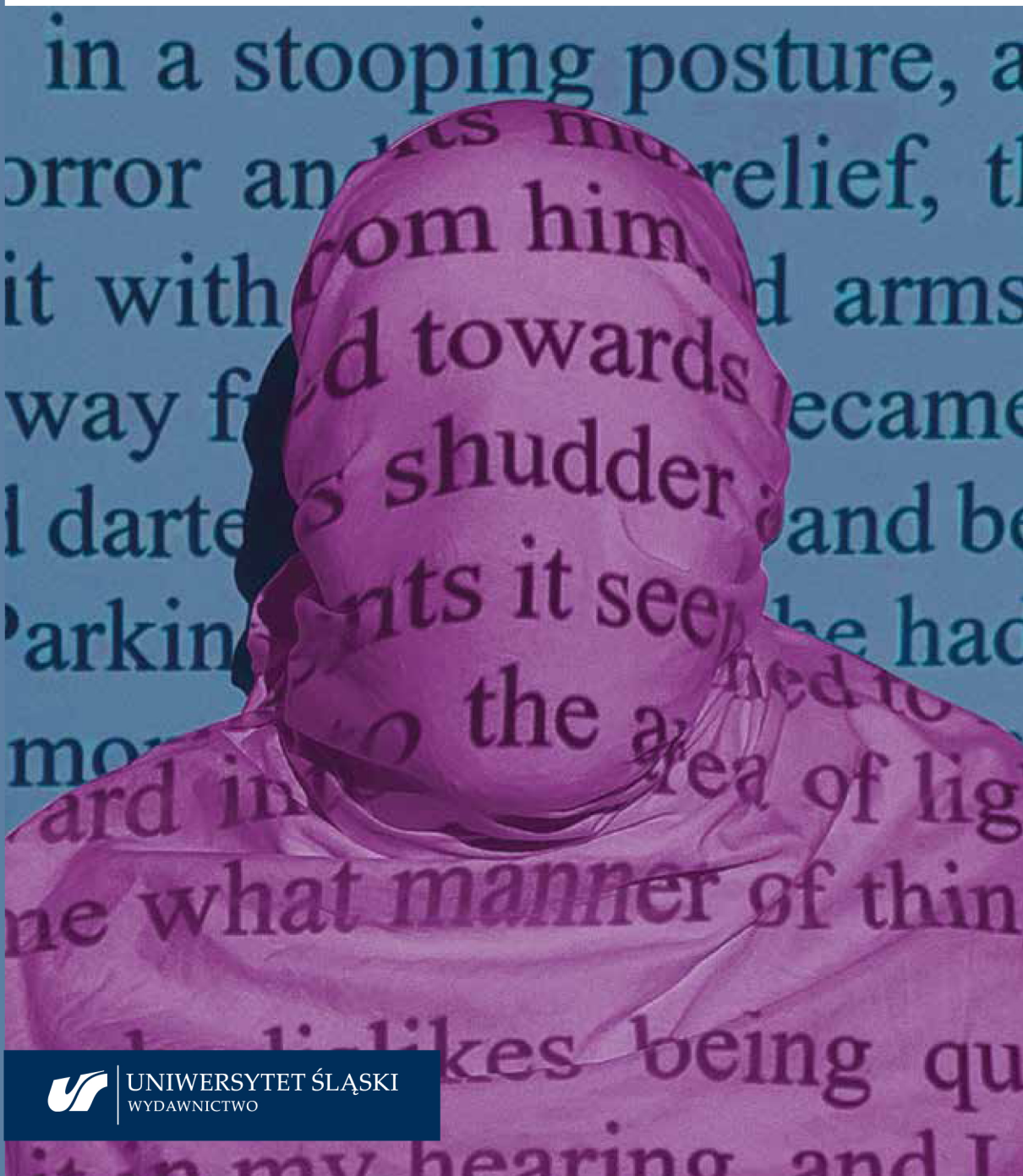
Jacek Mydla

Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James



UNIWERSYTET ŚLĄSKI
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REFEREES
Andrzej Wicher
Jakub Paweł Lipski

For Sylwia and Michał
May you always cherish your ghosts

"Everyone, I think, has an innate love of the supernatural."
M. R. James

"A slight haze of distance is required …"
M. R. James

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A Note on Referencing

The following system of referencing M. R. James's stories has been used throughout: a quotation from a story is followed by parentheses with abbreviated recognisable title followed by page number in the edition used.

Two scholarly editions of the stories have been used:

1. Anthology: James, M. R. *"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories.* Edited by Michael Cox. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Here are found the following stories (with abbreviations, dates of first publication, and abbreviated titles of collections[1]):
   - "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book" ("Alberic") 1895, rpt. 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "The Mezzotint" ("Mezzotint") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "Number 13" ("Number 13") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "Count Magnus" ("Magnus") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'" ("Oh, Whistle") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" ("Treasure") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "A School Story" ("School Story") 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "The Rose Garden" ("Garden") 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "The Tractate Middoth" ("Middoth") 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "Casting the Runes" ("Runes") 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral" ("Barchester") 1910, rpt. 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance" ("Humphreys") 1911 (*MGSA*)
   - "The Diary of Mr Poynter" ("Poynter") 1919 (*TG*)
   - "An Episode of Cathedral History" ("Cathedral History") 1914, rpt. 1919 (*TG*)
   - "The Uncommon Prayer-book" ("Prayer-book") 1921, rpt. 1925 (*WTC*)

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1 *GSA* for *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904); *MGSA* for *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911); *TG* for *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919); *WC* for *A Warning to the Curious* (1925); *CGS* for *The Collected Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (1931).

- "A Neighbour's Landmark" ("Landmark") 1925 (*WTC*)
- "A Warning to the Curious" ("Warning") 1925 (*WTC*)
- "Rats" 1929, rpt. 1931 (*CGS*)
- "The Experiment" ("Experiment") 1930
- "The Malice of Inanimate Objects" ("Malice") 1933
- "A Vignette" ("Vignette") 1936 (posthumously)

2. The first part of a two-volume Penguin edition: James, M. R. *Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories*. Edited by S. T. Joshi. London: Penguin, 2005.
   - "Lost Hearts" ("Hearts") 1895, rpt. 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "The Ash-Tree" ("Ash-Tree") 1904 (*GSA*)
   - "Martin's Close" ("Martin") 1911 (*MGSA*)
3. The second part of a two-volume Penguin edition of The Complete Stories of M. R. James by S. T. Joshi: James, M. R. *The Haunted Doll's House and Other Ghost Stories*. London: Penguin, 2006.
   - "The Residence at Whitminster" ("Whitminster") 1919 (*TG*)
   - "The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance" ("Disappearance") 1913, rpt. 1919 (*TG*)
   - "Two Doctors" ("Doctors") 1919 (*TG*)
   - "The Haunted Dolls' House" ("Dolls' House") 1923, rpt. 1925 (*WC*)
   - "A View from a Hill" ("Hill") 1925 (*WC*)
   - "An Evening's Entertainment" ("Entertainment") 1925 (*WC*)
   - "There Was a Man Dwelt by a Churchyard" ("Churchyard") 1924, rpt. 1931 (*CGS*)
   - "After Dark in the Playing Fields" ("Dark") 1924, rpt. 1931 (*CGS*)
   - "Wailing Well" ("Well") 1928, rpt. 1931 (*CGS*)
   - "The Fenstanton Witch" ("Witch")

Introduction

The Goal

My main purpose in this book is to examine ghost stories, chiefly those by Montague Rhodes James (b. 1862–d. 1936), with help of the insights and tools of narrative theory. By focusing specifically on mystery and terror, I hope to identify and describe the narrative mechanics of a well-made ghost story. I have chosen the concept of distance to help me unify this study but also to justify its division into two parts. In Part I, my focus is on the ideological sense of distance: that which animated the rise and future development of Gothic fiction. In Part II, I examine M. R. James's use of a wide range of distancing devices deployed with the purpose of turning readers into ghost-seers.

One of my aims in this book is to create a venue for an encounter and a dialogue between narrative theory and the ghost story. Desirable and productive as such encounters might be, they have been rare, reflecting a situation that caused Srdjan Smajić recently to comment on the "dearth of scholarship on the ghost story."[1] The scholar explains: "Despite the immense popularity of ghost stories in the nineteenth century, evidenced by their most widely circulating periodicals of the time, it appears that we are as unlikely to see new critical assessments of the genre as we are to see an actual ghost."[2] This diagnosis is true also of narrative theory, which, for a considerable period in the history of its development, remained firmly focused on realist fiction, this bias being arguably a result of the scientific aspirations at the origin of "narratology."[3]

1 Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists. Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

2 Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 11.

3 Tzvetan Todorov, who coined the term "narratology" in 1969 (in his book *Grammaire du Décaméron*), seems to have been inspired by the idea of a scientific study of narrative texts (he defines *narratologie* as *la science du récit*). See David Herman, "Histories of Narrative Theory (I): A Genealogy of Early Developments," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James

Even though Smajić's statement was made in a book published in 2010, his diagnosis was repeated in a more recent publication. In their introduction to *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* (2018), Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston refer (like Smajić a few years earlier!) to George Eliot's 1851 preface to her "bestseller" realistic novel, *Adam Bede*, to explain the prevalent binarism. This "old opposition between 'sober' realism and 'frivolous' fantasy" — they argue — has been perpetuated in contemporary theory and criticism, which tends to "privilege longer, supposedly more serious and politically engaged, literary forms."[4] At the same time, as this *Handbook* demonstrates, theory-informed ("speculative") approaches to ghostly matters in fiction tend to be privileged over strictly narratological, that is, form/structure/*techne*-oriented ones.

The realist ascendency has been repeatedly questioned by narratologists themselves.[5] In the 1983 "Afterword" to the second edition of his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth noted a shift (apparent in both theory and literary practice) away from an unreserved praise of realism: "Today the rules are a bit different: 'All good novels should be unrealistic' [...]."[6] Illustrative and instructive in this context is the idea of the fantastic, which seems to straddle, somewhat uneasily, the fence (rickety as it may be) that separates narrative theory and approaches which, for lack of a better word, I will call speculative, underpinned by philosophies which dominated twentieth-century thinking about culture and literature: Marxism, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and post-structuralism.[7]

Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 19.

4 Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 4. As Smajić puts it, according to this paradigm, literature's task is "to speak the truth and avoid falsehood," its "strongest claim [being] to socially responsible and politically consequential modes of artistic expression" (*Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 12).

5 As a very recent example, see Thomas L. Martin's "'As Many Worlds as Original Artists.' Possible Worlds Theory and the Literature of Fantasy," in Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, ed. *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 201–224.

6 "The Rhetoric in Fiction and Fiction as Rhetoric: Twenty-One Years Later" (1983), in Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 403.

7 The section headings of *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019) cover the following

Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic (defined as a specific literary genre and developed in his 1970 *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, published in an English translation five years later[8]) turned out to be inspirational in studies of narrative terrors and horrors, ghostly and otherwise. Regardless of the vehement criticism it provoked on account of its purported myopic scientism,[9] Todorov's concept and its future developments (*vide* the books by Terry Heller and Noël Carroll) have demonstrated the fruitfulness of analysis which zooms in on the narrative dynamic of a specific fictional genre, in particular on plots whose "frivolousness" defies the rules of realist "sobriety." The present task is to examine how these insights can be applied to Gothic and mystery plots, and to the ghost story as a genre in which these different narrative strategies converge.

To return to the encounter metaphor, the situation that I envision at the outset of this study is then as follows: There is a collection of stories by a classic ghostly author, M. R. James. In separate box, as it were, there are concepts developed by narrative theory, for example, that of the fantastic. It is time, one should think, for a dialogue between the two, and so I see my task here in terms of arranging and unobtrusively monitoring it, the goal being to estimate the extent to which narrative theory can open for us the inner workings of ghost stories and, more generally, stories of mystery and terror. The fact that M. R. James turned the ghost story into a genre that productively occupied him for more than twenty years should be regarded as a hint that — like the detective story in the hands of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle — it is indeed a genre in its own right, an art with its own rules, which allows us to speak of something along the lines of a narrative rhetoric of the supernatural or a poetics of the ghostly.

M. R. James placed himself, consciously and firmly, in the tradition of short fiction, and his admiration for the stories Sheridan Le Fanu, whom he regarded as second-to-none in the ghostly (or "weird") genre, is telling.[10] Similarly

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theoretical angles: post-colonial Gothic (race theory), psychoanalysis (abjection), gender and sexuality, modern media, poststructuralism (otherness).

8 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

9 I have decided to discuss aspects of Todorov's theory in a separate section of this book; see the Appendix "Narrativity, the Fantastic and the Ghost."

10 M. R. James's theory of the ghost story will be discussed at length in Part II of this book.

significant is M. R. James's recognition of the detective story as a genre with which the ghost story shares distinctive formal features. Conan Doyle's remark about the amount of effort needed to devise a detective plot as comparable to that expended in the composition of an entire novel should give us a sense of how complex the structure of a short story can be and typically is.[11] Reading experience gives ample testimony to this proposition. Anyone familiar with a Sherlock Holmes story will agree that, pleasurable and indeed brief as it may be, the experience of reading one is a complex and even a demanding process.

Admittedly, it is highly problematic to speak about progress in the history of fiction. Why and in what sense should *David Copperfield* (1850) be more "developed" or "mature" than, say, *Moll Flanders* (1722), or *Heart of Darkness* (1899) than *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)? The variety of the early English novels notwithstanding, we may hazard here a statement that, as we go from the early period in the history of English fiction to a later one, we do observe development in terms of formal (if not thematic) complexity, as authors become increasingly aware of the range of devices and methods of telling they have at their disposal and as the audience develops the required readerly sophistication. Inevitably then, M. R. James, a self-conscious author at the beginning of the twentieth century, and an admirer of Charles Dickens at that, found himself an inheritor (and a grateful one) of a tradition.[12] The short story can be seen as a distilment of what we might call a heritage of narrativity, which accounts for the great variety of narrative devices, the rich *techne*, employed by the masters of the craft. This inspires me with the hope that the scope of this study will be appropriately broad.

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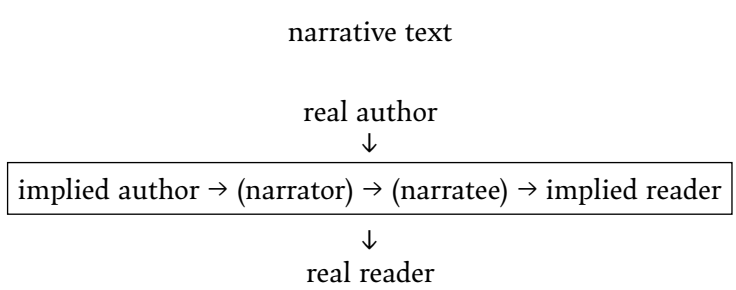
11 I am refereeing here to Conan Doyle's remark in chapter X of his *Memoirs and Adventures* (1923–1924): "The difficulty of the Holmes work was that every story really needed as clear-cut and original a plot as a longish book would do," https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/Memories_and_Adventures, accessed December 28, 2021. In my view, this statement suggestively indicates the complexity of a well-devised short story at the turn of the twentieth century.

12 On the origin of the short story in the second half of the nineteenth century see Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story. An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1 (chapter I). One of the dates cited for the coinage of the term "short story" is 1877, and one of its earliest occurrences in Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* (1883). Trollope uses this term in reference to his *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* (1861), which is what we could call now a novella, and also to stories published in periodicals; The Project Gutenberg eBook of An Autobiography, by Anthony Trollope, accessed March 25, 2023.

The Material, the Approach, and the Tools

This study, however, is not limited to purely "technical" issues that ghostly fiction raises. My concern is not solely with the applicability of the existing concepts and tools to ghost stories. What I have in mind is also a comprehensive outlook, one which places the narrative *techne* in a larger cultural context,[13] as posited in the model of narrative communication ("narrative-communication situation") represented by Seymour Chatman in the form of a box diagram.[14]



When approaching stories and genres, one simply must recognise the fact that both inside and outside that textual box, along with the reader and the author, there is also culture, history, and "ideology." Indeed, this fact seems to be so obvious that the diagram makes is conspicuously invisible. And yet, just like there are no culture-free authors and readers, real or otherwise, there are no culture-free narrators or narratees. For a reader of M. R. James's stories, it is immediately obvious that to ignore the larger historical and cultural context would be to ignore the fabric these stories are made of.

The wider context for the emergence of Gothic fiction, with the dramatic transition from what Horace Walpole called the "ancient" to the "modern"

13 I refer here somewhat obliquely to a remark — critical in its intention — by S. T. Joshi, who described M. R. James's "tales" as "all technique" and a "coldly intellectual exercise"; *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), 140.

14 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 151. The essentials are these: "The box indicates that only the implied author and implied reader are immanent to a narrative, the narrator and narratee are optional (parentheses). The real author and real reader are outside the narrative transaction as such, though, of course, indispensable to it in an ultimate practical sense."

worlds is now common knowledge. To bring this knowledge into play, I avail myself here of a convenient summary found in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*:

> Great cathedrals that have changed little since the middle ages still dot Continental Europe. In Great Britain, however, once Henry VIII decided that allegiance to the Pope in Rome was no longer necessary and, as a concomitant, that much in the way of cathedrals, abbeys, monasteries, convents, and, often, churches of far lesser status, would contribute substantially to the wealth of the Crown, many Gothic buildings fell into ruins because they were no longer maintained. In addition to the symbolism in the ruined architecture, the British mind came to associate a downright immorality with some of the thinking and practices in Roman Catholicism. For example, once Henry's decrees for creating the Anglican Church became operable, ties between Roman Catholicism and Continental European political class structures seemed dangerous. Moreover, celibate clergy, especially monks and nuns, eventually came to be anathema in British eyes. The clergy contributed in another way to Gothic tradition. The hooded, flowing robes worn by many members of ecclesiastical orders dovetailed precisely with stereotypical conceptions of ghosts in bedsheets, and, amidst the strange visionary responses otherwise created by Gothic architecture's combination of vastness and obscurities, they offered plausible models for supernatural beings.[15]

As we shall see in our analysis of the stories, this context is as persistently present as the ghosts themselves, despite the varying degrees of visibility.

According to the widely accepted narrative, the ghost story makes its first appearance, in Walpole's 1764/1765 novella *The Castle of Otranto*. The cultural context of the Enlightenment allowed — indeed, compelled — Walpole to represent the pre-Reformation world which his "Gothic story" revived as a world of "dark Christianity." The thus awakened spectres of that world were subsequently impossible to lay to rest, and the nineteenth century saw a vigorous blossoming of the ghost story with a culmination in the fictions of M. R. James. One is tempted to indulge in speculations about the thirst for the supernatural in

15 Benjamin Franklin Fisher, "Poe and the Gothic Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

an age of arid scientism and vigorous mercantilism, the standard departure for an interpretation of Scrooge's recovery of spirituality in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (December 1843) and his other Christmas stories. Yet even if we resist this temptation, it is difficult to ignore the ideological energies and cultural tensions that animate modern ghost stories.

As the lengthy passage above makes obvious, we can speak here of types of distance, historical and cultural, which, though they may lie outside the literary texts themselves, yet permeate them all the same. As we shall see in the course of these considerations, effects of distance — its deployment and its overcoming — can be found at the foundation of the early Gothic tales, or, to shift the metaphor, are found at the genre's fountainhead. In this respect, the typical ghost story tells a tale similar to the large-scale narrative about the rise of the Gothic: spectres of the past return to disturb the present. Historically, the warfare between the ancient and the modern, between forces of superstition and prerogatives of reason, between oppression and liberation impelled the genre to grow vigorously in the nineteenth century by making its attractions irresistible also to such great realists as Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins. Conceived as a significant component of the otherwise technically oriented analyses of chosen ghost stories, this cultural context will occupy us in several sections of the first part of this book.

The significance of history and culture for the genre of the ghost story tends to be accompanied, somewhat oddly, by assumptions of the genre's negligible artistic status. M. R. James himself sounds typically dismissive when he refuses to attach any special import to his Christmas-time diversions. This attitude corresponds to the preference — as already mentioned — among theorists for realism and verisimilitude, the recent turn to the supernatural, the horrific, and the weird notwithstanding. On the example of Gérard Genette, one of the founders of narrative theory, we can also observe interest in modernist innovations in fiction encouraged by introspective philosophies. Theoretic interest has gravitated towards authors who, like Henry James or Marcel Proust, seem to have treated literary authorship with appropriate gravity and who are duly appreciated for bold formal experiments. Faithful to one genre and working within a formula which he polished into a precious dark jewel, M. R. James did not intend to compete against such celebrities, and rated his literary ambitions as modest. Little wonder that even some of those who have studied his life and work tend to sound diffident around the fact that a man of his

standing dabbled in scary stories. Do mere diversions, apparently so trivial as to make their author hesitate whether or not he should get them into print, merit theoretical attention? Will they sustain and repay academic scrutiny?

What makes ghost stories problematic in the eyes of a literary scholar is the supernatural. If it should sound logical that a rationalist would recoil at a fictional ghost, then a classic M. R. James story thrives on precisely this kind of response. It strikes me as ironic that, while the fictionality of historical narratives (imputed in the notion that all narratives are essentially and inevitably rhetorical) has been universally accepted, fictions which deliver the pedestrian sense of the fantastic and the weird tend to be dismissed as mere spine-chilling diversions or as realistic in an oblique sense. Ghost stories proper are stories about real ghosts and real hauntings; they blatantly parade their fictionality in the shape of the supernatural, which is asserted as real. If there is a paradox here, then it has to do with the fact that scepticism (in both the protagonists and the reader, perhaps also in the author[16]) is a prerequisite for a genuinely horrific ghost story. M. R. James was reluctant to admit that he actually believed in ghosts and his protagonists typically display a degree of incredulity at the outset of the stories and before the onset of the supernatural. Even though the contemporary reader does not need to be convinced that a "real author" sits outside Chatman's box of narrative communication, they may need to be reminded that an "implied author" and an "implied reader" may — and usually do — share a number of beliefs as to what constitutes reality and what violates the boundary that separates the real from the imaginary and the supernatural.

