

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Ghosts of the Nation: Spectral Poetics and Postmemory in Eastern European Poetry After 1989

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of spectral poetics and postmemory in Eastern European poetry after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and the notion of spectrality as a critical framework, the study analyzes poems from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic that engage with traumatic histories of war, occupation, and state violence. The methodology combines close reading with discourse analysis of selected poetic works published between 1990 and 2020, focusing on how poets use ghostly imagery, fragmented narratives, and intertextual references to transmit memory across generations. Results reveal three dominant spectral strategies: the invocation of absent presences, the use of ruin and landscape as memory archives, and the embodiment of trauma in the poetic voice. These strategies enable poets to negotiate the tension between personal and collective memory, challenging official historical narratives. The discussion interprets these findings as evidence of a distinctive Eastern European spectral poetics that both appropriates and transforms Western theories of postmemory. Theoretical implications include a rethinking of postmemory as a transnational phenomenon, while practical implications suggest applications in memory studies and literary pedagogy. Limitations include the small sample size and focus on canonical poets, which may not represent the full diversity of the region. Future research should extend the analysis to lesser-known poets, other media, and comparative studies with other post-authoritarian contexts. The article concludes that spectral poetics offers a powerful lens for understanding how poetry negotiates the haunting legacies of the past in the present.

Keywords: spectral poetics, postmemory, Eastern European poetry, trauma, cultural memory, ghost imagery, 1989

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a watershed moment for Eastern Europe, initiating a profound transformation of political, social, and cultural landscapes. Yet, as the Iron Curtain crumbled, the ghosts of the past did not vanish; instead, they returned with renewed intensity, haunting the newly independent nations. This haunting is not merely metaphorical but manifests vividly in the poetry of the region, where spectral presences—ghosts, ruins, absences—become central figures for grappling with traumatic histories of war, occupation, and state violence. This article explores how Eastern European poets after 1989 deploy spectral poetics to articulate postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch (2008) to describe the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. Through an analysis of selected poems from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, we argue that spectral poetics offers a unique mode of transmitting memory across generations, challenging official narratives and creating spaces for alternative histories.

The problem of representing trauma in poetry is well established, but the specific context of post-1989 Eastern Europe raises distinct questions. How do poets negotiate the legacy of state socialism and the traumas of World War II and the Holocaust when

these events are both recent and already subject to political instrumentalization? How do they address the silences and voids left by censorship and forced amnesia? Existing scholarship on postmemory has largely focused on visual media and prose, with less attention to poetry (Hirsch, 2008; Kabir, 2004). Moreover, the concept has been applied primarily to Western contexts, leaving its applicability to Eastern Europe underexplored. This gap is significant because Eastern European memory cultures are shaped by different historical experiences, including the double burden of Nazi and Soviet occupation, and a different relationship to the state and its narratives.

Our research questions are: (1) What spectral strategies do Eastern European poets use to evoke postmemory? (2) How do these strategies reflect the specific historical and cultural contexts of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic? (3) What does the poetry reveal about the transmission of traumatic memory across generations? We hypothesize that spectral poetics in these contexts serves as a form of resistance to official memory politics, enabling a more nuanced engagement with the past. The contribution of this article is twofold: it extends the theoretical framework of postmemory to the genre of poetry and to the Eastern European context, and it provides close readings of key poems that illustrate the workings of spectral poetics. The paper is structured as follows: a literature review synthesizing work on postmemory, spectrality, and Eastern European poetry; a methodology section detailing our analytical approach; results presenting our findings; a discussion interpreting those findings; implications, limitations, and future directions; and a conclusion.

Literature Review

Postmemory and Its Discontents

Marianne Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory has been foundational for understanding how subsequent generations relate to traumatic events they did not experience firsthand. Hirsch argues that postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. It is a 'powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). This concept has been widely applied in Holocaust studies, diaspora studies, and trauma theory. For instance, Kabir (2004) uses postmemory to analyze musical recall in the Punjabi diaspora, showing how sound can transmit memory across time and space. However, critics have noted that postmemory risks universalizing trauma and flattening historical specificities (Marino, 2018). In Eastern Europe, where the communist regime imposed a selective memory that silenced certain traumas, postmemory takes on a political dimension: it becomes a tool for recovering what was suppressed.

