Preface: where ghosts live

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As they say, ‘we’ve got a ghost story on our hands here all right’ (Derrida 1987, 257) and, indeed, this Special Issue of Derrida Today speaks on the theme of ‘where ghosts live’. ‘Where ghosts live’ is a title, a warning sign, a speculation, some kind or more than one kind of conjuration. The contributors here join Derrida in attending to the language of ghosts, the voice that ‘already haunts any said real or present voice’ (Derrida 1989, 26). They are always aware that, though Derrida may seem to follow the ghost most closely in its hauntological appearance on stage in Specters of Marx, the ghostly presence is there also when he writes of the crypt and the coffin, of spectrality, the revenant, the phantasm, the spirit, or of mourning, of tele-technology, of telepathy, and then again when he writes of the impossible, or of the undecidable, which ‘remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost – in every decision, in every event of decision’ (Derrida 1992, 24).

Ghosts, as it were, appear at different places, in different times and spaces. They appear throughout Derrida’s writing. After all, the ‘future can only be for ghosts. And the past’ (Derrida 1994, 37). The title ‘where ghosts live’, therefore (which is perhaps both a statement and a question and also, since it hardly constitutes a sentence, may have no meaning at all), enjoins us to think of where ghosts might be in time and space. It might be that this is a time where the ghost (the apparition, simulacrum, synthetic image, virtual event, the speculation) seems to be everywhere, on screens, in buildings, on the other side of the telephone line, in answering machines, in computers, in books, in the street and in the self.

The title ‘where ghosts live’ asks us also to think of what it might mean for a ghost (‘which is neither present or absent, neither alive nor
dead’ [Derrida 2003, 18]) to live. It might be hoped that ghosts, the dead living, can teach us something significant about living and not living, and especially about those things which are intangibly present in our lives: love, friendship, hospitality, justice, knowledge, forgiveness, responsibility. It might be hoped that this lesson could be heard now especially, when so much of what was to come remains or now exists forever ghostly, as potentiality cancelled. Ghosts oversee our current micro- and macro-economic and environmental crises.

In the autumn of 2009, those contributing to this volume, along with a number of others who are not wholly excluded from this volume, came together in Ireland to talk about where ghosts live. The topic at that time appeared to have a peculiar resonance, given that the future seemed to have been cancelled by the global banking crisis and the more home-grown housing crash. If there is no future then there is no revenant to arrive back from that future, and as the assembly variously felt and registered in their speech, ‘we’ (whoever that is) become spectral, somehow impelled towards the idea of justice and revenge, an Oedipal struggle to wrest the land back from a usurping father. This and much more was articulated during those few days in Ireland in September 2009 as we assembled and talked about ghosts and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* and Paul de Man’s spirit, fire and meadows of asphodel, Heidegger and H. P. Lovecraft, Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, haunted houses, cellars and empty towers, PhDs and unemployment, poetry that no longer exists. This special issue of *Derrida Today* does not represent that event in 2009; ‘where ghosts live’ is in two places at the same time, so that Nicholas Royle’s contribution, for example, can be found as Chapter 8 of his recent book *Veering*. That September, which proved not to be the last, does haunt each one of the essays which follow, however.

Each of these essays calls out to something that lies ahead, therefore, to a future thought cancelled, to an unseen other, to a ghostly figure who sees us so much more clearly than we see it. The ghost is always so much more than expected, more visible, more surprising, more demanding, more alive. Each of these essays calls out in advance in response to the surprising sound of a voice heard within language, a surprising heat within language; there is much about fire in these essays, much about desire, much about the hidden presences which can never be eradicated from the language we use and others use. Why follow Freud and be frightened of the ghost? And if we say the ghost rather than a ghost, do we have a name for that individual? These essays discuss, but none of them exhibit, fear. Derrida’s ghosts are never to be exorcised;
deconstruction helps us to learn to live with ghosts even if we can never in advance precisely work out where they live. Derrida’s hauntology is not an exorcism, it is a conjuration.

There is evidence in these essays of how unsettled and unsettling the concepts of philosophy and literature are. They do not simply haunt each other but call back and forth to each other in an echo chamber where identity slips and ghosts proliferate. These essays are not philosophical, but nor is deconstruction, not in any simplistic sense. They variously explore unnamed territory to which it would be inadequate to attribute the word theory. They are as concerned with Shakespeare as they are with Derrida, with Bowen as much as Heidegger, with Homer as much as Nietzsche. They all show an ease of passage between texts haunted by previous categorisations, an ease which is the result of a deep engagement with deconstruction. These essays are a good example of what we might call deconstruction today.

References