On what grounds should we object to fictions that are on principle unrealistic? Is their undying popularity a strong enough reason to justify scholarly attention and academic treatment? Without addressing the problem directly, we might want to transfer it to a different territory, and inquire about the

16 On this point, there is a difference of opinion. Unlike M. R. James, Montagu Summers boldly confessed a belief in the reality of the supernatural. A ghostly author, according to Summers's metaphor, is a conjurer who calls up spirits "from the vasty deep." An author may try to dupe the reader with displays of fake spirits, but in such cases failure is inevitable due to "insincerity and untruth" (30); Montague Summers, ed., "Introduction," in *The Supernatural Omnibus. Being a Collection of Stories of Apparitions, Witchcraft, Werewolves, Diabolism, Necromancy, Satanism, Divination, Sorcery, Goetry, Voodoo, Possession, Occult, Doom and Destiny* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 7.

context in which such questions emerge. Seen from this angle, the "need for justification" seems to share the context of modernity as exclusive of whatever the enlightened reason finds suspect and dubious. To return to the issue already addressed, in his study of ghost-seeing, Smajić comments on the realistic paradigm as testifying to the pertinacity of Samuel Johnson's rule of "realism's mimetic mirror" (in Smajić's words), which takes us back to Plato's attack on poetry as falsehood.[17] Indirectly, the anti-realism of ghostly fiction raises a fundamental problem, that of the justifiable area for humanistic inquiry. There is, besides, little justice in the supposition that a ghost story must be devoid of a social or political agenda. The familiar socio-political context for the rise of the Gothic does not support this assumption. Indeed, our re-examination of that context will yield arguments for its refutation. Besides, if a ghost story can only produce the desired horrific effect due to a plausibly realistic setting for scenes of haunting and ghostly persecution (which sums up M. R. James's artistic creed), the ghost story becomes a battlefield of sorts for conflicting visions of reality.

As we have argued in reference to Walpole's project laid out in his "Prefaces" to *The Castle of Otranto*, fictions of the fantastic or supernatural type emerge in a specific cultural context from which they purposefully seek to distance themselves; namely, they rebel against realism, defined by him as "a strict adherence to common life."[18] As we shall see upon re-approaching the "Prefaces," a paradox is difficult to conceal: the "letting loose of invention" (to use Johnson's phrase[19]) is (to be) effected by reanimating a "lost world." Peopled by knights and monks and energised by vibrant superstitions, a world like that — also when seen from the perspective of the author himself — belongs to a past

17 At the beginning of Book 3 of the *Republic* (386–388), Plato famously condemns the kind of poetry that might arouse fear of death in the guardians of the state ("We must ask the poets to stop giving their present gloomy account of the after-life, which is both untrue and unsuitable to produce a fighting spirit [...]."). Plato refers here to passages in Homer that depict the underworld (among them Odysseus's descent into Hades; Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XI).

18 "Preface to the Second Edition," Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

19 Samuel Johnson, essay in *Rambler* no. 4 (March 31, 1750), in Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 174.

that is "buried" in the sense of it having been ideologically rejected, "exploded" in the words of Walpole.[20] Walpole may thus be held responsible for the conception of a genre, that of the Gothic story, defined through a readmission and legitimisation of content which was culturally alien and politically suspect.[21] Even Matthew Gregory Lewis, the genre's *enfant terrible*, constructed in *The Monk* a world split into two realms, a superstitious and an enlightened one, uncomfortably yoked together. The context for the re-emergence of the ghost story in the nineteenth century, however, and the genre's purported fruition at the turn of the twentieth century is very different, marked by a blending of realism and the fantastic into an artistically effective and culturally lasting genre. M. R. James's judgement about *The Castle of Otranto* is symptomatic in this respect: "*The Castle of Otranto* is perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre, and I fear that it is merely amusing in the modern sense."[22]

In this study, I propose to see the history of the Gothic in England as a history of repeated attempts to plant ghosts and ghost-seeing in the native context. This may seem odd in view of the fact that — in the words of the editors of the 2018 *Handbook to the Ghost Story* — Britain "might complacently be deemed the 'home' of the ghost story."[23] And yet despite this purported domesticity, uprooted by the forces of Reformation allied with those of Enlightenment, literary ghosts apparently needed careful replanting. In Part I of this book, I want to show this on the example of two Victorian ghost stories: "The Old Nurse's Story" by Elizabeth Gaskell and "Mad Monkton" by Wilkie Collins. Despite the native setting, in both these stories we can identify several distancing devices which indirectly justify the overriding purpose: to deliver the thrills of haunting and ghost-seeing. Gaskell's ghost-seer is an Englishwoman and the ghost is real; in this sense, the story is more unequivocally English in its handling of the supernatural element than what we have in Collins, who opted for the device which makes the reader uncertain as to whether the ghost

20 "Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances." "Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 6.

21 We shall later have a taste of the vehemence of anti-Gothic campaigners when we examine satirical passages in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

22 Montague Rhodes James, *"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Appendix, 343.

23 Brewster and Thurston, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, 8.

is real (delivering a version of the fantastic in Todorov's understanding of the term). In both Gaskell and Collins, there are ghost-seers, illustrating the general assumption that a ghost story must contain *scenes* of ghost-seeing, depictions of some form of sensory contact with the supernatural. The canon of M. R. James's ghost stories, discussed in Part II, supplies numerous examples of similar narrative strategies.

In the course of the development of narrative theory, a question concerning the choice of the literary material has been of some significance. My limited selection in this respect can plead justification from the fact that theorists have tended to prioritise particular texts and authors in search of pertinent example and gratifying illustration: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a case in point, as are Henry James's novels and stories (*What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*). Reasons for these two preferences are obvious, considering the status of Flaubert as a great innovator in the history of fiction, with considerable "stylistic achievements"[24]; and that of James, due to the bulk of his theoretical and critical writing, as a legitimate forebear of narrative theory.[25] In his ground-breaking *Narrative Discourse* (*Discours du récit*, 1972), Gérard Genette examines Marcel Proust's *A la recherché du temps perdu*, stating in the Preface that he is not going to be greatly bothered if in the course of his analysis he blurs the distinction between theory and interpretation. It is, says Genette, "the paradox of every poetics" as a science, to be "torn" between criticism and theory. This is an unavoidable predicament because "there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general."[26] In his pre-Genette *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth is more systematic in that his selection of illustrative material significantly broadens the scope of his theory and allows him to hope for "universal applicability" of his "rhetorical inquiry" into fiction.[27] Unlike Genette, Booth attempts to deliver a comprehensive theory

24 The allusion here is to the title of Alison Finch's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, ed. Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

25 See Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937). The book (almost 400 pages long) contains eighteen prefaces to James's novels.

26 "Preface," in Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 23.

27 From "Extensions," appended to the second edition of the book; Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.), 405.

of fiction. However, ultimately the insights of Genette have determined the direction of narratological research.

The desire to systematise and the scientific aspirations have inspired a conspicuous trend in narrative theory: to encapsulate the existing knowledge in the form of "introductions," "handbooks," dictionaries and encyclopaedias, with examples such as Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987) and the more recent *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2007). Worthy of special notice is the *living handbook of narratology* (LHN), published online by the University of Hamburg's Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology (at https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/11.html). This readily available wealth of knowledge has created an environment favourable to non-realist fictions. Booth himself supplies an example of a theorist peeping beyond the confines of realism and into the fuzzy realms of the fantastic and the weird. A section of his *Rhetoric* is devoted to Henry James's most famous ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898),[28] now a recognised classic of the genre. Booth's decision may have been motivated by the renown of the author, despite the fact that James himself regarded this story as a mere potboiler.[29] A simple but pertinent argument for the inclusion of non-realist fiction in narratological research goes like this: the existing tools of narrative theory must apply to it, and if they do not, they must be adjusted or refashioned, which may be this book's modest contribution.

It might be advisable to approach our chosen literary material by naming the essential elements of narrative, those which make up the core of narrative theory. The list of contents in Genette's *Narrative Discourse* names five such elements: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, the first three having to do with temporality while the remaining two with perspective. A narrative text can be examined with regard to how its author executes these elements. In the present study, however, I have decided to give preference to the idea of *distance*. Although the term does not appear in Genette's list, distance is a basic concept and — in my opinion — no comprehensive theory of narrative and

28 Another example is Roland Barthes's study of a "weird" story by Edgar Allan Poe (Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"): "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe" (from 1973), published in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

29 In a letter to H. G. Wells (dated Dec. 9, 1898), James describes it as "essentially a potboiler and a *jeu d'esprit*." Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Jonathan Warren (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2021; 3rd Norton Critical Edition), 120.

no exhaustive interpretation of a particular narrative text or a genre of fiction can ignore or omit effects of distance.

Distance: Aesthetic and Ideology

The idea of distance, indispensable as it is in any comprehensive theory of narrative, seems to be too broad to admit a definition. This may account for the lack of an extensive discussion of it in narrative studies. In this introductory treatment of distance, we might set off by availing ourselves of the entry in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary*. Following Gérard Genette, Prince places distance side by side with perspective and defines it as a major factor that regulates narrative information. Prince goes on to explain: "The more covert the narratorial mediation and the more numerous the details provided about the narrated situations and events, the smaller the distance that is said to obtain between them and their narration."[30] According to this approach, distance is relative to the conspicuousness of the narrative situation, or the act of narrating; the more conspicuous the narrating, the less realistic or verisimilar (*vraisemblable*) — to use the term proposed by Seymour Chatman — the portrayed world.[31] The immediacy of the epistolary mode in *Pamela* — precisely that feature of Samuel Richardson's narrative mode that Henry Fielding found preposterous — would occupy one end of a continuum, the other end being the province of narrative experiments of the *Tristram Shandy* type, with the authorial narrator celebrating the act of telling to the point of actually preventing the story from unfolding.

The term "distance" as it is used by narratologists has — unavoidably and naturally — acquired a number of meanings. We speak about distance in the sense of the temporal arrangement of the narrative (the relation between the *fabula* and its "expression,"[32] the s*južet*)[33]: the "then" of the narrated events

30 Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003; rvd. edition), 23 (entry "Distance").

31 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 50.

32 Gerard Prince provides the following definition of discourse: "The expression plane of narrative as opposed to its content plane or story; the 'how' of a narrative as opposed to its 'what'; [...]." *Dictionary of Narratology*, 2003. The term "fabula" is used to designate what Prince here calls "content plane" and "story."

33 Throughout this study, I use the term "fabula" for "story" in the narrow sense of "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors." Mieke

is not to be confused with the "now" of the narrating. We can also speak of distance when referring to the author's choice of the mode of representation: voice and mood; the narrator ("Who speaks?") is not to be confused with the observer ("Who sees?"). Wayne Booth has proposed a typology of distances (temporal, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral),[34] which in turn can be combined with Seymour Chatman's model of narrative situation (or communication), already presented. This typology enables us to distinguish varieties of closeness and remoteness between the elements that constitute the model[35]: the narrator and the implied author; the narratee and the reader, implied or real; etc. As I hope to show, the idea of distance will help us to obtain a comprehensive view of the body of fictional material chosen for analysis. Analysis of particular stories confirms this working assumption: ghost stories depend for their effectiveness on the way in which an author handles distance and, in particular, on the way he or she uses its various types and modes.

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette gives a somewhat sketchy treatment to the concept of distance along the lines indicated in Prince's definition. Rather than attempting a definition, Genette names factors responsible for the regulation of distance. The first of them is that of showing, or mimesis, as opposed to ("mere" or "pure") telling. The modern prioritising of the mimetic mode (in opposition to Plato, with whom the distinction between narration and imitation originated) is summed up in a celebrated passage in Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*: "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself."[36] Showing reduces the distance between the story and its reader, which

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Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5. In her book, Bal has decided to avoid using the ambiguous word "story."

34 Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 156 ff; see below.

35 According to Seymour Chatman's diagram, inside the box we find the implied author and implied reader, and narrator and narratee; in the most general terms, these four entities are textual. They are either present in the text (e.g., 1st person narrator) or — to use Gerald Prince's formulation — inferable from the text; the implied author "can be reconstructed" on the basis of the text.

36 Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), 62 (Lubbock's emphasis); a Project Gutenberg eBook at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18961/18961-h/18961-h.htm, accessed September 15, 2022.

is to say that the narrating is, as Genette's puts it, unobtrusive.[37] There are two basic methods to achieve showing in narrative fiction: dialogue and scene.[38] By convention, the representation of a dialogue by means of direct speech constitutes a scene in the narrow sense of a narrative speed (or duration) in which the time of narrating equals the time of reading. In this sense, every dialogue is a scene. This does not mean, of course, that every scene is a dialogue; and indeed, not every non-dialogic scene in that narrow sense will necessarily be mimetic. As Genette points out, the properties that render a scene mimetic have to do with detail, that is, with what creates "a realistic effect."[39] Let us examine this more closely.

In an allusion to *Pickwick Papers*, Genette praises Dickens for the frequent use of the "pragmatically afunctional" detail conducive to the realistic effect. I want to look at an example in *Bleak House*. In the "Bell Yard" chapter, the girl called Charlie is introduced in the following manner: "[...] there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face — pretty-faced too — wearing a womanly sort of bonnet much too large for her, and drying her bare arms on a womanly sort of apron. Her fingers were white and wrinkled with washing, and the soap-suds were yet smoking which she wiped off her arms."[40] In terms of speed, this passage falls somewhere between scene and slow-down. The description is not static; rather, it suggests that time is passing while the girl is standing. She is being examined by the two ladies looking at her: "She was out of breath, and could not speak at first, as she stood panting, and wiping her arms, and looking quietly at us."[41] It is obvious that Dickens devised this passage along the "Lubbock principle," as something to be shown. What I would like to point out, however, is that a passage like this also calls for a development of Genette's reflections on the realistic effect. The idea of realism in fiction (or narrative mimeticity) should

37 Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 45.

38 I discuss this issue in "The Gothic as a Mimetic Challenge in Two Post-Otranto Narratives," *Image [&] Narrative*, vol. 18, 3 (2017): 70–93.

39 Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 49. In this Genette is indebted to Roland Barthes and his essay "The Reality Effect" ("L'effet du eel" [1968]); *The French Literary Theory Today. A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1982).

40 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 262.

41 Dickens, *Bleak House*, 262.

be complemented with Roman Ingarden's conception of "schematised aspects" as a distinct layer of the literary work. Aspects are conventionalised sensory-imaginative associations evoked in the mind of the reader by particular words and phrases.[42] Charlie stands in person before "our eyes," "dressed" in abundant sensory detail of different varieties: not only ocular ("bonnet too large for her," "white and wrinkled fingers," "smoking soap-suds," "panting"), but also olfactory ("smoking soap-suds," again), and even auricular ("panting," again).

A careful analysis of the Dickens passage cannot ignore the presence of a consciousness that observes and judges what it perceives.[43] Indeed, the idea of observation informs the whole passage: "We were looking at one another [...] when there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face [...]."[44] But this presence of the observer becomes obvious in the judgments: not only as conveyed by the epithets "childish," "shrewd," and "pretty," but also by "womanly" and "too large for her." What this means for our immediate concern is that we have to distinguish between two types of distance, which do not seem to work in unison: the narrative distance, which Dickens diminishes by means of the wealth of realistic detail, and the personal distance (for lack of a better word), which Dickens at the same time makes conspicuous, that between the narrator (Esther) and the character (Charlie). Neither of these two distances is fixed or stable; both are liable to the author's manipulation, especially in such a sprawling narrative as a Dickens novel. The latter one brings us to the typology developed by Wayne Booth.

In a well-known section of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, "Variations of Distance," Booth proposes the term "aesthetic distance" to designate relations between the four players in the "reading experience": the author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader.[45] Booth proceeds to describe and illustrate five types of such relations (narrator–implied author; narrator–character; narrator–reader;

42 This reformulation of Ingarden's conception (presented in *The Literary Work of Art*; *Das literarische Kunstwerk* [1931]) is mine. Narratologists have so far evinced no interest in this element of Ingarden's theory. See Mydla, "The Gothic as a Mimetic Challenge," 83. I propose to use the term "mimetic" for Ingarden's dual layer that comprises schematised aspects and portrayed objects.

43 This aspect is almost entirely omitted in Barthes's discussion of the reality effect.

44 Dickens, *Bleak House*, 262.

45 Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 155.

implied author–reader; implied author–characters).[46] The types of distance occurring here are: physical, temporal, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral. The distance deployed in the Dickens passage represents the narrator–character relation and is chiefly of physical and social nature[47]; this is to say, the narrator (Esther) is not only older than Charlie but also her social superior, while the two may be regarded as equal in emotional and moral terms. The fact that in *Bleak House* large portions of the narrative are carried out by a young and relatively inexperienced woman complicates matters in that it introduces aesthetic effects that have to do with the distance between Esther and the implied author. Dickens's desire to establish a degree of amiability between himself as author (authorial narrator) and his readers adds a further complication. Most importantly, we realise how misleading the idea of the aesthetic would be, were it to conceal the fact that an author's technical or artistic decisions concerning the use of different types of distance are precisely what they are, *decisions*. As far as such decisions determine and regulate relations between the two major participants in narrative communication, the author and the reader, they are *pragmatic*. To this extent, we can treat them as decisions and choices informed by and indicative of ideology.[48] They are, in other words, expressive of the author's preconceptions and assumptions, moral, cultural, social, political.

Seen like that, distance cannot be used in isolation from concepts essential to narrative theory in any extensive study of a text, an author, or a genre. In fact, what makes distance special is its relevance to all the basic areas of the theory. Different types of focalization, for instance, can be defined in terms of distance, as in that between the focalizing character and other characters and objects in the fictive world. This suggests that when studying distance we

46 For the observer/actor distinction and the different "variations" of distance, see Chap. 6. in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

47 Booth mentions "differences of social class or conventions of speech or dress" (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 156), but then abandons the social category.

48 My understanding of the term "ideology" is admittedly a rudimentary one and refers to expressions of collective or personal concerns with power. In the realm of literary pragmatics (the production and reception of literary works), we can say that we detect ideology when we see that, for instance, a story is an expression of attitude, interest, judgement, belief, etc. Deliberate departures from realism, as in the case of "weird" and fantasy fiction, are not exempt from this type of criticism, which is not tantamount to censure. On the contrary, because ideology in this broad sense is omnipresent, it does not make sense to attach any high-handed moral censure to its instances in literary works.

may reasonably hope to attain a comprehensive interpretation of the fictional material in hand, that is, a particular narrative text.

Before we turn to fiction we need to look closely at distances deployed at the birth of the earliest Gothic story, *The Castle of Otranto*. In order to do that, we need to go back to the roots of the ideology which informs Walpole's prefatory strategies of ushering his "Gothic story" into the world of enlightened Protestantism.

First, however, some final remarks on the structure of the book.

The Structure

To address some of the cultural tensions that animate the early Gothic, we shall examine how and which ghostly stories straddle the gap between "ancient" and "modern" worlds. We shall therefore look closely at the philosophic denunciation of the Catholic doctrine in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) in order to contextualise Horace Walpole's justificative or validating strategies, chiefly those he used in his preface to the first, anonymous edition *of The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The project behind this blueprint for future "Gothic stories" can be better understood, as I intend to show, when examined in the light of Hobbes's dismantling of the "Romish" doctrine, denounced for its perpetuation of ancient demonology and spiritualist metaphysics. My aim in Part I of this study is thus to posit Hobbes as a forefather of enlightened Protestantism and his theory as a significant component of the ideological environment in which — and to some extent *against* which — the genre of the Gothic emerged and developed. It will be remembered that Walpole justifies the publication of his "Gothic story" by advertising it as a translation of an Italian original kept by a Catholic family in the north of England. The issue of anti-realism, already tackled in this introduction by references to Walpole's rejection of "a strict adherence to common life" and his goal of tapping into the "dammed up" "resources of fancy," can be reinterpreted in the light of Hobbes's allegories of nefarious superstitions and misconceptions. To use a metaphor from *Leviathan*, we can say that supernatural fictions reanimate a superstition-ridden fairy-tale world, a world that the modern man ought to regard as dead and buried.

The approach proposed here is far from new and consists in relating the *techne* of storytelling to ideology. Specifically, my goal is to focus attention on the way in which fiction addresses issues related to morality and power, including the meaning of large-scale historical processes and cultural transformations.

Literary practice, both the production and reception of fiction, shows that storytelling is informed by such concerns, which means, among other things, that an author is required to provide a well-defined, preferably realistic, setting for his or her fictions, no matter how weird or fantastical. This is true of ghost stories, at least those in the M. R. James tradition: if the supernatural must appear, it should appear in mundane circumstances. In this respect, M. R. James's praise of Le Fanu is noteworthy: "Nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly."[49] Ghosts have to come alive and, M. R. James argues, must be "treated gently." Even though M. R. James himself refuses to regard the ghost story as a unique type of short story, there is no doubt that a "weird author"[50] needs to work out a method of handling ghosts; in other words, to fulfil its goal, defined by M. R. James in terms of "mak[ing] the reader feel pleasantly uncomfortable," ghostly storytelling requires the use of tricks of the trade. Peter Penzoldt has argued that, with a "truly weird" author, skill comes first while moral concerns are secondary and subordinated to *techne*.[51] Yet in advising the use of a gentle hand in the treatment of fictional ghosts, M. R. James cautioned against morbidity. Neither he nor other practitioners of "weird fiction," on many of whom his advice was apparently wasted, wished to suspend moral concerns or expected their readers to do so. On the contrary, as Simon MacCulloch argues in a penetrating study of M. R. James's stories, the issue of an anthropomorphically arranged world ranks uppermost, especially in stories which feature cultured and scholarly protagonists. The typical movement in M. R. James is "from man-gets-treasure to treasure gets man," where curiosity is the *spiritus* that sets such narratives in motion. The critic detects here a reflection of M. R. James's own mental restlessness: "[H]is own proclivity for the strange and the danger he saw in it for his faith in conventional Christianity."[52]

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49 M. R. James, "Introduction" [1923], in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth's Editions, 2006), v.

50 The category "weird fiction" (relating primarily to H. P. Lovecraft) has been propagated in S. T. Joshi's studies of the genre. For a recent study of the British context, see James Machin's 2018 book *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939*.

51 Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965).

52 Simon MacCulloch, "The Toad in the Study: M. R. James, H. P. Lovecraft, and Forbidden Knowledge," in *Warnings to the Curious. A Sheaf of Criticism on M. R. James*, ed. S. T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007), 96 and 97.

