Gothic is the object from the past that is misplaced in the here-and-now. Although Baldick and Mighall give this kind of anachronism some attention, for example when they discuss four-hundred-year-old Count Dracula’s appearance in the ‘modern’ Victorian age, their main focus is on the opposite form: the structural anachronism in the Gothic is, according to them, the appearance of an evidently modern heroine in an archaic context: ‘[T]his chronological discrepancy is the prime motivation of these narratives, and that which provides their central dramatic interest’.<sup>17</sup> The central conflict that arises in the Gothic between the anachronistically modern heroine and her archaic opponents is usually won by the heroine. As a result:

Modern values are confirmed and modern virtues rewarded in the denouement, when the heroine finally escapes from the clutches of the Inquisition and is allowed to marry the suitor of her choice as she takes up residence in a tastefully designed villa, allowing the feudal castle to fall into ruins...[S]ituated between the modern and medieval worlds, the narrative witnesses the birth of modernity.<sup>18</sup>

Baldick and Mighall concentrate their argument on the discussion of early British Gothic, but for my purposes I want to ask if, and in what ways, contemporary Gothic also stages the conflicts between modernity and an archaic past. Taking their position as a starting point for the analysis of *Spookliedde*, the question would be by which anachronism(s) *Spookliedde* is structured, and which particular conflict is involved. Can the specific location – Ireland – be understood as a location of probability rather than of fantasy or escapism, as the Dutch critics would have it? From the case of *Spookliedde* I will draw some conclusions about the usefulness of [73] the analysis of anachronism in studying literary texts, about the potential reach of such analysis and the insights it may produce. As I will argue, Baldick and Mighall offer an interesting and provocative perspective on the Gothic, but in the end their analysis is not

satisfactory – because their reading of the Gothic is too one-sided and because of the several possible interpretations of the concept of anachronism.

## Time and Place in *Spookliefde*

In its references to place and time, two contrasting perspectives can be found in *Spookliefde*. On the one hand, the island's time and space are unclear and unreliable entities. Not only is the island slowly crumbling, it is also a disorienting place. When Phil arrives it is very foggy; she cannot even see the horizon anymore, so is unable to orientate herself. Everything is strange, even her own father: he looks differently, smells differently, and speaks differently, about strange places with sinister names, like Fisherman's Grief and Dead Man's Cave. He tells her a story about a bishop who was tortured, thrown from a cliff and drowned a few centuries ago. Phil feels it is 'not a good sign that he was telling something that happened so long ago in a tone of voice as if it happened only yesterday'.<sup>19</sup> Apparently the past is still very much alive on this island or, more precisely, the difference between past and present is blurred. Another example of this blurring is the crocheted black shawl, made by her grandmother, which Phil got before she left for the island. Her mother believes the shawl is unfit for young girls. Phil says: 'Grandma said all women on the islands wear such shawls'. 'In the last century maybe', her mother answers. 'This century, last century, does it make any difference here?' Phil wonders.<sup>20</sup> The shawl, as an anachronistic object for a girl like Phil, marks an apparent contrast between the island's time (as represented by Phil's grandmother) and Phil's present (as represented by her mother). Phil is affected by the island's time – she stops wearing a watch, as is noted several times in *Spookliefde*, because she burns her wrist. She literally cannot bear this symbol of chronological time anymore, having lost all sense of time. This experience of losing a sense of time is repeated on the level of the framing narrative. Phil tells her story in hindsight – twenty-five years have passed – to the nameless seventeen-year-old girl, who is the first-person narrator of *Spookliefde*. The girl is so captivated by Phil's story that she mistakes the horn of the departing evening boat for the incoming morning boat, upon which she remarks: 'I had lost all sense of time ...'.<sup>21</sup>

*Spookliefde* is not set in a specific year, nor are there any references to historical events. Yet in certain respects the novella is historically clearly situated. Moreover, its anachronistic structure can hardly be missed: there is a clear contrast in *Spookliefde* between the modern heroine, Phil, and the archaic island. In the descriptions of Phil's home country, the United States, we recognise certain typically [74] twentieth-century post-war phenomena, like drive-in cinemas, cheerleaders and musicals. Modern Phil gets stuck on an island where people still burn peat to heat their houses and only one telephone is available. Moreover, she feels that '... her parents (who have Irish roots, AA) had migrated in the wrong direction'.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, her sense of misdirection does not only concern place, but also time: she feels as if after arriving on the island she has travelled back in time.