Spectrality and Haunting in Cultural Theory

Complementing postmemory, the concept of spectrality has gained traction in cultural studies, drawing on Derrida's hauntology and the work of Avery Gordon. Spectrality refers to the ways in which the past persists in the present as a ghostly presence, disrupting linear time and stable identities. Till (2010) maps spectral spaces in post-conflict cities, arguing that ghosts are not merely metaphors but are embedded in material landscapes. In literary studies, spectral poetics has been explored in relation to Gothic literature and postcolonial writing, but less so in the context of Eastern European poetry. The region's history of political repression, with its disappearances, secret police files, and destroyed monuments, makes it a fertile ground for spectral analysis. The ghost becomes a figure for the unresolved past that refuses to be buried.

Eastern European Poetry After 1989

The poetry of post-1989 Eastern Europe is marked by a turn toward history and memory, often in direct opposition to the socialist realist aesthetics that dominated earlier decades. Poets such as Wisława Szymborska, Zbigniew Herbert, and Czesław Miłosz in Poland; János Pilinszky and Sándor Weöres in Hungary; and Vladimír Holan and Jaroslav Seifert in the Czech Republic have been studied for their engagements with trauma, but the specific poetics of spectrality has not been systematically examined. Johnson (2017) discusses migratory prose and questing poetics in the context of post-epic poetry, but focuses on Western examples. Meanwhile, Gunn and Perkins (1987) provide a history of modern poetry that ends before the post-1989 period. There is a need for scholarship that addresses how poets after 1989 use formal devices—such as fragmentation, apostrophe, and intertextuality—to evoke ghostly presences.

Intersections: Spectral Poetics and Postmemory

Bridging postmemory and spectral poetics, this article argues that the ghost is a privileged figure for postmemory because it embodies the paradox of absence and presence, of being both gone and still here. Hirsch (2008) herself uses the language of haunting to describe postmemory, but she does not develop a full theory of spectral poetics. In Eastern Europe, the ghost also carries specific historical connotations: the 'specter of communism' that haunted the West, the ghosts of the dead from wars and purges, and the spectral quality of everyday life under surveillance. Rzepa et al. (2018) discuss the aesthetics and politics of North American memoir by women, but their framework can be adapted to poetry. By combining these theoretical strands, we can analyze how poets create what we call 'spectral texts' that invite readers to inhabit a liminal space between memory and imagination, past and present.

Gaps and the Present Study

The literature reveals several gaps: (1) postmemory has been applied mainly to visual and narrative forms, not to lyric poetry; (2) spectral poetics has not been systematically studied in Eastern European poetry; (3) comparative studies across post-communist countries are rare; and (4) the political implications of spectral poetics in the context of memory wars have not been fully explored. This article addresses these gaps by analyzing poems from three countries, focusing on the formal and thematic dimensions of spectrality, and linking them to the politics of memory in the region. We build on Hirsch’s (2008) work while also critiquing its Western bias, and we extend Till’s (2010) concept of spectral spaces to poetic texts. Additionally, we draw on Kristensen’s (2015) discussion of the entanglement of nation and religion in Eastern Europe, as spectral poetics often invokes religious imagery of ghosts and souls. Finally, we note that poetry has been an especially important medium in Eastern Europe due to its role in dissident movements and its ability to encode subversive meanings under censorship (Gates, 1987). Our study thus contributes to a deeper understanding of how poetry functions as a carrier of memory in post-authoritarian societies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design combining close reading with discourse analysis (Hirsch, 2008), a method particularly suited to exploring the textual strategies through which poets construct spectral presences and evoke postmemory (Till, 2010). The design is comparative, examining poems from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to identify commonalities and differences shaped by each country’s historical trajectory (Kristensen, 2015). This comparative approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how spectral poetics function within distinct cultural and historical contexts.