The list of contents reflects this book's division into two major parts, but I hope to have shown that there are concerns which permeate the different sections and sustain a unity of the overall design. In Part I, I discuss the ideological issues raised by the supernatural in general, and by ghosts in particular. Here the trajectory is from Thomas Hobbes's debunking of "spiritual" metaphysics to examples of tentative admission of the ghostly content in early Gothic and Victorian fictions. Part II has been devoted solely to the ghost stories of Montague Rhodes James. While the concern in Part I is chiefly with how ideology influences narrative, Part II tracks a different movement. The impact of enlightened scepticism made Horace Walpole and post-*Otranto* Gothicists engage with ideological issues (which, among other strategies, forced them to use distancing devices); in that sense, narrative can be said to be subservient to ideology. In M. R. James, on the other hand, it is narrative which gets the upper hand and thus vindicates the supernatural, no matter how indirect and ostensibly reluctant this vindication may seem. First and foremost, this book in its entirety consists of renewed attempts at reading. I hope to demonstrate that reading closely and attentively is capable of revealing the many fascinating ways in which effects of distance serve an artistic rather than ideological purpose, that of telling a gripping story.

Part I
Keeping the Ghost at Bay and the Rise of the English Ghost-Seer

Hobbes on Gentilism, Demonology, and Spiritualist Metaphysics

I first turn to Thomas Hobbes and his *Leviathan* (1651)[1] with the aim to make clearer some of the philosophical foundations of enlightened Protestantism as a belief system which — as our analysis of fiction will show — permeates the ghost story genre. In particular, this section will help us examine the distancing devices devised by Horace Walpole to justify his publication of a "Gothic Story" and to allow his target audience to enjoy an imaginary trip to the Middle Ages, the "dark ages of Christianity," as he called the era. The philosophy of Hobbes has not attracted much attention in Gothic studies,[2] and yet this starting point seems to me like an almost obvious choice. Both the radicalism that informs Hobbes's rejection of the Catholic doctrine and his desire to provide a firm philosophical footing for a Christian commonwealth free from "Romish" or "Popish" misconceptions make up a relevant frame of reference for an assessment of the ideological investments of the early Gothic.[3] As he goes about this work of exposing remnants of paganism ("gentilism") at the very heart of that doctrine, Hobbes brings theology and philosophy so closely

1 I follow here the method of referencing *Leviathan* used in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's* Leviathan, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), i.e., *Lev.* is followed by chapter (Roman numerals), followed by section (Arabic numerals), followed by pagination of the so-called Head edition (London, 1651).

2 A notable exception is T. J. Lustig's *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), which was published as early as 1994, but which I discovered (thanks to Professor Jeremy Tambling's recommendation) after my encounter with Hobbes's anti-supernatural fervour. This section of my book, therefore, had been conceived and written in ignorance of Lustig's interpretation. In other words, the reader will find in Lustig's book an analysis of Hobbes's philosophy alternative to the one I carry out here.

3 Hobbes's concern is not solely with the purely theoretical aspects of the doctrine but also and in equal measure with its political relevance. This interest in ideology, as we may call it, was of great significance for the way in which Gothic authors built their fictive worlds.

together as to make them inseparable. His goal is to demonstrate how a person can be a modern Christian and an uncompromising rationalist thinker at the same time. In both these realms, religion and philosophy, radicalism means consistent rationality and sober-headedness. In particular, Christianity ought to shun ill-conceived spiritualism rather than materialism.

There are two narrative currents in Hobbes's assault on gentilised Christianity. First, he recounts the way in which the spirit of true Christianity was polluted by pagan influences, which led to the rise of the Church of Rome, or "Papacy." Second, he attempts to represent its doctrine as a fairy tale, an imaginary domain populated by ghosts.

In historical studies of ghost beliefs, much effort has been expended on recounting the transition from the medieval and "Romish" worldview to the modern and Protestant. The doctrinal excision of the idea of Purgatory in the latter worldview, because of its immediate significance for the afterlife of the faithful, has in such studies been accorded due prominence.[4] Stephen Greenblatt, though chiefly concerned in his study of *Hamlet* with the mental processes which accompanied the domestic politics involved in the transition, sums up the extent of the transformation in the following way:

> When in 1545 and 1547, with zealous Protestantism in the ascendant, the English Parliament acted to dissolve the whole system of intercessory foundations created to offer prayers for souls in Purgatory, the lawmakers and bureaucrats found themselves faced with an immense task. They had to strike at colleges, free chapels, chantries, hospitals, fraternities, brotherhoods, guilds, stipendiary priests, and priests for terms of years, as well as at many smaller founds to pay for trentals (the cycle of thirty requiem masses), obits (the yearly memorial service), flowers, bells, and candles.[5]

In the words of historian Ronald Finucane, by the time of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, "[...] England had passed through a Reformation and ghosts had been

4 "The Council of Trent (Session 25, 1563) defined purgatory as the place or state of purgation where souls after death render the temporal satisfaction due to sin." Robert S. Miola, ed., *Early Modern Catholicism. An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.

5 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 39.

banished from the realm: Catholic ghosts, at least, souls suffering in purgatory."[6] Finucane goes on to explain: "Purgatory was denied, only heaven and hell were allowed as alternative postmortem states. The indulgence, consequently, was meaningless, utterly worthless, while prayers, Masses and alms for the dead were just external ceremony, mere medieval invention. Chantry chapels, obits, all medieval manifestations of communion between living and dead were swept away."[7]

Institutional transformations were accompanied by theological debate, which, on the Protestant side, involved debunking the conception of Purgatory and the accompanying ghost beliefs as gross *mis*conceptions. Not only were they believed to have been founded on superstition but were denounced as essential parts of the money-making machine built and kept in motion by the Church of Rome. For Protestant polemicists, such as William Tyndale, Purgatory was "a poet's fable,"[8] but the abuses it made possible for the clergy to perpetrate were grave. Here I propose to see Hobbes's methodical and uncompromising assault on the Catholic doctrine as a summary of that debate, which — by the middle of the seventeenth century — had gone on for over one hundred years. This may be a reason why Hobbes has received so little attention from contemporary ghostologists, who tend to be interested in the large-scale transformation processes rather than the way in which a philosopher examined the premises of the doctrine he knew to be fantastical and nefarious, and followed them to their logical conclusions.

Already in the first sections of *Leviathan*, and specifically in that which treats of imagination, Hobbes attacks as erroneous the belief in apparitions, spiritual entities capable of existence independent of the perceiving mind. This belief and the "superstitious fear" it engenders have their root in a fallacious account of the operation of the senses. As a result, what can only exist in the human mind is endowed with ontological independence. This misconception informs "the religion of the Gentiles" (*Lev.* II, 7, 7). The example with which

6 Ronald C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead. A Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 90.

7 Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 91.

8 William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, quoted in Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 35 (note 64). In *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), Tyndale uses a number of telling phrases to denounce the doctrine as a money-grabbing scheme, for example, "purgatory-pick-purse" (*The Obedience of a Christen man* [...]; http://www.godrules.net/library/tyndale/19tyndale7.htm, accessed September 24, 2022.

Hobbes illustrates the confusion of perception with reality is the account of Brutus's encounter with the spectre of Julius Caesar, which supposedly visited the former on the night preceding the battle at Philippi. Recounted in Plutarch's *Lives*, the episode supplied Shakespeare — in a translation by Thomas North (1579) — with material for a ghost-seeing scene in *Julius Caesar* (Act 4, Sc. 3). Even if Hobbes knew the scene in Shakespeare, he does not mention it, and we may assume that he had little patience with literary perpetuations of ancient superstitions. In his analysis, he strips the episode of its narrative context, retained by Shakespeare, where the death of Caesar is preceded, accompanied, and followed by "spectacular signs" (Greenblatt's phrase). Various "prodigies" and "portents" in Shakespeare's rendition (e.g., Act 1, Sc. 3) emphasise the enormity of the assassination and provide a wider context for the appearance of the spectre.[9] Plutarch recounts it thus:

> But, above all, the ghost that appeared unto Brutus showed plainly that the gods were offended with the murder of Caesar. The vision was thus. Brutus [...] slept every night, as his manner was, in his tent; and being yet awake thinking of his affairs — for by report he was as careful a captain and lived with as little sleep as ever man did — he thought he heard a noise at his tent door; and, looking towards the light of the lamp that waxed very dim, he saw a horrible vision of a man, of a wonderful greatness and dreadful look, which at the first made him marvellously afraid. But when he saw that it did him no hurt, but stood by his bedside and said nothing, at length he asked him what he was. The image answered him: "I am thy ill angel, Brutus, and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippes." Then Brutus replied again, and said: "Well, I shall see thee then." Therewithal the spirit presently vanished from him.[10]

As might be expected, Hobbes eagerly leaps on the suggestion of sleep deprivation in Plutarch's account. This allows him to strip the episode of the moral dimension with which Plutarch and Shakespeare endowed it. Instead, Hobbes turns it into a philosophical lesson, a lecture on the power of "ignorance":

9 See also Greenblatt's analysis of Shakespeare's handling of ghosts in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, esp. the section "The Spirit of History," 180 ff.

10 "Appendix: Excerpts from Plutarch," in William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Marvin Spevack (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 162.

> We read of Marcus Brutus [...] how at Philippi, the night before he gave battle to Augustus Caesar, he saw a fearful apparition, which is commonly related by historians as a vision, but, considering the circumstances, one may easily judge to have been but a short dream. For sitting in his tent, pensive and troubled with the horror of his rash act, it was not hard for him, slumbering in the cold, to dream of that which most affrighted him; which fear, as by degrees it made him wake, so also it must needs make the apparition by degrees to vanish: and having no assurance that he slept, he could have no cause to think it a dream, or anything but a vision. And this is no very rare accident: for even they that be perfectly awake, if they be timorous and superstitious, possessed with fearful tales, and alone in the dark, are subject to the like fancies, and believe they see spirits and dead men's ghosts walking in churchyards; whereas it is either their fancy only, or else the knavery of such persons as make use of such superstitious fear to pass disguised in the night to places they would not be known to haunt. (*Lev.* II, 7, 7)

Hobbes is not greatly troubled by the fact that the actual story is not about waking "fancies," while it may be, in his account at least, about "dreams." It is indeed difficult to imagine a person, let alone a superstitious one, when visiting a churchyard, to fall asleep *and* fall prey to a vivid fancy.[11] Nor is he concerned with the fact that in Plutarch (and in Shakespeare, for that matter) Brutus is not represented as "timorous" or "superstitious," let alone "possessed with fearful tales." To give psychological depth to his interpretation, Hobbes inserts a comment on Brutus's conscience. While in Plutarch Brutus is "a careful captain," unable to stop himself from deliberating upon the current political affairs, Hobbes is convinced that he must have been "troubled with the horror of his *rash act*," a remark which is in line with Hobbes's concern with the political function of the sovereign. While in Plutarch "horror" is attached to the spectre, in Hobbes the hair-raising has its cause in the soul. We might expect Hobbes to be concerned with what in Plutarch's account amounts to a sacrilegious assault ("the gods were offended") on the sovereign; indeed, the

11 The so-called churchyard test, the way in which circumstances were believed to conspire in the production of a ghost-seeing experience, was a great favourite with ghost-debunkers; see Owen Davies, *The Haunted. A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 133–134.

stressing of Brutus's rashness reveals such concern. Primarily, however, Hobbes wishes to expose the "ignorance" of the Gentiles. This philosophical species of ignorance — the readiness to endow "dreams" and "visions" with the ontological status of independent existence, to which they have no claim — has been responsible for loosing "dreams" and "visions" upon the ancient world and allowing them to haunt the benighted. Philosophy must now step in to chase them away and usher in enlightened modernity.

Hobbes keeps returning to the ontological status of mental entities and phenomena: dreams, fancies, and visions of all kinds. In the fourth and final part of the treatise, entitled "Of the Kingdom of Darkness," his theory of perception, at once sensualist and rationalist, assists him in a final attack against the Church of Rome, the last pages before the "review and conclusion" evidently meant to deliver a death-dealing blow to "Papacy" and bury the metaphysics supporting it. Hobbes systematically develops a figure according to which the Church of Rome is represented as "the kingdom of fairies." A testimony to his intellectual daring, this feat could not have rallied for Hobbes's hosts of sympathisers, especially in view of the fact that *Leviathan* was written in France.[12]

Hobbes's consistent development of the allegory yields bizarre analogies. If the Church of Rome is represented as a kingdom of fairies, then, for instance, the Pope must be seen another Oberon (*Lev*., XLVII, 23, 386). Another brow-raising parallel comes with the idea of the *incubi* (*Lev*., XLVII, 30, 387). The comparison is introduced in a manner that would not fail to interest a Gothicist:

> For, from the time that the Bishop of Rome [i.e., the Pope] had gotten to be acknowledged for bishop universal, by pretence of succession to St. Peter, their whole hierarchy, or kingdom of darkness, may be compared not unfitly to the kingdom of fairies; that is, to the old wives' fables in England, concerning ghosts and spirits, and the feats they play in the night. And if a man consider the original [i.e., the origin] of this great ecclesiastical dominion [i.e., the Church of Rome], he will easily perceive, that the Papacy, is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof, for so

12 Hobbes fled to France during the Long Parliament but in France he had no reason to feel at ease: "They are all hostile to me. One part of the clergy forced me to flee from England to France; and another part of the clergy forced me to flee back from France to England." In Hobbes's dedication to *Dialogus Physicus* (1661); quoted in G. A. J. Rogers, "Hobbes and His Contemporaries," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's* Leviathan, ed. Springborg, 434.

did the Papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power. (*Lev.* XLVIII, 21, 386)

The figure of the fairy kingdom is used here with the aim to reverse, as it were, the existing state of affairs. In Hobbes's eyes, the "ecclesiastical dominion" of the Church of Rome is founded upon the misconception that ecclesiastical power is in fact political, which supposedly makes it superior to any earthly power. This allows "Romish" bishops to claim for themselves the authority vested in the civil sovereign. In calling "Papacy" a "kingdom of fairies," Hobbes undermines this claim. The prelates are deluded: the Pope can at best rule over a realm of fairies or ghosts. These, however, are mere relics of Gentilism and evidence that remnants of paganism haunt and pollute this ill-founded type of Christianity. The image may strike us as "Gothic" and not without reason. The Church of Rome is haunted by paganism, which — in a manner of speaking — *is* the spirit of that Church. Although Hobbes himself does not refer to the thus described "kingdom of darkness" as Gothic, authors such as Walpole must have had something similar in mind when they set their romances in the "dark ages of Christianity."[13]

Hobbes's graveyard imagery becomes even more remarkable when we consider the larger context: a *narrative* that recounts the survival and persistence of spectres of paganism in the Christian era. In other words, Hobbes gives an account of the contamination of Christianity by "Gentilism," that is, by ideas utterly alien to it. Light needs to be brought into Christianity; or, as Hobbes chooses to put it, the light of Scripture must be released. The "kingdom of darkness" is not only a dominion erected upon and sustained by misconception; it is the dominion of Satan, whom Hobbes elevates to the rank of the monarch of the imaginary kingdom: "For seeing Beelzebub is prince of phantasms, inhabitants of his dominion of air and darkness, the children of darkness, and these demons, phantasms, or spirits of illusion, signify allegorically the same thing" (*Lev.*, XLIV, 1, 333).[14]

13 See the next section, ft. 31.

14 Following the transition to Protestantism, ghostly visitations (that is, a Protestant haunted by a ghost of unknown provenance) were often attributed to diabolic agency (or "diabolic illusion") or to witchcraft; see Davies, *The Haunted*, 108 ff.

Two tools help Hobbes in this task of doctrinal purification, its goal being the enlightenment of benighted brethren: thoroughgoing materialism and uncompromising rationalism. And so, the spirit is body: "And consequently every part of the universe, is body, and that which is not body, is no part of the universe; and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it, is nothing; and consequently nowhere" (*Lev.*, XLVI, 15, 371). Similarly, ghosts or "demons" are "phantasms," products of the mind, thus existing in the human mind only: "As if the dead of whom they dreamed, were not inhabitants of their own brain, but of the air, or of heaven or hell; not phantasms, but ghosts; with just as much reason, as if one should say, one saw his own ghost in a looking-glass, or the ghosts of the stars in a river; [...]" (*Lev.*, XLV, 2, 352).

Among the pollutions that Gentilism has brought into Christianity, Hobbes names the following:

- the political authority vested in the clergy and in the Pope in particular (the appropriation of the title and power of emperor of Rome[15]);
- belief in ghosts (apparitions, spirits, entities capable of independent existence after the death of a whole person);
- the idea of purgatory (closely related to the belief in ghosts: "This window it is, that gives entrance to the dark doctrine, first, of eternal torments; and afterwards of purgatory, and consequently of the walking abroad, especially in places consecrated, solitary, or dark, of the ghosts of men deceased; [...]" (*Lev.*, XLIV, 16, 340)[16];
- the doctrine of transubstantiation (change of substance — bread and wine — with no change in the appearances or secondary qualities; the cornerstone of the Catholic liturgy)[17];

15 "It is also from the Roman Heathen, that Popes have received the name, and power of PONTIFEX MAXIMUS." *Lev.*, LXV, 35, 365.

16 As we have already observed, the reasons for the "building of purgatory" were believed to be mercenary, by the time of the publication of *Leviathan*, a commonly accepted explanation as well as accusation. The Church of Rome found the idea "profitable" (*Lev.*, XLIV, 16, 340). To refute this doctrine, Hobbes questions the supposition of the immortality of the soul, calling it "the natural eternity of separated souls" (*Lev.*, XLIV, 30, 346). Instead, "there is no life, but the life of the body; and no immortality till the resurrection" (*Lev.*, XLIV, 30, 346). Hobbes returns to these issues in chapter XXXIV.

17 *Lev.*, XLIV, 11, 338–339. Here Hobbes compares the "Romish" priests to "the Egyptian conjurers, that are said to have turned their rods intro serpents, and the water into blood, [and] are thought but to have deluded the sense of the spectators by a false show of things [...]."

- celibacy (*Lev*., XLVI, 33–34, 376–377; Hobbes calls it "vain and false philosophy" to maintain that "the work of marriage is repugnant to chastity, or continence, and by consequence to make them moral vice; [...]");
- idolatry and the canonization and cult of saints (also closely related to one another; *Lev*., XLV, 10–34, 356–365).[18]

As we have already suggested, to support his wholesale refutation of the "Romish" doctrine, Hobbes must provide a historical narrative that recounts the emergence, survival and dissemination of the "pollutions." It will explain why the advent of Christianity brought no clean break with "Gentilism" and how the "relics" of paganism muddled what was supposed to be a new, enlightened world. Hobbes takes up this challenge, even though it makes him perform some audacious intellectual conjuring tricks. A case in point is his story about the "spreading" of the contagion of demonology. Things have to start with the Greeks, and so they do. Hobbes takes us back to the "genealogy of the gods" in Hesiod. The rest of the story runs as follows:

> The Grecians, by their colonies and conquests communicated their language and writings into Asia, Egypt, and Italy; and therein, by necessary consequence, their *demonology*, or, as St. Paul calls it, *their doctrines of devils*: and by that means the contagion was derived also to the Jews, both of Judaea and Alexandria, and other parts, whereinto they were dispersed. But the name of *demon* they did not (as the Grecians) attribute to spirits both good and evil; but to the evil only: and to the good *demons* they gave the name of the spirit of God, and esteemed those into whose bodies they entered to be prophets. In sum, all singularity, if good, they attributed to the Spirit of God; and if evil, to some *demon*, but a *kakodaimon*, an evil *demon*, that is, a *devil.* (*Lev*., XLV, 4, 353; italics in the original)

The word "contagion" should not go unnoticed, even if we ignore the spectacularly broad strokes with which this history of demonology is drawn for us. For what Hobbes is at pains to narrate is not the growth and spreading of an idea. In actual fact, he narrates the spreading of ignorance, the way a powerful misconception conquered the ancient world. If only those misguided ancients

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The idea of "conjuration" is linked in Hobbes to a more general one, having to do with abuse of words.

18 "The worship of images" is "another relic of Gentilism," similarly to "the canonizing of saints."

had seen the true nature of things, rather than populating the world with figments of fancy: "As if the dead of whom they dreamed, were not inhabitants of their own brain, but of the air, or of heaven, or hell; not phantasms, but ghosts [...]" (*Lev.*, XLV, 2, 352). This ontological fallacy thrives on an inability (perhaps unwillingness) to tell reality from mental content: the dead do not inhabit the air; nor are there ghosts but only phantasms.

Besides the religious, cultural and political sources and aspects of the inimical doctrine, Hobbes dwells at some length on a strictly philosophical one. He seeks to prove that demonology found an ally in Aristotelian metaphysics with its theory of abstract essences. Practiced in "the Schools," it is understood as "supernatural philosophy" (*Lev.*, XLVI, 14, 371) and is founded on the belief in "certain essences separated from bodies, which [the metaphysicians] call *abstract essences, and substantial forms* [...]" (*Lev.*, XLVI, 15, 371; Hobbes's italics). In other words, this philosophy bestows independent existence on mental phenomena (e.g., images) and on the qualities and properties (e.g., colour, mental operations or the "soul"), which inhere in bodies. This metaphysics is "repugnant to natural reason" and in equal measure odious to a true Christian, who must reject the adulteration of Scripture by "Aristotelism." A signal case of this corruption can be found in Thomas Aquinas's project of Aristotelism amicably conjoined with theology.[19] An enlightened philosopher and a naturalist must now undertake the task of exposing the abuses of these doctrines, especially as he is fully aware of the political interest, the "ideology," at their bottom. Hobbes is thus a liberationist philosopher, conscious of the need, indeed duty, spiritually and morally to disabuse his brethren. He describes this task in the following manner:

> It is to this purpose, that men may no longer suffer themselves to be abused by them that by this doctrine of *separated essences*, built on the vain philosophy of Aristotle, would fright them from obeying the laws of their country, with empty names; as men fright birds from the corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick. For it is upon this ground that, when a man is dead and

19 The survival of "Aristotelism" in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is an important element in Hobbes's refutation of the Catholic doctrine. Hobbes does not attack Aquinas in person, but he does allude to the problems occasioned by the absorption of "Aristotelism" into the Christian doctrine (see *Lev.*, XLVI, 19, 373, and the relevant note in the edition cited).

> buried, they say his soul (that is his life) can walk separated from his body, and is seen by night amongst the graves. Upon the same ground, they say that the figure, and colour, and taste of a piece of bread has a being, there, where they say there is no bread: and upon the same ground they say that faith, and wisdom, and other virtues are sometimes *poured* into a man, sometimes *blown* into him, from heaven; as if the virtuous and their virtues could be asunder; and a great many other things that serve to lessen the dependence of subjects on the sovereign power of their country. (*Lev*., XLVI, 18, 372–373; italics in the original)

Consistently aloof in his rationality, Hobbes does not seem to have been discouraged by the vivacity of the misconceptions and superstitious beliefs he is seeking to expose and explode. Instead, he lays down intellectual foundations for the modern era, the chief of them being the rightly conceived sovereignty, autonomous and civil, in which Christianity will finally rid itself of the pollutions of heathenism. On the other hand, this is the intellectual enemy he confronts with ferocity and resolve. Verging on monomania, this determination makes him resort to the idea of haunting and engage in rhetorical jousts with the inimical political system and the erroneous and pernicious doctrine. As his discourse gathers momentum, he expels the Church of Rome from this world and sends it flying into a fairyland. As he must have been aware, this had little impact on the actual power wielded by "Rome," with its prelates and political allies. In his writings, however, he is the true sovereign and a rearranger of things. In this capacity, he sentences "Papacy" to the "life" of a revenant.