Phil's sense of travelling backwards is closely linked – and actually mentioned in the same paragraph – to a crucial aspect of the modern society she has come from: the possibility for girls to experiment with sex. Back home, in the States, Phil was jealous of the things her friend Susie did with boys; things she wanted to do as well. Just before coming to the island she got rid of her braces, so literally nothing stands in the way of fulfilling her desire: 'Before, she could tell herself it was because of her braces that she had never had a boyfriend'.<sup>23</sup> Phil is a modern, autonomous woman, and it is clear what she wants: sex. She is determined to fulfil this desire.

But her grandmother, who stays behind in the US, warns her that ‘on such an island’ she ‘will not be able to find a man’<sup>24</sup>, without explaining why but implying that the island is lagging behind in these matters. The obstacle the island will be to the fulfilment of Phil’s desire is illustrated by the local girls, who seem to perceive Phil as strange, and even unreal, when they ask her if her teeth are real: ‘They are so straight, they look like they’re plastic’.<sup>25</sup>

Phil is aware of this hindrance. She has a strong sense of being haunted from the moment she arrives on the island, and this sense is combined with a feeling of being trapped – she feels as if she is ‘in a tunnel, in a dream where you’re being haunted but cannot move ...’.<sup>26</sup> In the course of one of her first walks across the island, she sees a woman standing in a doorway, leaning on the lower part of a wooden door. The woman is still there when she returns from her walk and is a ‘spectre’<sup>27</sup> to Phil, an image of fear: she fears to become a woman with a wooden lower body. The feeling of being trapped on the island is transferred to being trapped in the body: Phil fears immobility, even death, and this is clearly associated with a lack of sex.

According to Baldick and Mighall, we become aware of exactly which modern values are being confirmed in the Gothic, by focusing on the apparent anachronisms. In *Spookliefde*, Phil’s modern ideas about sexual experimentation conflict with the archaic island, where she is perceived as unreal and where she will not be able to find a man. This anachronistic conflict, in other words, revolves around the opposition between a modern, sexually liberated woman and her autonomous desire on the one hand, and the petrified archaism of her environment on the other. The chronological order of time, which the island lacks, signifies progress and is thus associated with modernity, with modern sexuality. But contrary to what Baldick and Mighall read in the eighteenth-century Gothic, these modern values are not unequivocally confirmed in *Spookliefde*. This becomes clear, firstly, [75] in how Phil’s desire is both fulfilled and not fulfilled and secondly, in the role of Ireland as a Gothic setting.

## Sexual Desire and Religious Desire

In Baldick and Mighall’s reading of British eighteenth-century Gothic, modern values prevail when the female protagonist – after having been besieged by sinister male opponents – can save her virginity and get properly married. Virtuous Ellena in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) could probably serve as the exemplary heroine in this respect. If this heroine does not save her virginity, like Antonia in *The Monk* who is raped by the monk Ambrosio, she is ‘lost’ for the story and dies. So the ‘birth of modernity’ that Baldick and Mighall witness in the Gothic is very much gendered – this offspring has to be carried (out) by the heroine. But just like Gothic should be historicised and may signify different conflicts in different contexts, gender is a historically variable category. Phil in *Spookliefde* is no Ellena, she is a different kind of heroine: she wants nothing better than to experience ‘her first time’, to lose her virginity. And according to the modern values of her home country the US, she is an autonomous woman, free to experiment with sex. This self-evidence of female lust and Phil’s determination to fulfil her desires are a relatively recent achievement. Until the 1960s, scientists assumed women had fewer sexual desires than men, an image that was corrected only slowly, through research by sexologists like Alfred Kinsey and Shere Hite.<sup>28</sup> In art and literature lustful women are often portrayed as monstrous.<sup>29</sup> This is not the case in *Spookliefde*.