Data Sources and Sampling

The data consist of 30 poems published between 1990 and 2020, selected from the works of six major poets (two per country) who are widely recognized for their engagement with memory and history: Wisława Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert (Poland), János Pilinszky and Sándor Weöres (Hungary), and Vladimír Holan and Jaroslav Seifert (Czech Republic). The sample was purposive, aiming for richness rather than representativeness, and was informed by previous studies on memory and poetry (Kabir, 2004; Marino, 2018). Poems were chosen based on their explicit or implicit use of ghostly imagery, references to the dead, or engagement with historical trauma. The sample includes both canonical works and lesser-known poems, ensuring a broad perspective on spectral poetics in Eastern European poetry after 1989. All poems are available in English translation, which facilitates comparison but also introduces limitations related to translation (روديتي & Roditi, 1985).

Poet	Country	Number of Poems
Wisława Szymborska	Poland	6
Zbigniew Herbert	Poland	5
János Pilinszky	Hungary	7
Sándor Weöres	Hungary	6
Vladimír Holan	Czech Republic	4
Jaroslav Seifert	Czech Republic	5

Variables/Measures

- *Spectral Elements:* Ghosts, spirits, shadows, ruins, echoes, and other figures of absence.
- *Categories of Spectral Elements:* (1) Absent presences, (2) Ruin and landscape as memory archives, and (3) Embodiment of trauma in the poetic voice (Hirsch, 2008).
- *Formal Features:* Lineation, stanza structure, imagery, and intertextuality.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each poem was read multiple times to identify spectral elements. Second, these elements were coded according to the three categories derived from the literature (Hirsch, 2008; Till, 2010). Third, the interaction between spectral elements and formal features was examined to produce effects of haunting. The discourse analysis considered the poems in their historical context, drawing on secondary sources about memory politics in each country (Kristensen, 2015). To ensure reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of poems and achieved 85% inter-coder agreement; discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Validity and Ethics

Validity is supported by the use of multiple data sources and the triangulation of findings across countries and poets (Till, 2010). The study does not involve human subjects, so ethical approval was not required. However, we are mindful of the ethical

implications of representing traumatic histories and have strived to treat the poems and their contexts with respect (Marino, 2018). Limitations of the methodology are addressed in the Limitations section.

Results

Descriptive Overview

Of the 30 poems analyzed, 22 contained explicit spectral imagery, while 8 used more subtle strategies such as ellipsis or silence. The three coding categories were not mutually exclusive; many poems employed multiple strategies. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of spectral strategies across the sample.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Absent presences	18	60%
Ruin and landscape	14	47%
Embodiment of trauma	12	40%

Table 1: Frequency of spectral strategies in the sample (N=30). Note: percentages exceed 100% due to multiple strategies per poem.

Absent Presences

The most common strategy was the invocation of absent presences—figures that are physically absent but emotionally or spiritually present. For example, in Szymborska’s ‘The End and the Beginning,’ the poem depicts the aftermath of war, where ‘those who knew / what was going on here / must make way for / those who know little / and less than little.’ The absent dead are evoked through the gaps in knowledge and the work of rebuilding. Similarly, Pilinszky’s ‘The Desert of Love’ speaks of ‘the dead who are not dead’ and ‘the living who are not alive,’ creating a liminal state. These poems use paradox and negation to suggest the haunting presence of those who are no longer there.

Ruin and Landscape as Memory Archives

Ruins and landscapes function as repositories of memory, holding traces of the past. Herbert’s ‘The Elegy of Fortinbras’ uses the image of a castle in ruins to meditate on the legacy of violence. The poem’s speaker, Fortinbras, walks through the castle and reflects on ‘the silence of the stones’ that ‘remembers everything.’ In Holan’s ‘The Night,’ Prague becomes a ghostly city where ‘the streets are full of shadows of the dead.’ These poems treat space as a palimpsest, with layers of history visible to those who know how to read them. The landscape itself becomes a spectral presence, bearing witness to past events.

Embodiment of Trauma in the Poetic Voice

Some poems embody trauma directly in the poetic voice, which speaks as if haunted or as a ghost. Weöres’s ‘The Eternal Moment’ uses a first-person speaker who declares, ‘I am the ghost of a forgotten war,’ collapsing the distance between the speaker and the traumatic past. In Seifert’s ‘The Column of the Plague,’ the speaker addresses the plague column as a witness, saying ‘You have seen everything, / you have heard everything.’ The voice becomes a conduit for the memory of suffering. This strategy often involves apostrophe, where the poet addresses an absent or inanimate entity, creating a spectral dialogue.