If Hobbes's philosophy would not have won him the hearts of his French friends, it proved almost equally difficult to stomach by his countrymen back in England.[20] Evidence presented and examined by Sasha Handley shows that despite the polemical vigour, Hobbes, far from being universally accepted, was denounced and attacked as an atheist and labelled a "Sadducee."[21] Of course,

20 See Johann Sommerville, "*Leviathan* and Its Anglican Context," in *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's* Leviathan, ed. Springborg, 358–374. Worth consulting is also the section of this Companion which discusses the reception of Hobbes's philosophy.

21 Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 32, 39, 42, 44. Joseph Glanvill in his tract *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681) was especially vocal in the "condemnation against atheists and sadducees" (32). In some of M. R. James's stories (e.g., "Oh, Whistle" and "The Mezzotint"), concern with materialism and atheism plays a significant role (as we will see in due

a unanimous popular acceptance of a radical philosophical position has never occurred yet in the history of ideas. Indeed, as Handley and other scholars have shown, ghost belief in Protestant England was never successfully suppressed. Besides, the ambivalence (sometimes growing into anxiety) over the reality and true nature of ghosts persisted. At the same time, no matter how irreligious Hobbes's position may have seemed in the eyes of zealous preachers, it has survived as an option for those who have wished to embrace non-enthusiastic forms of belief.[22]

Hobbes certainly is no part of the cultural environment that gave rise to Gothic fiction in the second half of the eighteenth century. His position, however, makes him a natural ally to enlightened Protestantism, which did make up that environment and was an opponent with which Gothicists had to reckon. The positioning of Hobbesianism in the development of supernatural fiction may not be an easy task, because the revival of medievalism that permeated the Gothic was not devoid of ideological ambivalences. On the contrary, the dubious status of spectres as well as their puzzling relation to the imagination can be regarded as responsible for the narrative vigour that informs these stories and ensured their popularity. In other words, the spirit of Hobbesian rationality seems to be hauntingly present in the Gothic, especially in fictions which narrate the triumph of enlightened Protestantism over superstition. As we shall see in due course, M. R. James's stories provide ample evidence of the presence and vitality of these ambivalences.

Distances in Walpole's Prefatory Manoeuvres

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* relies upon a skilful managing of distance for both the ideological justification and the artistic effect of its medieval fantasy. Among the major types of distance he establishes is that between the world portrayed in the text and the intended reader. In the words of Sir Walter Scott, Walpole has managed to "carry [his reader] back" to the "ages of

course). The Oxford editor of the stories adds this comment (about James's reference to "sadducismus"): they "may perhaps indicate MRJ's own attitude towards rationalistic debunking of supernatural events" (*"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories*, 306).

22 I shall return to the idea of enthusiasm in the context of David Hume's essay.

feudal power and papal superstition."[23] Scott goes on to explain that a detailed recreation of the past was Walpole's principal goal: "Now it seems to have been Walpole's object to attain, by the minute accuracy of a fable, sketched with singular attention to the costume of the period in which the scene was laid, that same association which might prepare his reader's mind for the reception of prodigies congenial to the creed and feelings of the actors [i.e., characters]."[24] Thanks to his "learning," his "fancy," and his "genius," Walpole succeeded in attaining a willing suspension of disbelief in his readers — to use Samuel Taylor Coleridge's well-known phrase[25] — thus transporting them into another world, one that Scott calls "a ruder age," the age of feudalism and "Papacy." Walpole's reader was expected to "receive" as real things which, in the (England of the) second half of the eighteenth century, were regarded as somehow belonging to or representing that alien period: ghosts and other "prodigies."

Walpole himself claimed not to be concerned with reception. He avowedly wrote the story to satisfy his whim, allowing himself — after being visited by a dream-vision that featured pieces of a gigantic suit of armour — to be carried away by his warm imagination: "I have not written the book for the present age, which will endure nothing but *cold common sense*."[26] However, readers acquainted with the publishing history of *The Castle of Otranto* will recall that Walpole's opinion concerning the taste of "the present age" as well as his posture of a recluse of antiquarian pursuits[27] may account for his decision — on the evidence

23 Scott's 1811 introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, Appendix 12 in Michael Gamer's edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, 134.

24 Scott's introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, *passim*.

25 The phrase occurs in *Biographia Literaria* (1815): "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (*BL* ii, 6); quoted in Angela Esterhammer, "The Critic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 146.

26 From Walpole's letter to Madame Deffand, in Scott's translation; *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Gamer, 135; emphasis in the original.

27 I suggest here an analogy between Walpole, M. R. James, and many of James's protagonists (his "antiquaries"), which, in my opinion, is not entirely spurious. The word "antiquary," used by M. R. James to describe his narrators/protagonists ("patients" and ghost-seers), has also been applied to Walpole; see W. S. Lewis, "Horace Walpole, Antiquary," in *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, ed. Richard Pares and A. J. P. Taylor (London: Macmillan & Co., 1956), 178–203.

of the Preface to the first edition (1764) — to conceal his authorship and to put on the guises of a discoverer of a lost book, a translator, and a publisher.

And so, not knowing what sort of reception to expect, Walpole not only detaches himself from his work, but also establishes what we may call a triple distance between the "here and now" of the reader and the "there and then" of the story. The opening statements of the Preface (complemented by the information in the title-page of the 1764 edition) are as follows:

- the story is a discovery: "The following work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England"[28];
- it is a translation into English by a William Marshall, who — as he addresses his English public — describes himself as "naturally prejudiced in favour of his adopted work";
- the Italian original was printed in Italy (Naples) in the sixteenth century (1529);
- the author of the original is known as Onuphrio Muralto, identified on the title-page as "Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto";
- the story was composed (as far as can be ascertained) "near the time" when the represented events take place; further on, however, on account of the beauties of the language, it is suggested that the date for the composition must be near that of the publication;
- the events take place in the time of the Crusades (between the eleventh and the thirteenth century); there is a suggestion that they are not wholly fictitious: "the ground-work of the story is founded on truth."

We can see that Walpole is here at pains to distance himself from his story (are we to suspect a *murus*/wall pun in Muralto?[29]). We sense a great deal of cultural anxiety — as we may wish to call it — and a resulting ambivalence as to the propriety and value of the work. They seem to be responsible for the multiple disclaimers deployed before allowing the actual reading to commence. To risk a pun, before allowing the reader to "face" and enjoy the prodigies, the "entertainment" of the reading is represented as conditional on the prior making-sure that ideological screens are in place between the reader and the story. The narrative contract offered by the concealed author to the reader allows

28 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W. S. Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5. All my subsequent references to the novel and the prefaces are to this edition.

29 I am indebted to Professor Jakub Lipski for this suggestion.

him to publish and the latter to appreciate a work which might otherwise be regarded as suspect when judged by the principles of literary propriety obtaining in the present age.

The 1764 Preface allows us to identify as many as three major types of such screens, or a triple distance, a set of conditions for both the composition and the reception of "a Gothic story" (the subtitle of the second edition of *Otranto*) amid the *milieu* of mid-eighteenth-century England:

- temporal (historical): between the medieval setting of the story (the time of the Crusades) and the publication (the 1760s);
- geographical (geopolitical): between Italy and Britain;
- cultural (ideological): between the "darkest ages of Christianity" and the Age of the Reason/Enlightenment.

It becomes immediately obvious that the distances are closely related to one another, as the alternative terms suggest. Thus, the temporal and geographical distances are about the cultural gap that separates the setting of the story with its "actors" and its intended audience. Geography can only notionally be separated from politics and the spatial distance is in fact geopolitical, for we are speaking here of a gap between southern Europe with a political system totally alien to that of eighteenth-century Britain with its famed libertarian democracy.[30] Walpole's phrase "the *darkest* ages of Christianity"[31] emphasises the huge disparity in the two religious doctrines: enlightened Protestantism (represented by the assumed persona of the discoverer-translator) and the "Romish" Christianity of the Middle Ages.

Walpole's language carries evaluations which we can translate into Hobbesian terms, even if Walpole — as is fairly certain — may not have shared Hobbes's radicalism.[32] By reinventing for his readers a lost world of feudalism and papacy, Walpole re-enacts in *Otranto* the kind of political conflict that Hobbes

30 Succinctly described as "freedom fixed by laws"; the phrase is found in the prologue to *The Mysteries of the Castle*, a Gothic drama by Peter Andrews Miles (1795); see Jacek Mydla, *Spectres of Shakespeare. Appropriations of Shakespeare in the Early English Gothic* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2009), 194.

31 "The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of christianity [sic]; [...]" ("Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 5).

32 As Gamer points out in his edition of *Otranto* (106), Walpole objected to radical forms of Protestantism. We will return to this issue in our discussion of David Hume's differentiation between religion based on "fear" and on "enthusiasm."

is concerned with in *Leviathan*, namely that between ecclesiastic and civil authority. As we have mentioned, Hobbes repeatedly and emphatically argues that the church must claim no dominion on earth, that religious authorities have no title to political power. *Otranto*, however, recounts a number of supernatural interventions which eventually lead to the overthrowing of the figure of the sovereign, Manfred, denounced as a tyrant and a usurper. The prophecy cited at the very opening of the novel suggests that Manfred has been doomed: "*That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it.*"[33] What chances of keeping the "lordship and castle of Otranto" could he have when opposed by Heaven itself? Such considerations make dubious the "reliability" of the author, Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto. Indeed, Walpole suspects him of being "artful" and of pursuing a political agenda in publishing his story.[34] The story, somewhat predictably, ends with the institution of Theodore by Alfonso's shade: "Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: [...] it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen [...]."[35] This supernatural intervention shatters Manfred's hopes of becoming the great Leviathan.

There is, however, more to be said, because already the opening sentence of the preface complicates the geography: the book was found "in the library of an *ancient* catholic family in the north of England."[36] The Catholic family is not only an "ancient" stock; it lives in "the north of England," which brings into play the religious map of eighteenth-century England,[37] and hints at geographical

33 Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 18; italics in the original.

34 The distance between the "translator" and the "author" is the greatest when the former cautions the reader in the following manner: "It is not unlikely that an artful priest [i.e., a cunning ecclesiastic] might endeavour to turn their own arms against on the innovators [i.e., religious reformers and inventors of print]; and might avail himself of his abilities as an author to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions" (5). This remark suggests as plausible an interpretation of the story along predominantly ideological lines.

35 Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 112–113.

36 Walpole's use of the word "ancient" (referring to the pre-Reformation era) makes perfect sense in the light of Hobbes's philosophical narrative.

37 For this map of the country, see Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c. 1714–80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). Haydon comments on the strength of "Popish gentry in the North [of England]" (89).

remoteness and perhaps even at some sort of domestic exoticism. Thus, even though the *south* of England may now be the political and cultural centre of the country, then, somewhat paradoxically, this is where — at the end of the day — we find an Englishman, Walpole, composing his story in his mock-medieval castle at Strawberry Hill. The 1764 Preface, however, takes the reader on an imaginary trip to the north of the country, where the *Italian original* of the story has been found.[38] This type of cultural journey may sound familiar to readers of M. R. James's stories: an antiquary rummaging through a library full of mouldy and dusty volumes. Yet while, in M. R. James, this kind of trip would turn the enlightened gentleman into a hapless ghost-seer, in Walpole, ghost-seeing (the use of "vision" for "ghost" is suggestive) is safely contained within the medieval chronotope.[39] The surviving Catholics in England are inheritors of the once-powerful but now "exploded" doctrine. According to the narrative concocted for the 1764 Preface, the *Otranto* story, rather than originating *in* England, was conveyed *into* England via a family that seems to have preserved their pre-Reformation roots, which is precisely what makes that family "ancient."

It is interesting to note that Walpole uses the word "catholic" ("ancient catholic family in the north of England"), instead of "Romish" or "Papist." Both these disparaging terms were in common usage in his day and survived far into the next century, as the M. R. James's stories testify.[40] One obvious reason for Walpole's reservation may have been a desire to dull the public's anti-Catholic prejudice, while, in the guise of the translator, he takes his readers on an imaginary and nostalgic journey to Italy via the north of England, a region traditionally inhabited by gentry with Catholic affiliations, now regarded

38 I shall return to the theme of Italy (and what we may call "Italian prejudices" of the English) in our interpretations of two Victorian short stories: Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" and Wilkie Collins's "Mad Monkton" later in this part of the book.

39 For a discussion of the chronotope in relation to M. R. James's stories, see the relevant section of Part II in this book. Patrick Murphy uses it (in his analysis of the stories) to speak, among other things, of "historical and cultural continuity" as represented by a cathedral; Patrick J. Murphy's *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 94.

40 In M. R. James's stories, we still hear echoes of this ideological warfare; for instance, in "'Oh, Whistle,'" which takes us back to the times of the Templars, the local vicar is suspected of being "a concealed Papist" ("Whistle," 70). See p. 162.

as recusants.[41] The thus sensed ambivalence is almost poignant. While he commends the style, he cannot in like measure praise the characters or the incidents, which makes us think of another instance of Walpole trying to preempt censure of the audience and may explain the emphasis on the religious (Biblical) moral about sins of fathers visited upon children.[42] "The style" — says the anxious "translator" — "is the purest Italian" and "elegant"; the "diction" is beautiful.[43] Such are the "charms" of the original that the translator is considering the publication of the original, which, of course, is a purely fictitious consideration in view of the fact that the original *does not exist*. Moreover, it is also a baffling paradox, for the features that speak loudest in commendation of the story are those that could not be conveyed into an English translation. The English language seems to be unfavourable to the type of narrative that the story represents: in English, it is difficult "*to relate* without falling too low or rising too high [...]."[44] These comments on language suggest a great deal of stylistic incompatibility between the Gothic and English. He would like to use another language, preferably Italian, a language whose purity would not be compromised "in common conversation." As we know from the Second (1765) Preface, the solution was found in Shakespeare, a choice which influenced the development of the early English Gothic.

Whatever might have been Walpole's personal reasons for this splitting into the personas of the Italian canon and the English translator, the cultural rationale is stated explicitly, by the latter of course. "Some apology," he says, "is necessary" for the content that features the machine of the marvellous: "Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded

41 For basic information and maps, see the Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recusancy, accessed January 1, 2022.

42 The moral of the story, about the "sins of the fathers" "visited" on the offspring has been taken from the Bible (see Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9; Jeremiah 32:18); https://www.biblegateway.com, accessed January 1, 2022. See below, 85.

43 "The style is the purest Italian. [...] It is natural for a translator to be prejudiced in favour of his adopted work. More impartial readers may not be so much struck with the beauties of this piece as I was. [...] Our language falls far short of the charms of the Italian, both for variety and harmony." ("Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 7). There is an echo here of Hamlet's praise of *The Murder of Gonzago*: "The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian." (3.2.256), which makes perfect sense, considering Walpole's fascination with *Hamlet*.

44 "Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 7; emphasis in the original.

now even from romances. That was not the case when the author wrote; much less when the story itself is supposed to have happened."[45] Walpole, evidently, cannot make up his mind as to where exactly he ought historically to place his "author," and his Onuphrio seems to inhabit the hazy historical space between the ancient and the modern. After all, he cannot be entirely medieval or "Gothic," for otherwise how could his Italian have been so charming? At this point, Walpole removes his disguise and adds in his own proper authorial voice: "Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author [a Catholic monk? perhaps an English gentleman of 1760s desirous to recreate and relive those times?] would not be faithful to the *manners* of the times who should omit all mention of them. He [a modern author, and by implication also the reader] is not bound to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them."[46]

Walpole's Gothic and ghostly project makes him sound like a man suffering from a cultural schizophrenia or a multiple ventriloquist. The way he hides behind the different imaginary personas and the intermittent switching of perspectives are ample evidence of ideological pressures during the project's execution. As we see him negotiating the conflicting expectations and ambitions, we get the impression of watching a child at pains to justify his desire to play with a forbidden toy. The resolution came in the form of a new preface, in which Walpole openly claimed the authorship of *Otranto*, mounted an attack against Voltaire and a defence of Shakespeare, and — most importantly — asserted his desire to combine two types of "romance."[47] Yet the 1764 preface remains a fascinating account of the birth throes of the Gothic. It may be compared to a mirror in which we see the Gothicist cringe under the stern gaze of the uncompromising defender of enlightened modernity.

We shall presently scrutinise examples of how the spirit of Hobbes and the spectres of the Gothic kept engaging in ideological duels between forces of darkness and forces of light. Walpole's deployment of the triple distance made other Gothicists feel justified in following in his footsteps. The indefinite article on the title page of the 1765 edition ("*a* Gothic story") may have been read

45 "Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 6.

46 "Preface to the First Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 6; emphasis in the original.

47 "It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern." "Preface to the Second Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 9.

as an invitation to compose *another* story of the same kind,[48] which would and did institute him as the progenitor of a genre while his villain, Manfred, failed to establish a "line." Yet at the same time, as Walpole summoned — according to the Second Preface — the aid of Shakespeare stylistically to anglicise the infant genre, he also made sure that not all in *Otranto* was as dark and ancient as the "translator" would have his readers believe. Encouraged by the favourable reception of "this little piece" and doffing the disguise of "the borrowed personage of a translator,"[49] Walpole formulated another argument in its defence. The idea of blending "the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern," while not faultless, may be read as a tacit reply to the rules of fiction established fifteen years earlier by Samuel Johnson. While, to recall Walter Scott's praise, Walpole skilfully revived the world of feudalism and papacy and while he believed that medievalism liberated "the powers of [his] fancy" allowing them "to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention [...]," [50] he pleaded realism for his human protagonists: "the author [...] wishes to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions."[51] We see here a significant reservation in Walpole's attempt at withstanding the encroaches of realism upon fiction in that, as suggested earlier, Walpole is aware that a proper degree of "probability" is necessary for an artistically successful deployment of "miracles,

48 Clara Reeve's *Old English Baron* (1778) is an example. The fact of the native setting does not, upon closer inspection, undermine the contention of my interpretation of Walpole's distancing strategies. In anglicising the Gothic model, Reeve delivered a story almost entirely "stripped of the marvellous," in the words of Walpole (in a 1778 letter, quoted in James Watt's "Introduction," in Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), vii). In the Preface to the second edition of her novel, Reeve calls it "the literary offspring" of *The Castle of Otranto*, while criticising Walpole's violation of "limits of credibility" in his handling of the supernatural.

49 "Preface to the Second Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 9.

50 "Preface to the Second Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 9. "To expatiate," in its obsolete sense, is "to move or wander about intellectually, imaginatively, etc., without restraint" (dictionary.com, accessed February 9, 2014).

51 "Preface to the Second Edition," Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 9–10. Without being an expert or an afficionado of the immensely popular medieval fantasy, I tend to think that in the second preface, with this careful calibration of distance between the "actors" and the audience, Walpole gave a succinct definition of the genre.

visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events." His attempt at generic blending does help us understand better the nature of the Gothic world as one in which the modern in haunted by the ancient.

The Rules of Johnson and the Austen Challenge

The ground for the rejection of Gothic fiction on account of its flouting the rules of verisimilitude and propriety was prepared by Samuel Johnson. His influential essay in No. 4 of *The Rambler* (1750) *anticipates by fourteen years* Walpole's *Otranto* and largely pre-empts the latter's apologetic rhetoric.[52] On the example of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818),[53] we can observe how the so-called rules of Johnson were subsequently used to denounce — in the context of the extreme popularity of Ann Radcliffe's romances, especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) — the Gothic's violations of realism and its pernicious influence on the tender minds of "young, ignorant, and idle" readers.[54] In this section, I briefly examine the transition from Johnson's pre-*Otranto* essay to Austen's post-*Udolpho* critique with the aim to identify the challenges with which the enlightened mindset confronted the Gothic author. I will then examine these challenges in the context of an episode from Matthew Gregory

52 Another historical curiosity has to do with the fact that Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime (formulated in Part Two of his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*) as founded on terror and obscurity anticipated the rise of the Gothic by several years. For a recent examination of Burke's theory in the context of the Gothic see Eric Parisot, "The Aesthetics of Terror and Horror: A Genealogy," in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic. Volume 1: Gothic in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 284–303.

53 In the 1816 "Advertisement, by the authoress, to *Northanger Abbey*," Austen explains that the novel was finished in 1803; she finds herself unable to account for the fact that the publisher withheld its publication for more than a dozen years. The introduction to the novel for Oxford World's Classics quotes two more dates: *Northanger Abbey* was written in 1798–1799, but may have been begun as early as 1794 (Claudia Johnson, "Introduction," in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxvi).

54 On Johnson's Rule see David H. Richter, *The Progress of Romance. Literary Historiography and the Gothic Novel* (Michigan: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 91. I find the plural form more appropriate in view of the complexity of Johnson's argument against "romances formerly written."

Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), reputedly the most scandalous novel of the 1790s. As before, of special interest for me are the ways in which the idea of distance features in these debates.

What strikes us in Johnson's argument against "the fictions of the last age" is how facile seems to be the composition of such romances. Striking too is how prophetic his words sound. From our perspective, "fictions of the last age" are very much "fictions of the age to come":

> Why this wild strain of imagination found reception so long in polite and learned ages, it is not easy to conceive; but we cannot wonder that while readers could be procured, the authors were willing to continue it; for when a man had by practice gained some fluency of language, he had no further care than to retire to his closet, let loose his invention, and heat his mind with incredibilities; a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life.[55]

Johnson is predominantly concerned with the didactic role of fiction.[56] Reading being "a school," novels, regardless of their author's intentions, serve their readers, the majority of whom he famously describes as "the young, the ignorant, and the idle," as conduct manuals, instructing them in the conventions of social life. That is especially true if there are no other sources of instruction and if the young person has the leisure to consume literature: "These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; [...]." Any departure from common life, from regular human interaction (from what Johnson calls "the converse of men") is like walking on thin ice. The so-called mimetic mirror as the principle that ought to regulate fiction writing makes sure that fictionality is kept within the bounds of predictability and respectability.