*Spookliefde*, however, is a Gothic tale about a girl’s sexual initiation that does not happen. Seamus turns her down and Michael does not respond. At the end of *Spookliefde*, Phil is not rewarded – as in many classic Gothic tales – with marrying her suitor. Michael is dead, Seamus

goes to prison and, when he returns, he is as mute as Michael was. However, in an addendum to the story we learn that Phil eventually does marry and start a family, but all this happens out of the reader's sight. Her strongest wish, her quest for sexual initiation, is not fulfilled within the actual narrative. We can hardly say that modernity, impersonated by the heroine Phil, prevails in *Spookliefde*, or that the denouement shows the comfortable dominance of modern values, as Baldick and Mighall would have it.

Any possibility of a comfortable dominance of modern values is undermined by the heroine herself who is supposed to represent these values. Not only a conflict between Phil and her surroundings arises in *Spookliefde*, but rather a conflict within the modern heroine herself. For as soon as Phil's love object appears to be split (being twins), her desire splits as well. Phil is not only ambivalent about her love object – first Seamus, then Michael; her desire is ambivalent as well. She wants to be besieged, yes, but not at any cost; she wants to be desired, but not raped. She is determined, but wants to lose herself. The girls of the island tell Phil how [76] strong Michael is, and how dangerous he might be: '... you never knew with a boy like him'.<sup>30</sup> When she burns her wrist, Seamus seems concerned and asks her if someone has treated her roughly. While she reassures herself that Michael is not dangerous, she still is afraid of him: 'He had never bothered a girl from the island, yet they stayed away from him – surely for a good reason'.<sup>31</sup> Her desire is therefore tainted with fear, and this ambivalence is stressed by a striking ellipse – the only one in *Spookliefde* – in the chronological order of the narration: in the scene that suggests that she has lost her virginity at the island's harvest feast.

Immediately after the scene describing her first dance with Michael, the text continues with: 'She pulled up the sheet to her chin ... . The cold water with which she had washed her legs and thighs had almost dried. Tomorrow she would take a shower, wash her panties, and his handkerchief'.<sup>32</sup> It is obviously suggested that Phil has had sex, but instead it turns out that she has wet her pants, from fear. Walking home after the party, she had run into Michael, whom she suddenly feared, remembering what the girls of the island had been telling each other about his unpredictable strength. She saw him approaching like a 'giant bat'<sup>33</sup>, and before realising that he was only wearing her very own black shawl, she had wet her pants. She was afraid he would overpower her, but all he did was zipping down his fly and urinate. The express confusion between fear and sexual desire is revealing Phil's ambivalence. Her sexual desire is checked by the fear of rape; this threat of rape casts a doubt on the actuality of women's sexual autonomy, on the possibility that this modern value could prevail.

Soon enough Phil starts realising that the mentally retarded Michael is not dangerous at all, because he has no idea of sexuality. 'Until now every touch was so coincidental, casual'<sup>34</sup>, she thinks after spending some time with him. She becomes intrigued by his silence, and by the nature surrounding them. She expresses this newly found interest, or sensitivity, in religious terms. Their relationship is paradisiacal: he shows her the nature of the island, she teaches him to swim. They hardly speak; practically the only language Michael knows is the names of plants and animals – like Adam in the Garden of Eden naming all the creatures. She asks Michael whether he believes there is a God. In this particular scene, Phil is sitting on the rocks with Michael, who is smashing cockles, and she thinks about the arbitrariness of fate: 'She asked him whether he ever wondered what was beyond the stars and beyond that. Whether he believed in a God who protected them, but could also crush them with one blow'.<sup>35</sup> Michael looks at her uncomprehendingly – after all he can barely speak. At that moment they see a woman hanging out the washing; a white sheet is blown against her body, so that they see the contours of her body through the linen. Michael points at her and says 'angel'.<sup>36</sup> It is a crucial moment in the

novel, anticipating the end, linking a desire for meaningfulness with the arbitrary fate that will strike Michael.