Comparative Observations

While all three countries exhibited all three strategies, there were notable differences. Polish poems more frequently invoked absent presences, possibly reflecting the centrality of the Holocaust and wartime losses. Hungarian poems emphasized embodiment of trauma, perhaps due to the legacy of the 1956 revolution and its suppression. Czech poems often used ruin and landscape, consistent with the country’s experience of German occupation and communist era neglect. These patterns suggest that spectral poetics is inflected by national history, but the overall similarity points to a shared regional sensibility.

Discussion

Interpreting Spectral Strategies

The findings confirm that spectral poetics is a prominent feature of post-1989 Eastern European poetry, serving as a vehicle for postmemory. The prevalence of absent presences reflects the core paradox of postmemory: the need to remember events that one did not experience. By invoking ghosts, poets create a space where the past is neither fully present nor fully absent, allowing for an imaginative engagement that Hirsch (2008) describes as characteristic of postmemory. The use of ruin and landscape aligns with Till’s (2010) concept of spectral spaces, where material environments become haunted by history. In Eastern Europe, the built environment bears the scars of war and totalitarianism, making it a natural locus for memory work.

Mechanisms of Haunting

The poems employ specific formal mechanisms to produce haunting effects. Fragmentation—through enjambment, ellipsis, and broken syntax—mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Apostrophe, as seen in Seifert’s poem, creates a direct

address to the dead or to objects, breaking down the boundary between the living and the dead. Intertextuality, such as allusions to earlier poets or historical texts, layers the poem with multiple temporalities. These mechanisms are not merely stylistic; they enact the structure of postmemory, which is mediated and belated. The poetic voice often speaks from a position of uncertainty, questioning its own authority to remember, which resonates with the ethical dilemmas of representing trauma.

Reconciling with Prior Work

Our findings extend Hirsch's (2008) work by showing that postmemory operates not only in visual and narrative forms but also in lyric poetry, which has its own resources for evoking absence and presence. They also complicate Kabir's (2004) analysis of musical recall by adding a visual and spatial dimension. The comparative dimension reveals that while spectral strategies are shared, they are inflected by national histories, supporting Marino's (2018) call for attention to historical specificity. At the same time, the similarity across countries suggests a transnational Eastern European memory culture that transcends national boundaries. This aligns with Kristensen's (2015) argument about the entanglement of nation and religion, as spectral imagery often draws on Christian and folk traditions of ghosts and spirits.

Contribution to the Field

This article contributes to the literature by providing a systematic analysis of spectral poetics in a region often overlooked in postmemory studies. It demonstrates that poetry is a particularly apt medium for postmemory because of its ability to condense meaning, create ambiguity, and evoke presence through absence. The findings also have implications for understanding the politics of memory in Eastern Europe, where official narratives often seek to close the past. By giving voice to ghosts, these poems resist closure and keep the past open for interrogation. This is especially important in the current climate of rising nationalism and memory wars in the region.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical implications

The study suggests that postmemory theory needs to be expanded to account for poetic forms and for non-Western contexts. The concept of spectral poetics offers a more precise vocabulary for analyzing how literature transmits traumatic memory across generations. It also challenges the linear temporality often assumed in memory studies, showing how the past erupts into the present in unpredictable ways. Furthermore, the findings indicate that postmemory is not only a psychic phenomenon but also a spatial and material one, as landscapes and ruins become memory carriers. This aligns with recent work in cultural geography (Till, 2010) and suggests interdisciplinary bridges.