55 Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, no. 4, March 31, 1750 ["Vice and Virtue in Fiction]," 174; unless indicated otherwise, my citations to Johnson are to this essay.

56 In this and in other respects, Johnson is to be seen as a conscious inheritor of the Platonic legacy with its concern about artistic mimesis in terms of its influence on the audience; see Stephen Halliwell's remarks in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002), 134.

When, in *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen expels the Gothic from England, her critique shows her as a loyal disciple of Johnson. The polemical passages in the novel express her exasperation with the popular romance of her time, the genre against which she competed. In her essay "The Gothic Austen," Nancy Armstrong summarises the commonplace interpretation of the novel thus:

> *Northanger Abbey* was the first of Austen's major novels to be drafted (1794) and the last to appear in print (1818). Written and revised when Gothic fiction was the rage, the novel's willingness to poke fun at Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* has encouraged scholars and critics to align Austen's novels with Augustan reason and wit in contempt of the irrationality of sentimental literature in general and the excesses of Gothic romance in particular.[57]

Armstrong goes on to discuss the recent re-readings of *Northanger Abbey* in which, especially in the case of those written from feminist perspectives, Austen's explicit assault upon Radcliffe is found to be debatable. In my brief discussion in this section, however, I opt for the arguably superficial interpretation, taking its cue from the passage just quoted and leaving revisions in more dexterous hands.[58]

In the chapters set at the abbey leading up to Catherine's humiliation, Austen both playfully and skilfully exploits now-familiar Gothic narrative devices, chiefly obscurity as conducive to mystery and terror. She sets up this machinery in order to be able to dismantle it; her goal is to expose the thus concocted mystery as imaginary and the terrors as spurious. The world of romance which for a short time Catherine's hyperactive imagination eagerly builds during her brief stay at Northanger is entirely fantastical. Young, ignorant, and hence highly susceptible and impressionable, Catherine is represented as an easy victim of Gothic romances, the reprehensible species of fiction which her imagination has devoured with great gusto. But, eventually, time comes for a humiliating awakening: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine

57 Nancy Armstrong, "The Gothic Austen," in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 237.

58 For a boldly revisionist interpretation of *Northanger Abbey*, see the relevant chapter ("Jane Austen: The Anxieties of Common Life") in Judith Wilt's *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, Lawrence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

was completely awakened."[59] As the fictional edifice crumbles,[60] the tears now shed by the rightfully chastised "heroine" (as the authorial narrator ironically calls Catherine[61]) wash away those visions and she awakens from the Gothic slumber to confront the commonplace daylight world.

Austen eagerly embraces Johnson's idea of the novel offering "lectures of conduct" for "the young, the ignorant, and the idle." Indeed, at the end of chapter IX, we see Henry Tilney deliver a monitory sermon, the purpose being to make Catherine realise the full extent of her mental contamination brought on by the compulsive reading of "horrid" fictions.[62] In the immediate context of the novel, Henry's speech is a response to her suspicions concerning his deceased mother. He is shocked to realise that Catherine has acted as a female detective, spurred on by a belief that a crime must have been committed and thus casting Henry's father in the role of a villainous husband of the type known, for instance, from Radcliffe's romance (*A Sicilian Romance* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). Henry, however, names more than a dozen reasons why such odious scenarios simply could never take place on the English soil, why the very idea that his father may have killed his wife and got away with it is preposterous.

59 This we read at the beginning of chapter X, vol. II, which opens the second, soberly realistic part of the story. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 146. In this edition, the novel is 187 pages long.

60 The past preserved in the designation "abbey" has been almost entirely obliterated by the time of the novel's events. Catherine is able to discover that Northanger Abbey was "a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation" and subsequently fell "into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilney's on its [the convent's] dissolution" (102). She is then sorely disappointed to observe that "[w]ith the walls of the kitchen ended all the antiquity of the Abbey; [...]. All that was venerable ceased here" (135).

61 Austen's derisive way of referring to Catherine as a "heroine" is a great example of authorial distance.

62 While I readily admit that there is a great deal of sound reasoning in Judith Wilt's reading of *Northanger Abbey*, a veritable *tour de force* of literary criticism, I cannot accept some of its premises. For one thing, Wilt has chosen largely to ignore the strong authorial voice, so characteristic in an Austen narrative. One may oppose the idea of *intentio auctoris* on theoretical grounds; one may disapprove of the ideological position that the voice of the author expresses; yet one ought not to stop one's ears to passages in which Austen makes herself palpably present (as is the case with the "visions of romance were over" passage). Sure, we must not confuse Henry with Austen; as a character, Henry has still some painful growing up ahead of him. Yet, in his rebukes to Catherine, there is, too, a lot of Austen, the exasperated authoress compelled to compete in the literary market against Radcliffe and her imitators.

I have numbered Henry's arguments, simply to see how scrupulous Austen is in delivering this critique:

> If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember [1] the country and [2] the age in which we live. Remember that [3] we are English, that [4] we are Christians. Consult your own [5] understanding, your own [6] sense of the probable, your own [7] observation of what is passing around you. – Does [8] our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do [9] our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated [10] without being known, in a country like this, where [11] social and [12] literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by [13] a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where [14] roads and [15] newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?[63]

It is not necessary to examine the passage at any greater length, for the main drift is evident: *no* Gothic scenario could ever take place on the English soil; plots of this kind are alien to England and the English.[64] Only utter ignorance ("lack of understanding," "no sense of the probable," "lack of observation") could make a person believe "such atrocities" could ever be perpetrated in England and among the English or allow the villain hope to go unpunished. To return to the triple distances deployed by Walpole in his 1764 Preface to *Otranto*, here we see Austen roll them all up into a cultural challenge drawn up with the help of Johnson's mimetic yardstick.

The appeal to Christianity is worthy of notice. Thoroughly familiar with Gothic romances, Austen was fully aware that the worlds they portrayed were not heathen. So why does she make Henry describe the divide between "us" and "them" in religious as well as civic terms? An answer can be found in Hobbes and Walpole. These worlds of the Gothic may be Christian, but that type of Christianity is corrupt to an extent which makes the use of this designation

63 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 145.

64 Claudia Johnson conveniently sorts out the types of "appeal" Henry uses: "to national community," "to religious affiliation," "to modern ideological apparatuses," and "to the repressive force of socialized forms of surveillance" ("Introduction," in *Northanger Abbey*, xii).

virtually illegitimate. Henry's admonition to Catherine ("Remember that we are English, that we are Christians") expresses a firm conviction that only the native, English type of Christianity is the correct one, mirroring the more universal supposition that "human nature" is found in England. Other varieties of Christianity are little more than thinly veiled varieties of paganism, just as — by implication — other types of humanity, so many different species of barbarity. Upon close inspection then, the cultural distance between Hobbes and Austen does not seem to be as great as the gap of 150 years of historical time separating *Leviathan* and *Northanger Abbey* might suggest.

What I call here the Austen challenge may be described with the help of a horticultural metaphor. No matter how exotic Walpole's "Strawberry plant," he did wish to plant it in the English soil. Given the vigorousness of the Gothic genre, the question was: Could the Gothic be successfully planted and grown in the English soil? Since the anti-Gothic denies the Englishness of the Gothic and stresses its alienness, is it possible to produce a native breed?[65] Austen vehemently rejects the possibility of a Gothic story that would be genuinely English:

> Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the Midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the south of France might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented.[66]

The challenge may be described in a different way: The question is not whether a Gothic plant can grow in the English soil, but whether it can do so without having to feed on some foreign and — culturally and "ideologically" — alien juices. In large part, opposition to the Gothic was stimulated by the idea of its alienness.

65 William Godwin, on the other hand, in his *Caleb Williams* (1794) attempts to produce one, and does so with great success.

66 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 147.

The Johnsonian mimetic mirror[67] as appropriated by Austen makes it clear that the "nature" which is an author's duty faithfully to portray is to be understood as "life in contemporary England." Austen couched her compliment of "charming" in barely concealed condescension, suggesting the remoteness of anything romantically Gothic from the standard of "human nature" as found in "the midland counties of England." The Montonis and Schedonis of the Gothic romance do not and indeed could not live in England, a country whose religion, laws, customs, education, and manners have successfully curbed human propensities for wrongdoing. By implication, the same logic of exclusion seems to obtain for superstitions, even though Austen does not expressly comment on this ideologically charged element of the Gothic (even though suspicions of haunting occupy Catherine's mind in her stay at Northanger[68]). Popular and indeed entertaining as the story of the Bleeding Nun may have been,[69] it was found objectionable on the grounds of its being a foreign importation and hence a cultural infiltration and contamination. By the logic at work in the Austen world, legitimate ghost-seeing would add validity to some native atrocities calling for retribution. The power at work behind enlightened "lectures of conduct" — such as that delivered by Henry Tilney — makes this type of experience unthinkable.[70]

Horace Walpole's justificative manoeuvres depend on a wedge of sorts between enlightened England and the dark ages of Christianity. This cultural barrier separates the contemporary author and reader from the "ancient" setting with its "prodigies." In deploying his triple distance, Walpole may have

67 In a section of his book devoted to the mimetic mirror, Halliwell calls Johnson "a thinker whose aesthetic convictions are in part a kind of Platonism without the metaphysics." *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 143.

68 Catherine's proneness to be overcome by superstitious terrors makes her very similar to Radcliffe's heroines, for Radcliffe's ghosts (in the novels published during her lifetime) are always explained away.

69 The tale of the Bleeding Nun is an inset narrative in *The Monk* (vol. II, chapter I); Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 139 ff. The tale can be called a successful attempt on the part of Lewis to *reverse* the Radcliffean method of the explained supernatural (see below): a maiden dressed up as a ghost (to facilitate elopement) turns out to be a real spectre.

70 It will be recalled that the story of the Bleeding Nun parallels that of Ambrosio in that both narratives share the theme of how unbridled passions can lead to the worst kinds of atrocities.

created a space for ghosts to roam around, but its existence was tolerated under certain conditions, exactly those of the distances: historical, geopolitical, and ideological. In a broader perspective and with hindsight, Walpole's triple distance determined the "development" of Gothic fiction, and in particular it influenced, albeit indirectly, the emergence and growth of the ghost story as a feature of the Gothic's horrific subgenre. Also, as we have seen, the turn-of-the-century opposition to the Gothic, was founded on Walpole's strategies but used them, not to justify but to reject Gothicness.

I suggest that one way of seeing the development of the Gothic is to regard it as a series of attempts to meet the Austen challenge, which is to say, to reduce or otherwise to calibrate the distance so as to make it artistically viable. To be sure, already Radcliffe's fictions are a compromise, but, due to Radcliffe's half-hearted treatment of the supernatural, her romances cannot be accepted as wholly satisfactory. She knew how to build an effective ghost-seeing scene, without allowing an actual ghost to materialise. To this extent — assuming that an element of the supernatural is an essential ingredient of the Gothic — she created a "proper" variety of the genre.[71] However, her thus toying with the idea of the supernatural and raising supernatural terrors in the minds of

71 In the words of George Saintsbury: "Of the terror-and-mystery novel (the 'novel of suspense' as some call it [...]), the chief writers [...] were Mrs. Radcliffe and "Monk" Lewis. But in the eighteenth century, it enjoyed an enormous popularity, securely registered and irremediably ridiculed in Miss Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. In Lewis's hands (as it had done in those of the Germans) it admitted real *diablerie* and permitted great licence of situation and action; in Mrs. Radcliffe's and in most, though not quite all, of her minor followers, it was strictly 'proper,' and employed a curious, ingenious, and at the time highly relished machinery, which has been accurately enough called the 'explained supernatural.' Both these methods of applying the supernatural element were revived in the sensational novels of the third quarter of the nineteenth century and sporadically since. The first is not justly chargeable with what has been perhaps not unjustly called the 'schoolboy naughtiness' and extravagance of *The Monk*. [...]. But few complete examples exist in which the enormous difficulty of handling the pure supernatural in prose and at length has been mastered. The 'explained supernatural,' though something not quite unlike it occurs in the work of Wilkie Collins and others, has, since the attraction of its first appearance and its startling contrast to things known and popular passed away, been itself little popular, either with the public or with critics. Some at least of the former do not like to be cheated of their wonders; many of the latter regard such a much-ado-about-nothing as inartistic." George Saintsbury, *The Peace of the Augustans. A Survey of Eighteenth Century Literature as Place of Rest and Refreshment* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1916), 168–169. This interesting yet little-known passage was revived by Victor Sage in *The Gothick Novel: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

"ignorant" readers compromised both her realist and her non-realist credentials. Given the cultural context, it was not possible for Radcliffe to argue, like Walter Scott and others did afterwards, that readers had a right to be treated seriously, as do ghosts. To explain a ghost away is, from the reader's point of view, a disappointment; from the ghost's — a disfavour. An "exploded" or "explained" ghost is no ghost. Yet, in the eyes of objectors of the Austen type, an actual spectre would take the game far beyond the "charming." At the end of the day, the Radcliffean world, despite its abundant terrors and its outlandish setting, is a world of enlightened, unchallenged modernity, and her stories narrate a successful overcoming of superstition.

Somewhat surprisingly, such is also the world of *The Monk*. In what follows, we shall look at an example, the Lorenzo episode in *The Monk*, which recounts a successful dispelling of the fumes of superstition and an overcoming of ancient tyrannies: religious, domestic, and political. Ghost-seeing, like ghosts raised by superstitious fears, is fake at best. An added ideological context of my analysis will be provided by a polite essay by Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Superstition and Militant Scepticism in the Split World of *The Monk*

In debate over religion in the Britain of the Age of Reason, the voice of moderation was heard in David Hume's essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" (1741–1742). Hume's treatment of the subject is helpful in further clarifying the idea of an "enlightened" attitude towards religious matters, as opposed to deviations from and perversions of what was regarded as the true spirit of Christianity. The two extreme positions in the realm of religion, or, as Hume prefers to call them, "two species of false religion," are thus occupied by Catholicism and radical Protestantism, respectively. The "Romish" doctrine is here associated with superstition while radical Protestantism with a leaning towards enthusiasm.[72] While the superstitious variety of religiousness has its

72 Charles Dickens's use of the idea of enthusiasm in his depiction of the Gordon Riots of 1780 (the way in which moderate Protestants turn into heated and belligerent fanatics) in his *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) may serve, not only as a fine illustration of this distinction but also (that is, if we regard the novel as a piece of popular propaganda) of the *common acceptation*

sources, chiefly, in fear, the enthusiastic type — in "presumption" and "warm imagination."[73] While the superstitious person fears the Divine Being, the enthusiast regards himself as God's favourite. The superstitious religion is a system of enslavement: man is so remote from God that the mediation of priests is necessary. "All enthusiasts" — on the other hand — "have been free from the yoke of ecclesiastics [...]."[74]

As Hume develops his argument, the comparison becomes less and less symmetrical in that enthusiastic forms of religion, though false and responsible for disorders in their early stages, are not inimical to "civil liberties." In contrast to this process of gradual accommodation, the progress of superstition results in despotism: "The priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society by endless contentions, persecutions, and religious wars." Even though initially Hume does not make his references to Catholicism explicit, the exemplification he supplies has a clear Hobbesian ring to it and is couched in rhetorical questions: "How smoothly did the Romish church advance in her acquisition of power? But to what dismal convulsions did she throw all Europe, in order to maintain it?"[75]

In what follows here I want to examine the operation of narrative distance and ideology in a mock-supernatural episode of *The Monk* (1796), a post-Radcliffean novel, as we may call it, in which M. G. Lewis constructed a fictional world much more radically divided along doctrinal lines than that of his famed model. The episode chosen for analysis is not that of the Bleeding Nun, in which an actual ghost makes an appearance, but one which illustrates a successful narrative deployment of enlightened scepticism in religious matters. My goal is to examine how a Gothicist narrates the "exploding" of a religious

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of the idea of moderation in religious matters. See, for instance, Dickens's depiction of Lord Gordon in chapter 36, where the phrase "false enthusiasm" occurs.

73 In his critique of enthusiasm, Hume may have been indebted to John Locke; see, for instance, the note on the subject in John Locke, *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 289–290. Locke's main concern is epistemological, namely, with enthusiasts' claim to knowledge. In section IV.xix of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke carries out a systematic debunking of enthusiasm defined as false belief in private (as opposed to divine) revelation.

74 David Hume, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," in David Hume, *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

75 Hume, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," 41–42.

misconception, a "relic" of "dark" Christianity, and a powerful source of superstitious fear.

The episode occurs in chapter 3 of volume III of *The Monk* and takes place in a convent. The central feature here is the statue of St. Clare, which bars the way to a dungeon or "vault." At this juncture in the novel, as readers will recall, the prioress of the convent, the "Domina," having been exposed for a murderess, has been slaughtered by an angry mob. Her victim, Agnes, whose guilt consisted in illicit pregnancy, is presumed dead. Lorenzo, Agnes's grieving brother, turns into a detective of sorts and sets out in pursuit of a person whose behaviour has raised his suspicion: "'What can this mean?' cried Lorenzo; 'Here is some mystery concealed."[76] He soon finds himself alone in a sepulchre, lost in a "labyrinth of passages." On pursuing a faint light, he reaches the statue of St. Clare before which are gathered some nuns, who, on account of the riot and the mob violence they have witnessed, have sought refuge in this place and are in mortal fear for their lives. As Lewis presents it, the nuns are doubly terrified; their fears have both real and superstitious causes. Sister Helena describes the superstitions thus:

> If I stay another hour in these vaults, I shall expire with fear! Not the wealth of worlds should bribe me to undergo again, what I have suffered since my coming hither. Blessed Virgin! To be in this melancholy place in the middle of night, surrounded by the mouldering bodies of my deceased Companions, and expecting every moment to be torn in pieces by their Ghosts who wander about me, and complain, and groan, and wail in accents that make my blood run cold, ... Christ Jesus! It is enough to drive me to madness![77]

Lorenzo dismisses these fears as "puerile and groundless." He is appalled that a strong sense of "imaginary dangers" can make a person indifferent to real ones. He goes on to dismiss the idea of the ghost ("The idea of Ghosts is ridiculous in the extreme; [...]") and supernatural terrors as "ideal terrors."[78]

76 Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 359

77 Lewis, *The Monk*, 362.

78 In the now obsolete sense, "ideal" means "illusory," "imaginary," "existing only as a mental entity."

In response to his scepticism, however, the nuns summon the testimony of their senses: they have repeatedly heard "complaints and groans." In confirmation of this evidence, "a deep and long-drawn groan" is heard, at the sound of which Lorenzo starts in amazement. Sister Helena comes up with a ready explanation: "Doubtless, it proceeds from some Soul in pain, who wishes to be prayed out of purgatory [...]."[79] In this way, the sister expresses the typical superstitious construal of the situation. As the episode unfolds, the contrast between this perspective and that represented by the level-headed Lorenzo deepens. Moreover, the sensibilities of Lewis's intended readers were further irritated already by such irreverent exclamations as "Blessed Virgin!" and "Christ Jesus!" Expressions of irrational dread, they assist Lewis in raising "ideal" terrors, and readers are expected to respond with disapprobation and derision.

The progress of Lorenzo's investigation increases this distance. There is no doubt that the key to the mystery must lie with the statue. Having reportedly performed wonders before, now the statue groans in expression of her "grief" at the fall of the convent. Yet the sceptic refuses to be duped: "Lorenzo did not think this solution of the mystery quite so satisfactory [...]."[80] A further reason for suspicion has to do with the fact that the "marvellous stories" about the statue were "recounted" by the tyrannous Domina. In the minds of Lorenzo and the reader, this establishes the "Romish" connection between superstition and power: the latter is maintained through fear with the assistance of the former. Says Sister Helena: "She [the Prioress, the Domina] assured us often and often, that if we only dared to lay a finger upon it, we might expect the most fatal consequences."[81] Lorenzo, by way of a cautionary exemplum, is told a ghost story of sorts. As represented in that tale, the statue moves its hand and makes menacing utterances to chase away a robber, whose severed and now-shrivelled hand testifies to the veracity of the account.

This legend, however, does not weaken Lorenzo's resolve. On the contrary, he is certain that there must be a natural explanation and is determined to find it. As he takes action and, by doing so, physically violates the idolatrous distance between himself as merely a mortal person and the "Image" ("he shook

79 Lewis, *The Monk*, 363. Lewis combines here the traditional ghost lore with the rather conventional function of purgatorial suffering.

80 Lewis, *The Monk*, 364.

81 Lewis, *The Monk*, 364.

it, and attempted to move it"; "he touched the Statue with impunity"; "he applied his fingers to the knob," etc.), he discovers a mechanism that both accounts for the "miraculous" events and exposes the actual and mundane horrors buried in the convent's dungeon. This part of the narrative must be quoted in full:

> The Nuns besought him to desist in piteous terms, and even pointed out the Robber's hand, which in effect was still visible upon the arm of the Statue. *This proof, as they imagined, must convince him. It was very far from doing so*; and they were greatly scandalized when he declared his suspicion that the dried and shrivelled fingers had been placed there by order of the Prioress. *In spite of their prayers and threats He approached the Statue. He sprang over the iron Rails which defended it, and the Saint underwent a thorough examination.* The Image at first appeared to be of Stone, but proved on further inspection to be formed of no more solid materials than coloured Wood. He shook it, and attempted to move it; But it appeared to be of a piece with the Base which it stood upon. He examined it over and over: Still no clue guided him to the solution of this mystery, for which the Nuns were become equally solicitous, when they saw that He touched the Statue with impunity. He paused, and listened: The groans were repeated at intervals, and He was convinced of being in the spot nearest to them. He mused upon this singular event, and ran over the Statue with enquiring eyes. Suddenly they rested upon the shrivelled hand. It struck him, that so particular an injunction was not given without cause, not to touch the arm of the Image. He again ascended the Pedestal; He examined the object of his attention, and discovered a small knob of iron concealed between the Saint's shoulder and what was supposed to have been the hand of the Robber. This observation delighted him. He applied his fingers to the knob, and pressed it down forcibly. Immediately a rumbling noise was heard within the Statue, as if a chain tightly stretched was flying back. Startled at the sound the timid Nuns started away, prepared to hasten from the Vault at the first appearance of danger. All remaining quiet and still, they again gathered round Lorenzo, and beheld his proceedings with anxious curiosity.
>
> Finding that nothing followed this discovery, He descended. As He took his hand from the Saint, She trembled beneath his touch. This created new terrors in the Spectators, who believed the Statue to be animated. *Lorenzo's ideas upon the subject were widely different. He easily comprehended that the noise which He*

> *had heard, was occasioned by his having loosened a chain which attached the Image to its Pedestal.* He once more attempted to move it, and succeeded without much exertion. He placed it upon the ground, and then perceived the Pedestal to be hollow, and covered at the opening with an heavy iron grate.[82]

Once the statue has been moved by Lorenzo, the ugly truth about conventual oppression is revealed: a vault is opened and Agnes, "the Victim of Cruelty and tyrannic superstition,"[83] is discovered, the dead baby clasped in her arms.