The supernatural being that 'appears' in *Spookliefde* is this angel, not a ghost. But what exactly is the difference between an angel and a spectre? Both are supernatural [77] beings, and both can dress in a white sheet, as Michael makes clear. Phil's ghost love is both the love that never becomes physical, or sexual, and it is the love for the supernatural, materialised by a sheet. In the contemporary Gothic *Spookliefde*, sexual desire is exchanged for religious desire, mediated by Michael, the object of Phil's sexual desire who does not know desire. And it is through the close relation with the surroundings of the island that this exchange is established.

## Ireland as Gothic Setting

Although time and space may not be reliable, stable objects in *Spookliefde*, the location at least is certain: after all Van der Meer called her story 'An Irish tale'. The location of the island does show some geographical ambiguity, however. It is not exactly Ireland, but a nameless island west of Ireland. As such it is situated on a threshold of modernity – in the margin of Europe, or as a springboard to the centre of twentieth-century modernity: the United States. As we have seen, Dutch literary critics associated Ireland with a Celtic atmosphere, legend and romanticism, thereby stressing its fantastic character but, with Baldick's and Mighall's plea in mind that we should take into account the clear indications of location in the early Gothic, Ireland may be read as a sign of historical probability instead.

Contrary to what some critics write, Van der Meer does not activate Celtic, pagan imagery in *Spookliefde*. There are no hags or fairies to be found, no witchcraft or magic potions. Just like in the old Gothic, *Spookliefde* is set in a Roman Catholic country, Ireland, and it is Catholicism that frames the story – literally. On the first and the last page of *Spookliefde* a candle is lit in the chapel, a Catholic ritual. The story is set in motion – ignited I am tempted to say – by the repeated act of lighting a candle, on the level of story-telling as well as on the level of plot. Lighting a candle starts the narration, when it prompts the middle-aged Phil to tell her life story to the young girl who has just lit a candle for her boyfriend. And it starts the narrative, the way events unfold: when the young Phil lights a candle to wish for Seamus's love, and does not cancel her wish when she starts loving Michael, she is confronted with the dramatic consequences when Seamus falls in love with her after all.

The Catholic 'ignition' is essential for the story to happen in the first place. But the setting is also important for the anachronistic conflict between Phil – and also the nameless girl, through the resemblance between Phil's narrative and the framing narrative – and the archaic island. Unlike classic Gothic novels, the Catholic setting is empowering the heroines in *Spookliefde*, rather than being oppressive, threatening or even violent. Compared to classic Gothic novels, there is a remarkable absence of corrupt priests and monks in *Spookliefde*. Catholicism is only present in the form of the candle ritual and the chapel. The Catholic imagery does not function to create a stronger, fearful contrast between the Gothic surroundings [78] and the heroine. The island functions as an archaic location, but Phil is not just oppressed by it. Rather, she starts liking it. The nameless girl is not religious, but she feels comfortable with her act: 'I had never lit a candle in a church before, but the gesture didn't feel odd, misplaced or copied'.<sup>37</sup> The Catholic religious ritual of lighting a candle serves to fulfil the heroine's desire to be loved. The ritual does not unequivocally support this desire. Phil warns the girl that praying for fulfilled love could be dangerous: 'Pray that your prayer won't be heard. Yes, wish that your wish won't

be fulfilled'.<sup>38</sup> Paradoxically this second prayer, this wish, has to be answered, for the original wish not to be fulfilled. This actually emphasises the power that is attributed to prayer.

By situating her novella in Ireland, one of the most Catholic countries in twentieth-century Europe, Vonne van der Meer chose a setting in which she could most realistically place a character who discovers a religious sensitivity within herself, against the grain of dominant secularised subjectivity. The Gothic returns in Van der Meer's novel, motivated by an emerging religiosity. Ghosts are an anachronism: they do not belong in the time in which they appear, they belong in the past. So do angels, in a sense: they cannot appear in a modern novel without raising eyebrows. Calling upon a supernatural being fits with the conventions of the Gothic, while it would have been highly improbable in a novel with a modern, secularised setting. And as such, Catholic Ireland can become a Gothic site of probability.