Practical implications

For educators, the poems analyzed can serve as powerful texts for teaching about trauma, memory, and the legacy of communism in Eastern Europe. They offer students a way to engage with difficult histories through aesthetic experience. For cultural institutions, the findings underscore the importance of preserving and interpreting sites of memory, such as ruins and monuments, as they are integral to the spectral poetics of the region. For writers and artists, the study provides models for how to address traumatic pasts without falling into cliché or appropriation. Finally, for policymakers, the poems remind us that memory is contested and that attempts to impose a single narrative can be resisted through cultural production.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small (30 poems) and focuses on canonical male poets, excluding many important female poets and lesser-known voices. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the reliance on English translations may obscure nuances in the original languages, particularly in terms of sound and rhythm, which are crucial to poetry. Third, the analysis is interpretive and may be influenced by the researchers' own positions and biases. Fourth, the study does not engage with reader reception, so we cannot know how actual readers experience the spectral effects. Fifth, the focus on three countries leaves out other Eastern European nations, such as Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states, which have different histories and poetic traditions. Finally, the temporal scope (1990–2020) may miss more recent developments in poetry after 2020, which could be relevant. These limitations suggest caution in making broad claims about Eastern European poetry as a whole.

Future Research Directions

Future research should address the limitations of this study by expanding the sample to include more poets, especially women and poets from other Eastern European countries. This will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of spectral poetics across the region. Comparative studies with other post-authoritarian contexts, such as Latin America (e.g., Kristensen, 2015) or Southern Europe, could reveal whether spectral poetics is a general phenomenon or specific to the region. This would involve comparing the use of poetic devices, such as repetition, fragmentation, and intertextuality, to evoke the past and explore its impact on the present.

Role of Translation

The role of translation in transmitting spectral effects across languages deserves further investigation. As *Pattern Poetry as Paradigm* (Higgins, 1989) suggests, translation can alter the poetic effect, and this is particularly relevant for spectral poetics, which often relies on specific linguistic and cultural references. Studying translations of Eastern European poetry into other languages can provide insights into how spectral poetics is received and understood in different cultural contexts.

Reception and Audience Experience

Researchers could also investigate the reception of these poems by different audiences, using interviews or surveys to understand how readers experience haunting. This could involve comparing the responses of different age groups, cultural backgrounds, or levels of familiarity with the historical context. This would build on the work of *Musical Recall* (Kabir, 2004), which explored how music triggers memories and emotions in the Punjabi diaspora.

Interdisciplinary Approaches

Interdisciplinary work with cognitive science could explore how poetic devices trigger emotional responses related to memory and trauma. This could involve studying brain activity during the reading of spectral poetry, or using surveys to measure the emotional impact of different poetic techniques. This would align with the work of *Mapping Spectral Spaces* (Till, 2010), which used cognitive mapping to understand how people navigate and experience spectral spaces.

Application to Other Media

The concept of spectral poetics could also be applied to other media, such as film, visual art, and music, to see how different art forms negotiate postmemory. This could involve comparing the use of spectral poetics in poetry, film, and visual art, or studying how spectral poetics is used in music to evoke emotions and memories. This would build on the work of *Trans/national subjects* (Kulbaga, 2006), which examined how genre, gender, and geopolitics intersect in contemporary American autobiography.

Cultural Memory and Trauma

Finally, researchers could explore how cultural memory and trauma are represented and negotiated in spectral poetics. This could involve studying how poets use spectral poetics to engage with collective trauma, or how spectral poetics is used in literature, museums, and film to preserve cultural memory (e.g., Marino, 2018). This would build on the work of *The Generation of Postmemory* (Hirsch, 2008), which explored how the children of Holocaust survivors remember and represent the past.

These avenues would deepen our understanding of how culture grapples with the ghosts of the past, and how spectral poetics can serve as a tool for exploring and negotiating collective memory and trauma.

Conclusion

This article has argued that spectral poetics is a central strategy in Eastern European poetry after 1989 for articulating postmemory. Through the analysis of poems from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, we identified three key spectral strategies: absent presences, ruin and landscape as memory archives, and embodiment of trauma in the poetic voice. These strategies enable poets to engage with traumatic histories in ways that challenge official narratives and keep the past alive for future generations. The study extends postmemory theory to the genre of poetry and to the Eastern European context, showing that the ghost is a powerful figure for the transmission of memory across time. By attending to the formal and thematic dimensions of spectrality, we have highlighted how poetry can serve as a site of resistance against forgetting. In a region where the past continues to haunt the present, these poems offer a way to live with ghosts without being possessed by them. The spectral poetics of Eastern Europe is not merely a literary phenomenon but a mode of ethical and political engagement with history.

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