Lorenzo's role as champion of the Enlightenment is of dual nature: he is uncompromising in his scepticism and his actions are meant to disprove the superstitious beliefs. In other words, Lorenzo is not only a rationalist but also an empiricist, as he suits actions to theory. He perceives, thinks, and acts according to empiricist and rationalist protocols for reliable knowledge,[84] which allows him to explain the ghost away. This operation expels the nuns' superstitious beliefs and fears and allows them to take a leap, as it were, from the "ancient" to the modern world; they may now awaken from their ghost-ridden illusions (filled with "groans" and "clanking chains").[85] I would like to stress that in this way, Lewis gives narrative form to philosophical denunciations of "demonology" and superstition along the lines drawn by Hobbes and Hume. Lorenzo is *principally* hostile to idolatry, which motivates his ghost-exploding

82 Lewis, *The Monk*, 366–367; my emphasis.

83 Lewis, *The Monk*, 351

84 For the concept of "rationalist protocols" (in the context of nineteenth-century detective fiction) see Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 6.

85 The phrase "we are devil-ridden" occurs in a Sherlock Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" (1910), one of those few detective narratives in which Conan Doyle toys with the idea of the supernatural, the most famous being of course *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. See Arthur Conan Doyle. "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," in *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 1408; predictably, the idea that the murders under investigation in the story may have been the work of "Satan himself" is expressed by the local vicar. The story's ambiguous title craftily suggests to the reader the possibility of a supernatural solution to the mystery. For a detailed analysis of another mock-supernatural story by Conan Doyle ("The Sussex Vampire"), see the relevant section of Smajić's book and also my article: "*Das Unheimliche* or *l'étrange*? Sherlock Holmes and the Uncanny Adventures of Fake Vampirism," in *The Outlandish, Uncanny, Bizarre: Culture Literature Philosophy*, ed. Ryszard W. Wolny and Stankomir Nicieja (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Filologicznej we Wrocławiu, 2016), 77–90.

investigation, but which, in the eyes of the benighted nuns, verges on sacrilege. While for the terror-stricken spectators his actions are an irreligious attack on the "Image," for Lewis's readers, aloof in their sense of cultural superiority, they are a justified and desirable assault on a sad relic of idolatry. Crucial is the moment in which Lorenzo comes into physical contact with the statue, which his examining touch denudes of the elevated status of a holy object. The reaction of the nuns is significant in this respect. This descent into matter, as we may call it, is signalled by his first discovery: the statue is actually made of wood, not stone. No spirit inhabits it; if it hides anything, then it is a mystery of very mundane nature, the felonious deed committed by the domina.

This scene is one of numerous examples of the way in which the tensions between the "ancient" (feudal, medieval, Popish, etc.) doctrine and the ideals of enlightened modernity — precisely those tensions which Hobbes and his ideological warfare unleashes rather than containing — fuel early Gothic fictions with narrative energy. In the space of a dozen pages, Lewis has been able to deliver a model "terror" narrative in which the forces of superstition fight with and are defeated by those of reason allied with level-headed agency. A result of this spectacular victory, the episode realises the precept of explained supernatural. But — as readers of *The Monk* well know — this is only true of this part of the story, an inset narrative, modelled on the technique devised by Ann Radcliffe. As a whole, *The Monk* is a curious work with a world of ambiguous and split ontology; the "ancient" and the "modern" worlds exist side by side, as it were, and are occasionally allowed to penetrate one another.[86] The plot that involves the eponymous figure of Ambrosio is set in the ancient world of "dark Christianity" and in this world, ghosts and demons refuse to vanish upon the pressing of a secret knob.

Two Victorian Ghosts

The ghost seems to be part of the English cultural landscape, as confirmed by Joseph Addison in his famous 1712 essay on fancy.[87] There is ample evidence,

86 Lorenzo strikes us as more "English" and less Spanish than, for instance, Ambrosio.

87 "Our Forefathers look'd upon Nature with more Reverence and Horrour, before the World was enlightened by Learning and Philosophy, and lov'd to astonish themselves with the

examined by Sasha Handley in her *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England*, that ghosts survived the Reformation and ghost belief, for instance, in the form of numerous true ghost-seeing accounts, or "apparition narratives" (such as that published anonymously by Daniel Defoe in 1706[88]), persisted despite the vociferous debunking of such belief by Protestant theology before the shaping of the ghost story as a distinct literary genre which flourished in the Victorian era. As we shall see, this genre thrives on both these attitudes: superstition, popular and otherwise,[89] and scepticism.

Before clarifying the idea of the ghost story in Part II, two things must be emphasised: the rise of the Gothic with narrative techniques which favoured mystery and suspense and in large measure depended for their effectiveness on deployment or suggestions of the supernatural; the emergence of the short story, an economical form of fiction, in a specific cultural context (the format popularised by Dickens and the Christmas issues of his periodicals). The ghost story in this sense is a particular literary product, distinct from both so-called apparition narratives and from the novel. As such, it must be seen against a larger context, both historical and cultural. A ghost story can of course imitate an account of an "actual" haunting, but this will not militate against effective fictiveness produced by devices developed by practitioners of the genre (typically involving confirmations of veracity, e.g., eye-witness testimony). As we

Apprehensions of Witchcraft, Prodigies, Charms and Enchantments. There was not a Village in *England*, that had not a Ghost in it, the Church-yards were all haunted, every large Common had a Circle of Fairies belonging to it, and there was scarce a Shepherd to be met with who had not seen a Spirit." *Spectator* No. 419 (Tuesday, July 1, 1712); available online at https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12030/pg12030-images.html#section419, accessed April 29, 2022.

88 "A True Relation of the Apparition of Mrs. Veal" is advertised in the Preface as a relation that "is Matter of Fact, and attended with such Circumstances, as may induce any Reasonable Man to believe it." E. J. Clery and Robert Miles, eds., *Gothic Documents. A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5–6. I borrow the phrase "apparition narrative" from Clery and Miles (*Gothic Documents*, 5).

89 Addison himself, in an essay on popular supertistions (No. 7, Thursday, March 8, 1711), gives a fine equample of an attempt to put commonsensical restraint on "extravagant casts of mind," in support of the belief that "it is the chief concern of wise men, to retrench the evils of life by the reasonings of philosophy, it is the employment of fools to multiply them by the sentiments of superstition." Joseph Addison, *Selections from Addison's Papers Contributed to the Spectator* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1894), 125.

have already remarked, disbelief rather than firm conviction is a precondition for an artistically successful deployment of a fictional ghost. As M. R. James emphasised, the element of scepticism may be a powerful means to whet the reader's appetite for the supernatural and to make ghost-seeing effective.

At this point, and on our way to M. R. James's stories, I want to examine two Victorian stories which I propose to regard as attempts to overcome the distances deployed by Walpole. In other words, I see in them attempts to enhance the artistic efficacy of the supernatural by rendering the setting and the plot native and domestic. The first of these stories is Elizabeth Gaskell's now-classic tale of the supernatural, "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852).[90] As it is set in Northumberland (corresponding to Walpole's "north of England") and takes place in a past that can still be recovered by an eyewitness (the nurse), both the geographical and temporal remoteness is significantly diminished with the result of reducing and redefining other types of distance (e.g., the cultural one) and of enhancing the effect produced by the supernatural machinery. The other story, Wilkie Collins's "Mad Monkton" (1855),[91] features a ghost-seer who is both an Englishman and a Catholic. This situation corresponds to Walpole's idea of an "ancient Catholic family," one of Collins's concerns being the social survival of a clan plagued by superstitions.

What these two stories have in common is an element of alienness, supplied by Italy, a country that featured prominently in early Gothic narratives. Long stretches of Collins's story are set in Italy and in his representation of Catholic clergy Collins makes liberal use of the common anti-Catholic sentiments and prejudices. In Gaskell's story, even though there is no change of setting, Italy plays a role which is equally significant; here a domestic conflict is triggered by the *pater familias*'s fondness for organ music, which prompts him to invite an Italian musician. The ensuing rivalry between his two daughters for the love of that musician leads to a disaster. The malevolent ghost that haunts the present of the tale told by the nurse and poses a lethal threat to her ward

90 The story first appeared in "A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire" in *Household Words* in December 1852.

91 It is noteworthy that the story should first appear (in *Frazer's Magazine*) under the title "The Monktons of Wincott Abbey" and was described as "edited by Wilkie Collins" (see the note in the Oxford World's Classics edition, 380).

is half English and half Italian. This culturally hybrid spectre has a counterpart in Collins's story.

As is already evident, both the stories fall within the range of options delineated by the early Gothic. My aim is not to consider the possibility of composing a native English ghost story, but to examine some of the challenges authors met in doing so and the narrative strategies and themes they used to make domestic haunting convincing and effective. My choice of this literary material must be regarded as arbitrary and narrow, especially in view of the fact that numerous Victorian authors, including prominent realists such as Gaskell herself, tried their hand, if not at the ghost story proper[92] then at narratives that in one way or another toyed with the element of the fantastic or borrowed and reworked particular topes from the Gothic repertory.[93] Having explained how my choice is related to Walpole's idea of justificatory distance, I will now briefly examine the Dickensian context before finally addressing myself to the stories.

When surveying the background, we cannot ignore the towering figure of Charles Dickens, who has been credited with, if not establishing, then reviving the Christmas ghost-story tradition. Writes Tara Moore: "[...] Dickens had enough of an influence on expectations of the genre to cause an astounding ratio of uncanny elements in the first wave of Christmas books. All of Dickens's Christmas books [...] involve some sort of ghostly interference or a spiritually viewed space set apart from normal time [...]."[94] Dickens, of course, had an idea of his own about the role a fictional ghost should fulfil. As he explained in a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell: "Ghost stories, illustrating particular states of

92 Objectionable as this term must seem, I will attempt a definition of the ghost story based on M. R. James's theory. It must be noted, however, that hardly any of the numerous ghost stories by Dickens meet the criteria of that definition.

93 What immediately springs to mind are the Brontë sisters and the scenes of haunting in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Worth mentioning is also the example of *The Lifted Veil*, a novella by the eminent realist of the period, George Eliot, which features, among other fantastic ingredients, a scene of the reanimation of a corpse as a consequence of blood transfusion.

94 Tara Moore, *Victorian Christmas in Print* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 82–83 (chapter "Ghost stories for Christmas"). As Claire Wood argues, "Although *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843) were influential, the author did not invent the Yuletide ghost story as is sometimes claimed." "Playful Spirits: Charles Dickens and the Ghost Story," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 90.

mind and processes of the imagination, are common property, I always think — except in the manner of relating them, and O who can rob some people of *that*!"[95] As we shall see presently, Gaskell's actual contribution to "A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire" in 1852 was not exactly to Dickens's liking. His objection was chiefly raised by Gaskell's flaunting of his idea of a well-wrought ghost story motivated by her unwillingness to confine the supernatural to the mental realm, preferably with a moral lesson attached to it.[96]

M. R. James would, in one of his late ghost stories, muse over the fast disappearance of the folk legends that kept alive the Christmas ghost-story tradition, of which he regarded himself as a continuator. His "An Evening's Entertainment," itself an attempt to recapture the near-extinct spirit, opens on a nostalgic note: "Nothing is more common form in old-fashioned books than the description of the winter fireside, where the aged grandma narrates to the circle of children that hangs on her lips story after story of ghosts and fairies, and inspires her audience with a pleasing terror" (157). Yet, despite this nostalgia and despite, too, M. R. James's esteem for Dickens, this great Victorian author — as some scholars have not failed to observe[97] — cannot be regarded as a thoroughgoing ghostly author, one with a whole-hearted dedication to the supernatural of the horrific kind. Dickens's representations of ghosts come with an additional, preferably allegorical or symbolic meaning attached to them. Thus, for instance, Scrooge's "adventures" are so many experiences devised to bring about his spiritual transformation. In the best of the stories, the author's determination to deliver religious didacticism is pronounced,[98]

95 Letter dated November 25, 1851, quoted in Annette B. Hopkins, "Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 9/4 (1945), 362; Dickens's emphasis.

96 For an analysis of Dickens's handling of the ghost-story conventions, see also (besides Wood) Harry Stone, "*A Christmas Carol*: Giving Nursery Tales a Higher Form," in *The Haunted Mind. The Supernatural in Victorian Literature*, ed. Elton E. Smith and Robert Haas (Lanham, MD, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1999).

97 Claire Wood aptly sums up Dickens's creative — I would go as far as call it experimental — approach to the ghostly thus: "Above all, Dickens's engagement with the ghost story is characterized by invention and playfulness. This is evident in the mingling of humour and horror; in his manipulation of generic conventions and reader expectations; and in his extension of the form's range through the allegorical use of ghosts." Wood, "Playful Spirits: Charles Dickens and the Ghost Story," 90.

98 Here is an example, a passage towards the end of "The Haunted Man" (or "The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain, A Fancy for Christmas-Time" (1848; a story otherwise

a feature which some would regard as being at odds with the arguably more modest goal of supplying "pleasing terror" (M. R. James's phrase) rather than moral edification.[99]

The above-quoted passage from M. R. James's story brings to the fore orality, a significant element of the larger cultural context. While Dickens insisted that an author's departure from realism must be justified by a purpose superior to that of providing ghostly thrills, the winter fireside tradition posed the challenge of immediacy to printed stories. And while immediate conveyance of live experience seems to be a major goal of any fiction author, what the early Gothicists opted for was stylistic sophistication and medieval or continental exoticism.[100] Despite his entanglement with processes of industrial-style production and dissemination of literature,[101] Dickens apparently appreciated the value of oral immediacy, as testified by his public readings of *A Christmas Carol*. Other authors have kept making renewed attempts to restore the atmosphere of oral performance, preferably a tale told by an eyewitness of uncanny events.

Let us briefly examine a recent example. *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill, a relatively well-known novel which came out in 1983, opens with a chapter ("Christmas Eve") recreating the festive atmosphere. There is a competition of sorts among children "vying with one another to tell the horridest, most spine-chilling tale, with much dramatic effect and mock-terrified shrieking."[102] But the effect that Hill is after consists in taking her reader beyond this

genuinely disturbing in its treatment of the theme of memory): "[...] Christmas is a time in which, of all times in the year, the memory of every remediable sorrow, wrong and trouble in the world around us should be active with us, not less than our own experiences, for all good [...]." Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 407.

99 For an overview of Dickens's ghost stories, see Wood's chapter in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, 89–97.

100 But then, as we have noted after M. R. James, novels of the *Otranto* type do not meet the criteria of the modern ghost story. This will become clearer when — in Part II — we have discussed those criteria in detail.

101 This is the context ("marketing and distribution of the literary commodity text — the industrialisation of writing") which David Ellison brings to bear on his interpretation of "The Signalman," one of the most famous "horrific" rather than edifying ghost stories of the era; "The ghost of injuries present in Dickens's 'The Signalman,'" *Textual Practice* 26, no. 4 (2012): 668.

102 Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), 18–19.

tradition; the challenge is to leave behind the hackneyed conventions of fireplace terror-mongering and to justify a solitary perusal of a written, and by implication authentic, account. The principal narrator removes himself from the family in order to come to terms with the experiences of the past that still haunt him. Writing is represented here as a peculiar type of exorcism: "Well, then mine [ghost] should be exorcised. I should tell my tale, not aloud, by the fireside, not as a diversion for idle listeners — it was too solemn, and too real, for that. But I should see it set down on paper, with every care and in every detail. I would write my own story."[103] In this way Hill, while reviving the tradition, undercuts the privileged status of orality in order to justify writing. This makes us aware of the way in which the two types of narration vie against one another for truthfulness and authenticity.

The story that we turn to presently, "The Old Nurse's Story Story," represents an early instance or stage of this competition while *The Woman in Black* illustrates that it continues to energise the ghostly genre, as we shall observe in our subsequent analyses.

The North of England: Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story"

At the outset, Elizabeth Gaskell sets up a cosy familiarity between Hester, the nurse, the children in her charge whom she addresses, and the events she is going to recount. Yet the readers should be on their guard, for the story heads towards a full-blown manifestation of the supernatural followed by a deadly fit of one of the characters, an old lady, which will occur in the here and now of the narrative. On the last page, we see her "death-stricken" and expiring with the story's moral which she keeps repeating over and over again: "Alas! Alas! What is done in youth can never be undone in age! What is done in youth can never be undone in age!"[104] It is easy to predict the effect that such a story might have on the wee ones, especially in view of the fact that the principal ghost-seer is a six-year-old girl, Miss Rosamond, who closely escapes death at

103 Hill, *The Woman in Black*, 22.

104 Elizabeth Gaskell, "The Old Nurse's Story," in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, ed. Laura Kranzler (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 32. All my references here are to this edition; page numbers are given parenthetically in the main text.

the hands of a ghostly playfellow. Dickens[105] objected to the "dramatic" ending in the story.[106] Also, a passage in Wilkie Collins's "The Haunted Hotel" may be read as a clandestine criticism of Gaskell and of the apparently long-standing custom of treating children to a display of horrors, something that John Locke strongly objected to in his writings on education.[107] In Collins's story, a young lady starts in terror at the sight of a bloody spot she sees on the ceiling of her hotel room. An adult character makes the following comment: "I suspect the nurse is in some way answerable for what has happened [...]. She may quite possibly have been telling Marian [the young lady] some tragic nursery story which has left its mischievous impression behind it. Persons in her position are sadly ignorant of the danger of exciting a child's imagination."[108]

The dying words of the old lady in Gaskell's story stress one of the oppositions with which the story is concerned: youth and old age. Another, birth and death, is also with us from the start. In the opening sentence, Hester, now herself an aged woman, addresses her wards: "You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I daresay you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman in Westmoreland, where I come from" (11). "Your mother" introduces the principal character, Miss Rosamond, aged about six when the dramatic events took place ("that was the baby, who is now your mother"). The opening sentence introduces death as well, side by side with nativity. Yet there is also motherly warmth in "my dears," which underlines

105 According to Dickens, the "turn" at the end of the story, by which all the figures become ghost-seers, is a weakness; Hopkins, "Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell," 365 (letter dated November 9, 1852).

106 Shirley Foster, "Elizabeth Gaskell's Shorter Pieces," in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124. The critic comments on the climactic scene in the story as "a masterly piece of dramatic writing."

107 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Part IX, Section 138; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Some_Thoughts_Concerning_Education/Part_IX, accessed April 29, 2022. In one of his stories, "Casting the Runes," M. R. James makes display of horrors literal; the story's villain treats some local children to stories told by way of series of "magic-lantern slides" of increasing odiousness ("Runes," 138). The stress on the intolerably disgusting visual content of the slides may be treated as James's indirect commentary on luridness, which it was his principle to avoid in his ghost fiction.

108 Wilkie Collins, "The Haunted Hotel," in Wilkie Collins, *"Miss or Mrs?" "The Haunted Hotel." "The Guilty River,"* ed. Norman Page and Toru Sasaki (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 197.

yet another theme, that of substitutions. Just as, in the story proper, Hester becomes Miss Rosamond's foster mother, Miss Rosamond is for Hester a surrogate daughter, "an only child": "I would have gone with the child to the end of the world" (12).

What makes the opening sentence somewhat bizarre is the fact of its being cleft in twain, as it were. While we may call the first part feminine, as it is concerned with motherhood and orphanhood, the remainder shifts the reader's attention to the masculine line, introducing a broader perspective: "[...] and I daresay you have heard your grandfather was a clergyman up in Westmoreland, where I come from" (11). This remark brings religion into focus along with distant family connections ("you have heard"). Hester's mentioning of her place of birth adds a personal dimension, but the overall movement is away from closeness and intimacy to a frame: temporal (ancestry), spatial (geography), as well as cultural (religion). The stage for the domestic tragedy is thus set, and the narrative will progress from here by way of a prying open of family secrets accompanied by explorations of the unfamiliar and inhospitable space of an old manor house in Northumberland.

For the remainder of the story the nurse seems to have forgotten about the narratees, the "dears." At the same time, the attention is directed towards two other children, first Miss Rosamond and then the phantom child she eagerly befriends. The scene is laid in Furnivall Manor House, an old castle-like edifice, its name apparently passed down the male line: "I was going to be young lady's-maid at my Lord Furnivall's at Furnivall's Manor" (12). The repetition of the name stresses the theme of inheritance: according to custom, the family name is inherited by the eldest daughter, Miss Furnivall, the old lady whom we see expiring at the end of the story. In fact, both the daughters of Lord Furnivall in the back story take after their father in their excessive pride. This conventionally coded masculinity ("stern and proud"; "as they say all the Lords Furnivall were;" 13), when passed on to female progeny, is cause of the ladies' undoing. The tragedy is brought on by their mad rivalry followed by the fatal expulsion of the offending daughter by the "stern" patriarch. The sternness and pride are contrasted sharply with the unreserved devotion, love, and commitment that bind Hester to her ward, which are also the qualities by which the latter becomes attached to the ghost child.

We become aware at this point of Gaskell's debt to the Gothic with its apportioning of gender roles which involves the blending of stern masculinity

with oppressive, castle-like setting. To be sure, in Gaskell there is no Manfred to tyrannise over the females; at least not in the flesh. However, there is the father's ghost, playing away on the broken organ in the hall.[109] More to the point, there is the poisoning spectral presence of his character in the daughters, and in particular in the surviving one, who, Lady-Macbeth-fashion, is doomed to endless torment by the consciousness of having become "unsexed" as she took her father's side in the domestic conflict thus contributing to the deaths of her sister and her sister's child.[110] Not only do the daughters become duplicates of the father figure, but there is also the effect of mirroring: in resembling their father, they are also like one another. Typically, the embedded narrative contains clues about the dometic conflict by representing the daughters/sisters as psychologically locked together in their rivalry over an Italian musician brought over to England by the father, a lover of organ music. To some extent, the father does take after Walpole's Manfred, namely in his obsession with lineage. He will not tolerate any adulteration of the family blood, which makes the elder daughter (Miss Maude, who — it will be recalled — inherited the family name) conceal her relationship with the musician and then their offspring (27). By conspiring against her elder sister, Miss Grace has taken her place as the favoured child.