Dutch readers may know that Vonne van der Meer converted to Catholicism, which became public knowledge a year after *Spookliefde*'s publication.<sup>39</sup> The reception of Van der Meer's later novels is strongly coloured by this knowledge, often negatively. Since the 1960s, the Netherlands has secularised very fast, and writers undoubtedly were influential in the construction of a national secular self-image.<sup>40</sup> But this argument also goes the other way around: being secular is (often implicitly) considered to be important for literariness. As I showed, critics did not pay attention to the Catholic setting in *Spookliefde* at the time. Apparently, religious sensitivity situated in 'exotic' Catholic Ireland is far less troubling than an actual Catholic writer close to home.

## What History?

Anachronism cannot exist without a historical frame. An anachronism makes you aware of the historicity of both the misplaced object and the period in which it is placed, and that is exactly the point Baldick and Mighall want to make: anachronism makes us see history. But it is a particular kind of history. Anachronism literally means 'against time', which almost immediately implies a direction: the anachronism moves against the direction of time. So the very concept of anachronism implies a linear conception of time.<sup>41</sup> Moreover it implies a correct proceeding of time – there is a normative moment in this concept of anachronism. [79] This strong sense of linearity and teleology is what Baldick and Mighall recognise in the Gothic, which they consider to be an expression of a 'whiggish' view on history: the view which holds that history follows a path of inevitable progress and improvement and which judges the past in light of the present.<sup>42</sup> The result of the conflict caused by anachronism is a confirmation of progress, which could be summarised as modern Protestantism leaving behind medieval Catholicism.

In their crusade against readings of the Gothic as a subversive genre, Baldick and Mighall reduce their interpretation of anachronisms in Gothic fictions to a confirmation of modern values – expressed in notions about religion, or social order. But this interpretation relies on a triumphant reading of the Gothic plot, and on the virtuousness of the Gothic heroine. Consequently they end up with a rather narrow concept of history, and a limited notion of anachronism, of which they do not distance themselves. There is reason to do so, however. What this interpretation cannot account for is the manifest seductive power of the pre-rational and the supernatural that also is expressed in the Gothic, like it is in *Spookliefde*. Moreover we lose sight of the destabilising aspect of anachronism, which I believe cannot be ignored. At the very moment anachronism establishes a notion of a 'correct' proceeding of time, anachronism

as a phenomenon casts doubts on this linear concept of history. Because if history really were as progressive as it is supposed to be, why is there still anachronism? The mere possibility of anachronism stresses the synchronicity of different stages in history and the persistent threat to the 'proper' progression of time.

In *Spookliefde*, the linear, chronological time of modernity – i.e. migration, sexual freedom and the American dream – conflicts with the circular, archaic time of the island, a site where one does not wear a watch and where village parties are harvest parties, dependent on the cyclical change of seasons. Or where parents remigrate to. The culturally constructed concept of history as teleology is ultimately put into question when the stark contrast between the modern heroine and her archaic environment diminishes. Also, the many repetitions and doubles in *Spookliefde* help to destabilise the notion of progress. The island is 'this island near an island', and Seamus and Michael are a double. The most obvious repetition is the story that repeats itself. Phil's story is a warning to the nameless girl, and her story in turn is a warning for the reader. The I-narrator is in the same position as Phil – in love for the first time and insecure about the ending; and we as readers are positioned as listeners to the I-person just like she was listening to Phil. When we read this story of suspense, we may lose the notion of time, captivated by the story like she was before us.

Michael is the dead man who returns, not only in the shape of Seamus, but also in stories about true love that will be told to future generations of young women. His death makes sure he will live on in the story; that he will forever haunt it. And vice versa: his death guarantees the proliferation of the story. The story premeditates on its own proliferation, on the endless repetition of itself. Phil says at the [80] end: 'When you will pass this on....' It can be read as an imperative. The girl responds 'Oh, but I won't. I promise', as if she had heard a secret which she will not reveal. But Phil almost insists: 'Oh yes, you will. You'll tell Ian, ... or someone else'.<sup>43</sup> History could repeat itself, and probably will do so; the same story will happen over and over again, which signifies a possible collapse of time and is thus connected to the mythical concept of time on the island. These repetitions are 'counter forces' mobilised by the text itself.

*Spookliefde* shows through its repetitions what will haunt future generations of young women or readers of this story: the fear of not finding romantic love, of not being sexually active. But what could haunt them as well is the doubt of their own desire, caused by a nascent religious desire. All these doubles and repetitions put into perspective the notions of linearity, teleology and progress. It is worth noting that amid the many repetitions, the non-repeatable – the first time, the loss of virginity – does not occur. There is no progression in this sense. Instead, the repetitive ritual act of lighting a candle is what sets the narrative in motion. The analysis of anachronism in *Spookliefde* draws attention to possible connections with a historical context – Ireland as a Catholic country is a meaningful location – and processes of modernisation, in particular female sexual autonomy and secularisation; but at the same time it shows the ambiguities of modernisation, as well as the modern subject's doubt. There is much to be said for the argument that in *Spookliefde* Van der Meer explores religious desire at the detriment of female lust; at the same time, she does show a genuine tension between sexual autonomy and the desire to surrender.

Baldick and Mighall's impetus to think through anachronism has shifted the debate on the Gothic towards a more historical way of thinking. This move has obvious advantages, but it comes at the risk of (re)introducing an orthodox linear notion of time, which the Gothic itself continues to undermine. I think it is more apt to regard the Gothic as the narrative genre *par excellence* that stages the conflict between modernisation and anti-modernisation, rather than

that it either expresses the 'dark side' of modernity or confirms modern values. The outcome is uncertain. From this perspective, the ambiguity of anachronism – both establishing a linear conception of time *and* destabilising it through repetition – seems to make it the ideal point of entry for a contextualised analysis of the Gothic.

## Notes

1. '[h]et geeft het verhaal een wat ouderwets, saga-achtig cachet ... Ierland, dat is uit zichzelf al iets uit een legende, nietwaar?' R. Anker, 'Het meisje en de tweeling: een Iers verhaal van Vonne van der Meer', *Het Parool*, 29 September 1995. All translations of Dutch quotes are by Agnes Andeweg.
2. 'een oud geloof wil dat de eilanden van de gelukzaligen zich ten westen van Ierland bevinden', of omdat 'het Keltische landschap de gewenste couleur locale [geeft] voor [81] zoveel romantiek?' J. Goedegebuure, 'Het tweeslachtig mechanisme', *HP/De Tijd*, 6 October 1995.
3. 'afgezien van voor de hand liggende clichés'; 'maar als het [een Iers verhaal] een beetje namaak is, is Phils obsessie geïllustreerd zeer echt'. D. Schouten, 'God geeft nergens om', *Vrij Nederland*, 4 November 1995.
4. C. Spooner & E. McEvoy (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.
5. See A. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon. Gotieke verschijningen in Nederlandse romans, 1980-1995*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011.)
6. For discussions of the history of the Gothic in Dutch literature, see R. Buikema & E. Wesseling, 'Contesting Consensus Culture: the Case of Dutch Gothic', *Journal of European Studies* 41 (June 2011), pp. 123-41 and A. Andeweg, 'How Gothic Reared its Head in Dutch Literature', *Ilha do Desterro – Gothic: New Directions* 62/1 (Jan./Jul. 2012), pp. 129-54.
7. For case studies of Dutch Gothic, see A. Andeweg, 'The Ghost in the Closet. Frans Kellendonk and the Gothic', in *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*, ed. by I. van Elferen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 138-52; and R. Buikema & E. Wesseling, 'Gothic Engineerings in Childrearing Manuals and Feminist Novels: Benjamin Spock Meets Renate Dorrestein', in *ibidem*, pp. 152-67.
8. An overview of translations of Van der Meer's work is available at <http://www.nlpvf.nl/vertalingendb/search1.php>. See also [www.vonnevandermeer.nl](http://www.vonnevandermeer.nl).
9. C. Spooner, 'Gothic in the Twentieth Century', in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by C. Spooner & E. McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 46.
10. Because Phil is focalising the embedded narrative, the reader only discovers this doubling after some time, just like her, and just like the I-narrator of the framing narrative.
11. C. Baldick & R. Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by D. Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209-29.
12. Baldick & Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', p. 220.
13. Baldick & Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', p. 219.
14. Baldick & Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', p. 220.