The focalization of the narrative through Hester lends further emphasis to this conventional Gothic coding of gender. The house is represented as an architectural expression of "stern and proud" masculinity, with the inferior female characters (Hester and Dorothy — socially; Miss Rosamond — a helpless child) huddled together. Almost everything about the place is "great" or "grand" — the words positively punctuate the narrative: "we saw a great and stately house" (13), "we drove up to the great front entrance [...] and went into the hall [...] it was so large, and vast, and grand" (14), "that grand music rolling about the house" (18), "the old lord [...] played away [...] on the great organ" (19). Hester may be overwhelmed by the dimensions of the place ("I began to think I should be lost in that wilderness of a house." 15), but, at the same time, she is the one who fulfils the task of exploring it for the reader.

109 The image brings to mind "the enormous dilapidated organ" in one of M. R. James's stories ("Alberic," 2).

110 In the story's moral, we hear an echo of Lady Macbeth's "What's done cannot be undone" (5.1.64).

Exploration is of course another recognisable Gothic feature: a more or less systematic discovery of an alien chronotope. Here Gaskell may be said to have been indebted to Ann Radcliffe, who developed this theme of (female) curiosity, the trope named after the black veil episode in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (to be discussed further). To begin with, some old pictures are inspected, thanks to which the readers get a vivid glimpse into the past, as Hester compares the young ladies represented there the way they looked "in those days" (16). This inspection is also an occasion for Gaskell to plant a suggestion of something uncanny, a hint at a past secret that the revelation, somewhat absurdly, discloses in its hiddenness. The portrait of the offending daughter, Miss Maude, must remain concealed; it stands on the floor, "with its face towards the wall" (17).[111] Hester and Dorothy make sure that the girl does not see it. Hester, however, *will* see it and promises to keep it a secret. Gaskell does not miss this chance to affix some terror and mystery to the revelation; says Hester: "I could have looked at it an hour, but Dorothy seemed half frightened at having shown it to me, and hurried it back again [...]" (17). Only a suggestion, to be sure, but also indicative of Gaskell's deft handling of the horrific potential of something mundane. M. R. James stressed the need to take full advantage of the setting for the gradual introduction of the supernatural before it is allowed full display, a centre-stage manifestation.

The ghostly is introduced through another suggestion, this time much more ominous. After the examination of the portraits, Hester, now in the role of a female detective, properly inquisitive and brave, examines the great organ in the hall:

> At the opposite end of the hall, to the left as you went in [...] was an organ built into the wall, and so large that it filled the best part of that end. (14)

> Well! I told you I had a brave heart; and I thought it was rather pleasant to have that grand music rolling about the house, let who would be the player. [...] I thought at first, that it might be Miss Furnivall who played, unknown to Agnes [a woman in attendance on Miss Grace]; but, one day when I was

111 Interestingly, this is the attitude that the old lady, Miss Grace, assumes in her death-like paralysis at the end of the story: "She was carried to her bed that night never to rise again. She lay with her face to the wall, muttering low [...]" (32).

> in the hall by myself I opened the organ and peeped all about it and around it, as I had done to the organ in Crostwaite Church once before, and I saw it was all broken and destroyed inside, though it looked so brave and fine; and then, though it was noonday, my flesh began to creep a little, and I shut it up, and run [sic] away pretty quickly to my own bright nursery; and I did not like hearing the music for some time after that, any more than James and Dorothy did. (18)[112]

Gaskell's handling of time plays an important role in this scene. To begin with, uncanny atmosphere thickens when we are told again that organ music has been heard for some time. A hint at a mundane explanation is dismissed as unconvincing and with "but, one day [...]" the narrative is progressing towards a confirmation of the marvellous. We are placed in the now of the episode ("one day") and assume the viewpoint of the narrator ("I peeped all about it and around it"). Then an element of retrospection is added ("as I had done") to verify her conclusion; Hester's past experience must be mentioned, for otherwise she would not be able to judge that the instrument was "broken and destroyed inside" and that therefore no music could be played on it. This implicit inference justifies Hester's reaction ("my flesh began to creep a little"). There seems to be little reason for this terror. After all, she has not seen a ghost. Not yet. At the same time, she has exhausted mundane explanations and our recognition of her powers of reasoning justifies this response, which is also bodily and instinctive. In the terms of Tzvetan Todorov's conception of the fantastic, at this point the narrative steps into the realm of the marvellous.[113] Hester has now "peeped" into another, murky dimension of the world ("though it was noonday"!), and her dashing for the shelter of the "bright nursery" adds a finishing touch to this masterful scene. Finally, the domestics, James and Dorothy, are mentioned as those who already know, because they have already done their

112 We should not miss a significant hint: the "broken and destroyed" instrument may be read as an allusion to the demolition of the Catholic church in England, and so the father's ghost playing away on the organ may be seen as a spectral revival of that "broken" past. The family may be said to inhabit a church rather than a manor house.
Some historical information about Crostwaite Church can be found here: History 2 | Crosthwaite Church (crosthwaitechurchkeswick.co.uk)

113 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 41 ff.

share of peeping about. They remain reticent, not because they do not want to share their knowledge, but — we might assume — because the supernatural is not easily verbalised and perhaps should be left unnamed.[114]

Let us explore briefly the idea of investigation. The distribution and management of knowledge, as we may call it, or the circulation of information among the characters and the audience, essential in detective fiction, is as important in ghost stories. There is in both genres a similar movement from ignorance to knowledge, even though this similarity should not be overemphasised. In the ghost story, as a type of mystery story,[115] we also find the characteristic narrative dynamic which involves finding out the truth by unriddling, by solving a mystery. In "The Old Nurse's Story," this process is accompanied by terror of the supernatural; there is the growing uneasiness of the characters involved (chiefly Hester) and the mounting danger they are exposed to (chiefly her ward). Hester is an amateur detective because, being curious and brave, she has the makings of a sleuth. Yet, her privileged position as principal narrator and witness of events notwithstanding, she is at a disadvantage as far as access to knowledge is concerned. This state of cognitive frustration, which is of course related to her social position, is an obvious cause of suspense in the mundane sense. Whatever their cause, disproportions in the knowledge among the characters fulfil the essential function of raising the dynamic of the narrative and pushing it towards revelation and closure. Hester progresses from the plight of an ignoramus to a stage at which she knows as much as there is to know, which is to say, as much as old Miss Furnivall (Miss Grace) does. Thus, by virtue of Hester being the principal narrator, the reader is caused to accompany her in her investigation while, vicariously, enjoying the fact of sharing her deprivileged outset position.

Miss Furnivall is the "sad" guardian of the mystery. She is extremely reticent as well as unapproachable: "the hard, sad Miss Furnivall" (16). This mystery is unravelled with the help of an inset narrative, which Dorothy delivers after the near-fatal encounter of Miss Rosamond with the spectres of Miss Maude

114 On the ineffable, see Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings. Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 8.

115 The ghost story and the detective story fall into the baggy class of the mystery story. Some authors give special emphasis to the element of detection in their ghost stories; Charlotte Riddell, for instance, makes amateur inquires especially prominent in her haunted-house mysteries (see, e.g., her "Walnut-Tree House").

and her child. Essential in the process of solving a mystery and thus a characteristic feature of the genre, here the inset story has the form of a deposition of sorts, forced forth from Dorothy:

> And I taunted her so, that she *told me all she knew at last*; and then I wished I had never been told, for it only made me more afraid than ever.
>
> She [Dorothy] said *she had heard the tale from old neighbours* that were alive when she was first married; when folks used to come to the hall sometimes, before it had got such a bad name on the country side: *is might not be true, or it might, what she had been told.* (25; my emphasis)

It is not possible to get to the bottom of things in a straightforward fashion; there are stories within stories. Dorothy, not being an eyewitness to what occurred in the past, can only retell what she once was told. But now that "we" have seen the spectres (25), we are as eager to hear "the tale" as Hester is, and, like her, we do not care too much about the truth.[116] True or not, a story will allow us to make sense of the events. And yet, a more powerful closure is going to be delivered.

There is in "The Old Nurse's Story" a typical interchange of scenes and stories. At this point, it will be recalled, Hester has just experienced ocular confirmation of the veracity of Miss Rosamond's story about her abduction by the two female ghosts. Yet her first response has been to dismiss it:

> "Now you are a naughty little girl, and telling stories," I said. "What would your good mamma, that is in heaven, and *never told a story in her life*, say to her little Rosamond if she heard her — as I daresay she does — telling stories!"
>
> "Indeed, Hester," sobbed out my child, "I'm telling you true. Indeed I am." (22; my emphasis)

116 Noteworthy is the manner in which Hester uses the word "story" in the sense of a piece of falsehood in the quotation that follows. The question arises, does this word in the title undermine the reality of the ghosts?

After the ghosts have revealed themselves, Hester finds that she is desperately in need of "a story." Old Miss Furnivall does not volunteer one; what Hester hears as she is shooed from the room is wailing and barely comprehensible warnings: "Miss Furnivall kept shrieking out, "Oh, have mercy! Wilt Thou never forgive! It is many a long year ago –'"; 23). The ghosts are not only reticent but actually deprived of the capacity to produce any sound: "[...] I had heard no sound of little battering hands upon the window-glass, although the phantom child had seemed to put forth all its force; and although I had seen it wail and cry, no faintest touch of sound had fallen upon my ears" (24). In this way, sound or no sound, we receive what might be called a mimetic fulfilment of diegetic expectations. To put it differently, ocular proof verifies the "stories" of haunting that may have seemed dubious, but the final scenic dénouement comes at the very end.

To deliver closure, Gaskell offers a *re-enactment* of the mystery that has lain concealed in the past. With the exception of the one surviving participant, Miss Grace, this tragic tableau features the spectres that have haunted the mansion. They re-play the moment of expulsion, in the midst of winter, of Miss Maude and her child by the irate father upon him finding out about her clandestine and disgraceful marriage to the Italian musician. We see the proud and vengeful Miss Grace, her young self, standing by and watching. The mystery of the east wing of the grand house solved, the mute spectres enter in grim procession through the door leading to that sealed-off part of the mansion:

> All at once, the east door gave way with a thundering crash, [...] and there came into that broad and mysterious light, the figure of a tall old man, with grey hair and gleaming eyes. He drove before him, with many a relentless gesture of abhorrence, a stern and beautiful woman, with a little child clinging to her dress. (30) [...]
>
> They passed along towards the great hall-door, where the winds howled and ravened for their prey; but before they reached that, the lady turned; and I could see that she defied the old man with a fierce and proud defiance; but then she quailed — and then she threw up her arms wildly and piteously to save her child — her little child — from a blow from his uplifted crutch. (31)

Already weird due to the absence of sound from the three phantom actors, this mesmerising pantomime acquires another dimension thanks to the human "spectators." Miss Rosamond, with all the energy she is capable of gathering, is all the time trying to break free from the arms of Hester and intervene. At the sight of the uplifted crutch, *old* Miss Furnivall cries out to the phantom father to make him "spare the child." At this moment, the spectre of *young* Miss Furnivall appears and joins the group, thus making obvious her complicity in the fatal expulsion of her sister and the girl. Her present self is prevented from interfering with the past and also from undoing the wrong: "It was the likeness of Miss Furnivall in her youth; and the terrible phantoms moved on, regardless of old Miss Furnivall's wild entreaty, — and the uplifted crutch fell on the right shoulder of the little child, and the young sister looked on, stony, and deadly serene" (31).[117]

What makes Gaskell's re-enactment impressive is the skilful and effective scenic merger of the past and the present. There is a slow-motion effect, due not only to the "interruptions" occasioned by the wild behaviour of Miss Rosamond, whom it is more and more difficult for Hester to control, but also to the suggestive epithets with which she intersperses the account, e.g., the "grey hair" and "gleaming eyes" of the father. Also the mention of the circumstances (the howling wind, the defiant attitude of the mother, and, finally, the uplifted crutch) virtually freezes the progress of events at the crucial moment of old Miss Furnivall's futile interference. The sensory vividness is heightened by the use of direct speech. We hear the frenzied shrieks of Miss Rosamond as she repeatedly pleads with Hester ("Hester! Hester! let me go to her; [...]") and at some point even addresses herself to the phantom child. Due to the compounded effect of the deceleration, vividness, and directness, the scene makes a lasting impression. Yet despite the phrase "terrible phantoms" (31), the ghosts are not

117 Hopkins argues that compliance with Dickens demand (only the girl should see the spectres) would result in a "blunder": "his proposal makes a pointless distinction between those who do and those who do not see the spectres. To have had the real child, who is only the innocent medium through whom the train of apparitions arrives to torment the guilty, see what the guilty woman herself could not see, would certainly have been a psychological, hence an artistic, blunder" ("Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell," 365). Dickens objected to the way in which the seeing of the ghosts by adult figures, and especially the narrator herself, is a confirmation of the actual existence of those ghosts, and so they cannot be contained within the realm of an individual psyche.

as horrific as the display of human cruelty coupled with the almost equally ruthless moral about the impossibility of righting past wrongs. The terrors of a re-enactment and reliving of a scene like that are futher intensified by the presence and live empathy of a child ghost-seer.[118]

Dickens may have objected with reason. The spectral re-enactment of human ruthlessness has a touch of cruelty to it. For one thing, it is a reaffirmation of the moral stated early in the narrative and supported by quotations from the Old Testament, given in an English translation, which further enhances the social and cultural distance between the past of the principal actors and the present of the observers.[119] The main lesson is about the wages of vanity, especially when this vice is strengthened by youth and beauty. The ghostly dumb-show drives this lesson home; the punishment is a deathly paralysis of the offending woman.[120] An intervention on account of her awakened conscience is prevented, to demonstrate, not simply the irreversibility of human time but the irreversibility of the time of those whose pride has made them unyielding and unmerciful, and thus impervious to the essential Christian teaching. The Biblical quotations stress this gap, which seems to justify moral objections.[121] Certainly, the tenor that informs Dickens's allegorical Christmas

118 As we shall see, scenes that re-enact the past are a characteristic feature of M. R. James's stories. Such spectral re-enactments may vary in accuracy (the one in Gaskell is uniquely faithful), but an element of repetition is always involved; the past is not allowed (or refuses) to rest.

119 The choice of language is of course significant. In many of his stories, M. R. James uses Latin, which stresses the divide between the "dark" and "modern" types of Christianity. This may be seen as a way to emphasise the transition between the two eras, enabled and marked by the translation of the Bible and evocative of the figure of William Tyndale.

120 Unlike Shakespeare's Gertrude, the sinner is not left to Heaven; rather, like Lady Macbeth, she is made to look into murky Hell.

121 It may be of some interest that in a passage in *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) the same verse from Proverbs 16:18 ("Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall") is quoted, which expresses the moral of Gaskell's story. Also in Dickens it is quoted by servants, here commenting on the "fall" of the "haughty" Dombey. The difference is that Dickens at once places the thus-expressed holier-than-thou attitude in an ironic relief: "It is wonderful how good they [i.e., the servants, about to abandon the now-ruined household] feel, in making these reflections; and what a *Christian* unanimity they are sensible of, in bearing the common stock with resignation" (Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chap. LIX, 873; my emphasis). Dickens gives *his* proud man (and his equally haughty wife, for that matter) a chance to repent. At the end

tales is very different. The lesson taught in "A Christmas Carol" is precisely the contrary one: towards the end of the story, Scrooge wakes up from the nightmarish vision of the future to find that — unlike Marley — he has time to make amends.

It may sound anachronistic to question the reliability of Gaskell's narrator and the story does not give us reasons to suspect her credibility. At the same time, the ending and the moral lesson it is supposed to convey to the "little dears" are clearly on her, Hester's, side of the represented reality. Established early in the narrative, the distance between her person and the world of "grand" things and "proud" people that she unwillingly enters, is sustained throughout and it is abundantly obvious that the social gap has a significant moral dimension. Dorothy's inset narrative strengthens the sense of remoteness between the world of the domestics and that of the family of the nobles, as do scenes of ruthlessness and cruelty. The "wickedness" of the phantom girl has its counterpart in the "justice" doled out at the end to Miss Grace, old Miss Furnivall. From Hester's perspective, this other world is indeed as unreal as the organ music rolling about the stately mansion.

Hester's desire to prevent Miss Rosamond from going over to that other world acquires a meaning beyond the mere determination to save the girl's life. Similarly, the telling of the story to the "little dears" is way beyond mere fireplace entertainment. This suggests that we might not be carrying things too far were we to make the distances deployed by Gaskell more specific than the text seems to allow for. After all, the main part of the story is about an antiquated alienated and socially noble family in the north of England, with a taste for organ music, which hints at a desire to maintain cultural ties with continental Europe. It is thus painfully ironic that that leads to the kind of domestic catastrophe which seems to be beyond the pale of Christianity, at least of the type represented by the domestics.[122] The Furnivalls seem unable to live by the code of humility, a virtue which Hester embodies, and the parallels with the fate of Lady Macbeth sustain the sense of moral incompatibility. The family may be considered doomed and ghostly before their deaths and spectral afterlife.

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of the novel, Dickens rises to the attitude of Christian mercifulness towards his characters; Gaskell does not.

122 The story does not explicitly identify the Furnivalls as Catholics.

In the story to be discussed presently, Wilkie Collins makes more palpable the cultural distance that renders ghost-seeing both plausible and artistically effective.

An Ancient Catholic Family: Wilkie Collins's "Mad Monkton"

In an introduction to Wilkie Collins's short fiction, John Bowen describes the novella "Mad Monkton" as a story that "concerns a young man on the threshold of marriage who is frustrated in his progress to erotic consummation by strange and apparently supernatural forces."[123] At the end of the same essay, the critic makes another reference to this story but once more chooses to ignore the evident larger cultural context. Bowen praises "Mad Monkton" as one of Collins's "most successful and innovative stories" and ends up summarising it once more: "[it] tells the story of an aristocratic young man, Alfred Monkton, who is on the verge of marriage but suddenly believes himself to be haunted by the spectre of his unburied uncle, who has died of a duel in Italy."[124] Collins's shrewd handling of the Gothic heritage is highly commendable: "an ancient house and family, complete with prophecy, fatal inheritance, and ghost" are the "materials" which Collins has wrought "into a complex exploration of psychic life and fictional uncertainty" (48). On the whole, these statements illustrate the way in which criticism tends to psychologise the supernatural content in modern fiction. After all, the title of the story suggests that its hero is "mad." However, the summary omits the distancing device used by Collins. For even though the reader's attention is fixed and fixated upon Mad Monkton, this strangely afflicted young aristocrat is not the story's principal narrator.

To some extent, the "fault" — if indeed there is one — may lie with the narrator himself, who mentions Monkton's Catholicism in passing, putting the information in parentheses. At the same time, the (authorial?) narrator links this piece of information with what seems to be a more germane idea, that of the Monktons' social and cultural alienation: "He [young Monkton, Alfred] simply remained at Wincot, living as suspiciously strange and

123 John Bowen, "Collins's shorter fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39.

124 Bowen, "Collins's Shorter Fiction," 48.

solitary a life as his father had lived before him. Literally, there was now no companion for him at the [Wincot] Abbey but the old priest (the Monktons, I should have mentioned before, were Roman Catholics) who held the office of tutor to Alfred from his earliest years" (43).[125] In fact, Catholicism and estrangement (the "madness" in the title) are closely connected, even though initially the narrator may have (naively or craftily) understated what gradually becomes obvious. Monkton is a Walpole-like eccentric, especially when seen and judged from a distance by neighbours and servants (Austen's "voluntary spies" come to mind); a solitary individual who spends his days "walking about the library with heaps of dusty papers in his hands" (43). He seems almost to blend with the place, "haunting" the uninhabited parts of the building, parts "popularly considered to be inhabited by the ghosts of the monks who had once possessed the building" (44). In other words, the last of the Monktons is believed to have developed the kind of monomania that has been the bane of the family for generations. Predictably, the priest is thought to be "at the bottom of all the mischief" (44). Indeed, this figure, in which we recognise the clichéd "mischievous ecclesiastic" is a predictable addition to the palette of ready associations and prejudices which Collins used to paint the picture of the ancient family and their seat.[126] The reader is expected to conclude that young Monkton has fallen victim to some nefarious folly which has prevented him from enjoying life (including the attainment of "erotic consummation") the way a normal lad would do. As it turns out, young Monkton's erotic abstinence lies at one end of the spectrum whose other end is occupied by his dissolute uncle.

Even though the "horrible affliction" of "hereditary insanity" is suggested at the beginning, the precise nature of the affliction is not described and the idea of insanity is similarly ambiguous. The "shameless profligacy"[127] of Alfred Monkton's uncle, spending his time, Byron-like, on the Continent (39) may be

125 All my references are to the Oxford World's Classics edition: Wilkie Collins, *Mad Monkton and Other Stories* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Page numbers are given parenthetically in the main text.

126 For a recent treatment of Collins's anti-Catholicism in three other narratives, see Susan M. Griffin's article "The Yellow Mask, the Black Robe, and the Woman in White: Wilkie Collins, Anti-Catholic Discourse, and the Sensation Novel," *Narrative* 12 (2004), 55–73.

127 The word "profligate" is appropriately a Latinate one and hints at moral dissipation but also at degradation and corruption.

one symptom of the insanity; the reckless uncle is certainly in his element in the south of Europe, which aligns him with the classic Gothic villains. Alfred's physique and bearing are not ordinary either; nor are they conventionally masculine: "He was so shy, so quiet, so composed and gentle in all his actions, that at times I should have been almost inclined to call him effeminate" (48).[128] What the narrator suggests are two different departures from the accepted standard of masculinity: the unbridled sensuality ("profligacy") of the uncle is contrasted with the almost feminine reservedness and softness of Alfred. The further suggestion is that they may have the same root. In fact, the two dissimilar Monktons are, as it were, spectrally bound together. The hot and southern temper of the uncle causes him to take part in a duel "in the Roman states" with the result of being shot dead (45), whereupon the persistent superstition turns him into a haunter. In this way, in Catholicism — sketched in strokes recognizably Gothic — Collins found the desirable amount of the superstitious and the sensational. The dead uncle, his body unburied but concealed after the duel,[129] supplies the ghost, while Alfred — the ghost-seer.

Availing himself of the Biblical-Walpolean theme of the "sins of the fathers"[130] (discussed above; now recast as *hereditary* affliction), Collins updates it by constructing a narrative about social and cultural extinction. Even before we learn of the "curious old prophecy about our family" (60; the word "extinction" occurs on this page), we may have doubt about the Monktons' chances of *biological* survival. Their social isolation and the notoriety that has clung

128 For the association of Catholicism with effeminacy, see Patrick R. O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117.