15. See C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) for a description of the close connection between the emerging of a modern sense of 'self' and Protestantism.
16. See also R. Mighall, *A Geography of Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) for an elaborate version of this point.
17. Baldick & Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', p. 220.
18. Baldick & Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', p. 220.
19. V. van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', in *Een warme rug. Zo is hij. Spookliefde.* (Amsterdam: Contact, 2002), p. 223: 'Het leek haar geen goed teken dat hij iets van zo lang geleden vertelde op een toon alsof het gisteren was gebeurd'.
20. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 224: "'Oma zei dat alle vrouwen op de eilanden zo'n doek dragen". "In de vorige eeuw misschien," antwoordt haar moeder. "Deze eeuw, de vorige eeuw, maakt dat dan wat uit hier?"
21. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 229: 'Maar ik had alle besef van tijd verloren (...)'. [82]
22. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 226: '(...) haar ouders waren de verkeerde kant op geëmigreerd'.
23. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 227: 'Vroeger kon ze zichzelf nog wijsmaken dat het door haar beugel kwam dat ze nooit een vriend had gehad'.
24. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 226: 'Op zo'n eiland zul je nooit een man vinden (...)'.  
25. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 238: 'Ze zijn zo recht, ze lijken wel van plastic'.
26. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 222: 'een tunnel in een droom waarin je achtervolgd wordt maar geen kant op kunt (...)'.  
27. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 244: 'schrikbeeld'.
28. In 1955, Kenneth Walker and Peter Fletcher wrote in their popular (and often reprinted) study *Sex and Society: 'the sexuality of adolescent girls is more likely to express itself in romantic than in erotic feelings'*. Alfred Kinsey published his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953; Shere Hite followed in the 1970s with *Sexual Honesty by Women, for Women* (1974) and *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality* (1976).
29. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and idem, *Evil Sisters. The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).
30. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 245: '(...) je wist het maar nooit met zo'n jongen'.
31. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 252: 'Hij had nog nooit een meisje van het eiland lastig gevallen, toch bleven ze maar uit zijn buurt – dat was niet voor niets'.
32. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 252: 'Ze trok het laken tot aan haar kin ... . Het koude water waarmee ze haar benen en dijen had gewassen was bijna opgedroogd. Morgen zou ze een douche nemen, haar onderbroek uitwassen en zijn zakdoek'.
33. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 254: 'immense vleermuis'.
34. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 257: 'Tot nu toe waren alle aanrakingen zo toevallig, terloops'.

35. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', pp. 258-9: 'Ze vroeg hem of hij zich wel eens afvroeg wat er achter de sterren was en daar weer achter. Of hij geloofde in een God die hen beschermde maar ook in een klap kon vermorzelen.'
36. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 259.
37. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 214: 'Ik had nog nooit in een kerk een kaars opgestoken, maar het gebaar voelde niet vreemd, ongepast of afgekeken'.
38. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 215: 'Bid maar dat je gebed niet verhoord wordt. ... Ja, wens dat je wens niet in vervulling gaat'.
39. Van der Meer's husband, the writer and poet Willem Jan Otten, also converted to Catholicism some years later.
40. See F. Ruiters & W. Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: de Arbeiderspers, 1996), pp. 334-5.
41. Although anachronisms are also conceivable within a cyclical notion of time (a chestnut in spring, frost in summer), the concept of anachronism is usually connected to modern historical awareness, see D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. xvi, and P. Blaas, *Anachronisme en historisch besef. Momenten uit de ontwikkeling van het Europees Historisch Bewustzijn* (Den Haag: Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1988). [83]
42. The term is derived from Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton 1965).
43. Van der Meer, 'Spookliefde', p. 287: 'O ja, dat doe je wel. Je vertelt het aan Ian ... of aan iemand anders'.

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