129 Wilkie Collins knew Italy well enough to be able to flesh the story out with detail. The narrator mentions the Pope's intervention in the existing laws: "A recent address from the Pope to the ruling powers in Italy, commenting on the scandalous frequency of the practice of duelling, and urgently desiring that the laws against duelling should be enforced for the future with the utmost rigour" (54). This comment gives the readers a sense of the political ineptness of the "Roman states." In the Hobbesian terms, we may be talking here of symptoms of a weakening civil authority. Alternatively, the Pope intervenes *because* the civic authority is already weak. One way or the other, the conclusion seems obvious, that the powers of church and state were not clearly divided.

130 Gaskell has a character quote a version of the "curse" ("The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children") in "The Poor Clare" (1856), one of her "Gothic" stories; Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, 79 and 82. This is another story with an intriguing representation of British Catholics.

to the name do not sound promising.[131] The prophecy strikes us as a matter of course, being so predictable. By binding the living and the dead, it is like a curse. In brief: the "race" of the Monktons will be extinct if a Monkton lies unburied: "When in Wincot vault a place / Waits for one of Monkton race; [...] Monkton's race shall pass away" (60). Ironically, because of its persistent vivacity in the mind of the one surviving Monkton, this belief is precisely what prevents the "race" from continuing. What binds Alfred to the family's past, in other words, is the power of superstition. Of this he is keenly aware:

> "This superstition, if you please to call it so, has never died out of the family from that time to the present day; for centuries the succession of the dead in the vault at the Abbey has been unbroken — absolutely unbroken — until now. [...] [T]he voice that cries vainly to the earth for shelter is the voice of the dead." (61)

Considering the circumstances, this prophecy may indeed have the meaning of a curse in the sense of a historical vengeance of sorts. Says Alfred: "The monks whom we succeeded in the Abbey in Henry the Eighth's time, got knowledge of it some way; [...]" (60). What he somewhat euphemistically calls "succession" is in fact a reference to the dissolution of monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII.[132] In this particular case, the Monktons became "lord[s] of acres from [their] birth — [...]," that is, owners of the confiscated land and the Abbey. The ghosts of the monks, mentioned early in the story, believed to be haunting the Abbey, may be more vivacious than expected. They seem to have survived and trouble the present by the superstitious power inherent in the ancient prophecy.

In this way, Collins has managed to introduce into his story another point of view, attached to another character, for whom he has prepared ample narrative space. Alfred Monkton, the quaintly-named "Last-left Master" of the prophecy, takes over as the narrator and, appropriately, offers a "confession" (63). The meaning of this shift is that the afflicted man is a living and breathing, if

131 We see Collins reworking here the Walpolean motif of a struggle for political survival against supernatural enemies (represented by a curse).

132 Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries was passed in 1536 and Act for the Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries in 1539.

subjective, confirmation of how vigorous the superstitious belief is. He is perfectly aware of that, which explains his frantic outburst aimed at the principal narrator, now turned narratee:

> "I guess what you want to ask me," he exclaimed, sternly and loudly; "you want to ask me how I can be mad enough to believe in a doggerel prophecy, uttered in an age of superstition to awe the most ignorant hearers. I answer" (at those words his voice sank suddenly to a whisper), "I answer, because *Stephen Monkton himself stands there at this moment, confirming me in my belief.*" (61–62; Collins's emphasis)

These shifts of focus between the ghost-seer and the sceptic cannot fail to produce the desired effect: the hearer cannot help being affected and to some extent implicated, without actually seeing the ghost: "[...] I felt my blood curdling as he spoke, and I knew in my own heart, as I sat there speechless, that I dared not turn round and look where he [Alfred] was still pointing close at my side" (62). The two points of view are parallel but they meet and blend with one another nonetheless. Alfred's gaze (its direction the same as that of the pointing gesture) is not fixed on his friend, but on the ghost that stands behind the latter, close at his side.[133] In fixing *his* gaze on Alfred, our narrator as it were assumes that other point of view, although he is too afraid to see for himself. Collins was obviously aware of the effectiveness of this situation, of the way in which the dominant point of view, that of the sceptical narrator, becomes momentarily appropriated by that of an actual ghost-seer. The enlightened narrator's point of view is of course that of Collins's readers, and it is their imagination that Collins wishes thus to hold in thrall.

The cultural distance thus performs a double role. It allows the author to deliver supernatural thrills without making the reader go over to the "ancient" side of the cultural divide. Collins's use of the double or shifting perspective shows that such splitting need not result in a clash or conflict. To be sure, there is an obvious personal distance between the principal narrator, who is "normal," and his friend, who is superstitious, effeminate, and possibly mentally

133 There is some confusion, one cannot help noting, between "turn round" and "close at my side." But perhaps "close at my side" should be read as an anticipation of the movement of turning round.

unhinged. Yet, as we have just observed, this distance, great as it is, can in fact assist the author in creating effective ghost-seeing situations, their very success sustained by the fact that the readers are not excessively pressured into compromising their disbelief, or "suspending" their scepticism. "Mad Monkton" may be regarded, together with "The Turn of the Screw," as a model example of the fantastic in Todorov's understanding of the term as a distinct literary genre. The "hesitation" in the mind of the reader (the defining feature of the genre) is skilfully sustained almost until the end of the story, which recounts the expiration of Alfred Monkton brought on by "brain fever" (99).

The mind of the principal narrator is made up, however, and he is unwavering in his scepticism. He compiles a number of natural causes (medical, psychological, and cultural) responsible for the undoing of the last of the Monktons:

> When I reflected on the hereditary taint in his mental organisation, on that first childish fright of Stephen Monkton from which he had never recovered, on the perilously secluded life that he had led at the Abbey, and on his firm persuasion of the reality of the apparition by which he believed himself to be constantly followed, I confess I despaired of shaking his superstitious faith in every word and line of the old family prophecy. If the series of striking coincidences which appeared to attest its truth had made a strong and lasting impression on *me* (and this was assuredly the case), how could I wonder that they had produced the effect of absolute conviction in *his* mind, constituted as it was? (100; Collins's emphasis)

Clearly, two perspectives are in conflict here, but — on Todorov's theory — *both* are needed to produce the desired state of hesitation (sustained, at least to some extent, by the question mark at the end the passage just quoted). If we re-read this passage in the meta-narrative mode, its meaning answers neatly to the definition of the fantastic as a genre: Alfred's belief in what sounds like an ontological oxymoron ("the reality of the apparition") is represented, appropriately, as a religious creed of great strength and vivacity: "firm persuasion," "superstitious faith," and "absolute conviction." The narrator seems to be determined with equal strength to uproot this belief, or at least to "shake" it. His "despairing" creates in us an image of a spiritual tug-of-war between the two friends. In fact, however, the battle is fought in the narrator's mind, even though his scepticism is the dominant point of view. Events ("striking

coincidences") have apparently conspired to verify the "truthfulness" of the prophecy and left him labouring under a strong and lasting impression which *he*, the sceptic, is unable to shake off.

What manner of events? The above passage occurs at a critical juncture in the narrative. After a frantic and exasperating search, the uncle's remains have been found lying unburied near a monastery in Italy. This propitious event, however, has been followed by another, which will lead to Alfred's death: the sinking of the ship on board which the coffin was being conveyed to England. This calamity has been anticipated "superstitiously": a voyage is ill-fated when there is a dead body on board a vessel (95). In fulfilment, as it were, of this "superstitious irrationality" (95), which possessed the minds of the crew, the ship hits a squall, springs a leak, and presently goes down, taking with it the remains of Stephen Monkton and thus sinking the "future" of the nephew (97). This circumstance leaves the narrator, and chiefly the readers, in a state of hesitation, the forces of rationality battling those of superstition. Collins declines to offer a resolution, and when, at the end of the story, the narrator visits the tomb of the Monktons, with the body of Alfred deposited between those of his parents, and looks into the niche intended for the coffin of the uncle, he cannot help feeling overpowered by superstitious terrors, even though no ghost appears: "A chill came over me, and a sense of dread which I am ashamed of having felt now, but which I could not combat then" (104).

The conflict may not be resolved in the soul of the narrator, or that of the reader, but, seen from a different angle, the opposition scepticism vs. superstition, the huge cultural and psychological distance notwithstanding, is more like cooperation. The change of perspective occurs, of course, when we "see things" from the point of view of the author, the implied author, to be precise, the controlling agency that sets in motion the textual devices responsible for producing the desired artistic effects. No matter how strong Collins's anti-Catholic sentiments might have been, his narrator in "Mad Monkton" is certainly less than friendly towards the monks he meets in Italy during his uncanny search for the missing body. At some point, he confesses: "I never had more difficulty in keeping my temper in my life. I succeeded, however, in repressing a very disrespectful expression on the subject of monks in general, which was on the tip of my tongue [...]" (81). In this situation, he is using tobacco to buy some information from a monk, "an old Capuchin," at a convent at Fondi. We recognise in this ecclesiastic a stereotype. Not only is he "very

infirm, very suspicious, and very dirty" (80), but he loses with the readers any claim to spiritual authority when they discover his weakness for snuff, which, once discovered, is used by the narrator to wheedle information. He offers the monk, whose supply of snuff has run out, a pinch of his own, and records the effect thus: "The Capuchin took the largest pinch I ever saw held between any man's finger and thumb, inhaled it slowly, without spilling a single grain — half closed his eyes — [...]" (81). In this manner, when discovering the decaying body of a profligate English Catholic, the narrator also discovers a classic specimen of humanity warped by conventual life.

The explanation offered by "the father superior of the convent" as to the reasons for refusing to give proper burial to human remains adds finishing touches to Collins's picture of the abuses of "Popery."[134] The monk is offended by words like "disgust," used by our narrator to describe the shocking sight. He goes on to explain: "[...] you are out of the pale of the Holy Catholic Church. [...] The slain man died, unabsolved, in the commission of mortal sin. [...] Inside this convent the ground is consecrated; and we Catholics are not accustomed to bury the outlaws of our religion, the enemies of our Holy Father, and the violators of our most sacred laws, in consecrated ground. Outside the convent, we have no rights and no power; [...]" (86).[135] Predictably, the narrator considers this explanation "bitter" and "ungracious," which suggests, the latter word especially, that rules of common decency have been violated in observance of some antiquated and ultimately inhumane principles. In particular, the reverence towards "our Holy Father" prevents the monks from fulfilling obligations towards their sinful fellow creatures. At the same time, we must not forget that Stephen Monkton never felt at home in sane and temperate England in the first place, and that his disposition seems to have made him prefer Italy as his chosen homeland, "naturally" suited to his excesses. The old monk's overindulgence as regards snuff may be seen as a symptom of a similar disposition. It is therefore ironic that now Italy should refuse to bury its native exile, as we might want to describe Stephen.

134 The relation of haunting to lack of proper burial is of course as old as the cultural and social histories of ghosts.

135 It is difficult, when reading this passage, to suppress associations with *Hamlet* and with the plights of Old Hamlet and Ophelia. Perhaps Collins expected his readers to recall the curse Laertes flings at the "churlish" priest (*Hamlet* 5.1.233–234).

Alfred Monkton never felt at home in England, either. In an interesting passage that is part of the confession, Collins places his ghost-seer in surroundings that are uncannily in unison with his impenetrable and ghost-afflicted soul. Alfred is here portrayed as a Walpole-like enthusiast of all things Gothic:

> "Ah! what a life it was when I began my search. I should like to live it over again. Such tempting suspense, such strange discoveries, such wild fancies, such enthralling terrors, all belonged to that life! Only think of breaking open the door of a room which no living soul had entered before you for nearly a hundred years! think of the first step forward into a region of airless, awful stillness, where the light falls faint and sickly through closed windows and rotting curtains! think of the ghostly creaking of the old floor that cries out on you for treading on it, step as softly as you will! think of arms, helmets, weird tapestries of by-gone days, that seem to be moving out on you from the walls as you first walk up to them in the dim light! think of prying into great cabinets and iron-clasped chests, not knowing what horrors may appear when you tear them open! of poring over their contents till twilight stole on you and darkness grew terrible in the lonely place! of trying to leave it, and not being able to go, as if something held you; of wind wailing at you outside; of shadows darkening round you, and closing you up in obscurity within! Only think of these things, and you may imagine the *fascination of suspense and terror* in such a life as mine was in those past days!" (64–65; my emphasis)

Clearly, Alfred is at home in the otherwise unhomely (*unheimlich*) place, which does not belong to the daylight, contemporary world that surrounds him. The ancient prophecy may be a curse that eventually drives him into an early grave, but the attractive power of his native abbey, "the fascination of suspense and terror," is too great for him to withstand. This fascination makes him an ideal ghost-seer *even before an actual ghost appears before him*; he expects this place to be haunted, a strong conviction which aligns him with the heroines of Radcliffe and with Austen's Catherine before her reformation. Psychologically speaking, *this propensity* is his curse, and also, absurdly, one he eagerly embraces. Alfred is placed here in the position of a model Gothic protagonist beset by unknown horrors but powerless to suppress his/her desire to discover them. His effeminacy further sustains this analogy.

What adds flavour to Alfred's superstitious fascinations is his conviction that the to-be-revealed horrors concern his family, and hence, by the inexorable laws of heredity, him personally. This predicament of being primarily concerned has to do, first of all, with the fact that Alfred is the only surviving Monkton. Yet it is also related to the fact that the past is far from morally indifferent, as the word "horrors" already plainly indicates.[136] Further in his account (too long to quote in its entirety), Alfred speaks of what his research has yielded: "Terrible confessions of past crimes, shocking proofs of secret wickedness that have been hidden securely from all eyes but mine, came to light" (65). Little wonder that he dreaded to look at "certain old portraits in the picture gallery," such images being of course the staple past-enlivening device of the Gothic (used to a similar effect also in Gaskell's story, as we have seen).[137] Moreover, in Alfred's account of his research we can see a succinct poetic definition of Gothic suspense (to be developed in Part II) as produced by an act of digging into some ugly secrets, some past "horrors," motivated by concerns that make this act personally relevant to the researcher.[138]

Alfred is as good as foredoomed by his bizarre fascination. At least this is what the principal narrator suggests as he interjects to emphasise his disapprobation and detachment: "I shrank from imagining that life:" — he comments parenthetically — "it was bad enough to see its results, as I saw them before me now" (65). Were we, however, to regard this remark as coming from the author, we could not help being struck by its disingenuousness. Certainly, the Monktons may be an obsolete clan, corrupt, degenerate, and otherwise

136 This is a succinct definition of the fictional ghost: the past that haunts the present. The ghostly temporality will occupy us at some length in Part II.

137 Portraits in Gothic fictions are used to stress familial continuity *and* to ensure the continuing presence of some criminal heritage; the latter function makes them indispensable in conveying the classic "sins of the fathers" message. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901), portraits are an essential clue on the way to the solution of the mystery of the "spectral" hound. See my "Archeologia zbrodni. Gotyk detektywistyczny na przykładzie *Psa Baskerville'ów* Arthura Conan Doyle'a" [Archeology of Crime. Detective Gothic on the Example of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*], *Zeszyty naukowo-dydaktyczne NKJO w Zabrzu* (Zabrze 2006–2007): 49–68.

138 Already in my book *Spectres of Shakespeare*, I attempted to define this species of narrative suspense. For the reasons just stated it can be called past-oriented suspense, while "Gothic suspense" stresses its provenance. I have studied the issue in relation to various works of fiction, including Wilkie Collins's *The Dead Secret*. See below, 147 ff.

ill-adapted to the modern mode of life. Governed by the law of the survival of the robust and vigorous — to hint at Darwinism — modern life sentences ancient Catholic families to social extinction. Collins drives this message home with the help of the distance between the principal narrator and the title protagonist. At the same time, there is a great deal of Alfred Monkton in the implied author; for, without sharing Alfred's strange fascination, Collins would never have been able to devise one of his best ghost stories. In other words, though thus exposed and condemned, superstitions live on spectrally and sustain the vigour of Gothic narratives. Little wonder that Collins admired M. G. "Monk" Lewis.[139] Like Lewis before him, he also searched for narrative energies in cultural antagonisms while at the same time seeming desirous to let the past go extinct. Little wonder, too, that such half-hearted burials of superstitions were never fully successful. Ghostly storytellers such as M. R. James exposed both the futility and the insincerity of these narrative projects.

139 See Bowen, "Collins's Shorter Fiction," 38.

Part II
The Ghost Story and M. R. James's "Gentle" Handling of Ghosts

Thus far, we have occupied ourselves with the rise of the ghost story as a fictional genre in the broad cultural and literary-historical context including the eighteenth-century and Victorian Gothic. In particular, we have examined how distances, chiefly ideological ones, were used by authors in their attempts culturally to justify and artistically to explore the element of the horrific supernatural. Now our attention turns to M. R. James and his stories. In this part of my study, I want to discuss the ghost story genre's eminent representative, Montague Rhodes James (b. 1862–d. 1936).[1] My goal is partly to study the presence and uses of that legacy in his fiction. However, besides a historical, there is also a conceptual angle. Proceeding systematically, I will combine insights of philosophy and narrative theory in my readings of the fiction. Ultimately, as my goal is to assess M. R. James's artistic achievements as an accomplished storyteller, and my method is quite simply that of attentive, interpretive perusal of the stories.

Thus, before turning to the stories themselves, I want to discuss what I consider essential aspects and premises of the genre of the ghost story. This will provide an appropriate theoretical framework for both M. R. James's ideas concerning the proper artistic treatment of fictional ghosts — the type of narrative that makes haunting most effective — and for the subsequent analysis of the stories themselves.

First, however, let us introduce — somewhat belatedly — the figure of M. R. James.

1 M. R. James studied at Eton and at King's College, Cambridge. In 1889, he became Dean of King's College and in 1905 was elected Provost. In 1918, he became Provost of Eton. As a scholar, M. R. James specialised in cataloguing manuscripts and was an expert on Biblical apocrypha and medieval church architecture.

M. R. James: An "Antiquary" and His Ghost Stories

M. R. James's first collection of ghost stories, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, was published in 1904 and was followed by three other collections. All of the stories were eventually "issued under one cover," as he put it, in the 1931 collected edition.[2] This body of over thirty stories is now available in scholarly editions that supply not only the helpful factual information about their reception but also the useful and much-needed historical and cultural context without which many of the stories may now fail to engage a reader's attention.[3] Despite M. R. James's renown, some critics, notably S. T. Joshi (widely known for his studies of the weird tale, classic and modern), have complained that M. R. James is "all technique."[4] The thus-implied critique strikes me as somewhat odd in view of the fact that little scholarly attention has been bestowed on the narrative methods and structure of the stories. Indeed, I hope that my book may fill this gap.

Since his death in 1936, M. R. James's popularity with readers has shown no signs of abatement. The praise voiced by H. P. Lovecraft in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1945) is often quoted: "Dr. James, for all his light touch, evokes fright and hideousness in their most shocking forms; and will certainly stand as one of the few really creative masters in his darksome province."[5] In another comment, Lovecraft emphasises the quality that virtually contradicts the "light touch" in observing that "[M. R. James was] gifted with an almost diabolic power of calling horror by gentle steps from the midst of

2 In 1923, M. R. James published a collection of Sheridan Le Fanu's (1814–1873) stories of the supernatural, *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories* (now available, with James's brief Introduction, in the series of Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural by Wordsworth Edition, 1994). Jack Sullivan, in his study of the ghost story (*Elegant Nightmares*), calls Le Fanu's "Green Tea" an "archetypal ghost story." The story was serialised in Dickens's *All the Year Round* in 1869.

3 The two-volume edition by Penguin (Penguin Classics, 2005–2006, ed. S. T. Joshi) contains 35 stories; an Oxford World's Classics edition (1987, ed. Michael Cox) offers a selection (twenty-one) of the stories. See Note on referencing for details.

4 S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), 140.

5 H. P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, edited, with Introduction and commentary by S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012), 95 (chapter X. "The Modern Masters"). Also available at the H. P. Lovecraft Archive, https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx, accessed May 4, 2022.

prosaic daily life."[6] He also makes several apt observations on M. R. James's use of "casual verisimilitude," "antiquarian scholarship," and "sly humorous vignettes," before discussing briefly some of his favourite tales, among which "Count Magnus" seems to have ranked the highest. More recently and slightly more level-headedly, M. R. James's "informal" biographer, Michael Cox, has stated that "the stories have always been awarded a high place, often the highest, in the English ghost story tradition, and this estimation shows no sign of falling off."[7] In recognition of their elevated standing among tales of mystery and the supernatural, M. R. James's stories have been a list-of-contents must in anthologies of short fiction of this type. In the words of Julia Briggs, another scholar with a considerable contribution to fictional ghost-lore: "A story by James is almost *de rigueur* in any ghostly anthology, and he is the only writer whose *Collected Ghost Stories* have remained continuously in print."[8] Here are some examples: *The Oxford Book of Ghost Stories* (edited by Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert) contains "'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad,'" while the international *Penguin Book of Ghost Stories* (edited by J. A. Cuddon) features "The Rose Garden." Among *Classic Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories* (1996) we find "The Haunted Doll's House" and "A School Story," while among *Classic Vampire Stories* (2007) — "An Episode of Cathedral History."

Another testimony to the reputation and enduring cultural presence of M. R. James's fictions has to do with new media, which is hardly surprising if one takes into account the undying popularity, indeed proliferating vigour, of mystery and terror in those realms of popular culture that thrive — and most of them do — on narrativity. Among those which were adapted for television — chiefly in the 1960s — are "'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You My Lad,'" "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" and "A Warning to the Curious."[9] Film-makers in Britain seem to have been motivated by a desire thus to revive the Christmas

6 Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 91.

7 Michael Cox, *M. R. James. An Informal Portrait* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 140–141. In a footnote to this statement, Cox points out that "no completely satisfactory book has been written on the ghost stories, about which [...] there is much to be said" (141).

8 Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors. The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 125.

9 There is also a documentary on James and his ghosts entitled "M. R. James: Supernatural Storyteller"), which contains as footage many snapshots and scenes from the BBC film-adaptations.

ghost-story tradition, established over a century earlier by Charles Dickens in his familial and household periodicals. M. R. James himself was dedicated to maintaining this tradition. Before he came to give serious thought to the idea of publishing his stories, he would write them for a circle of friends and students at Cambridge, to be read to them around Christmastide.[10] A full-length feature film, *The Night of the Demon* (1957; dir. Jacques Tourneur; *Curse of the Demon* in the US version), was based on "Casting the Runes," one of a number of M. R. James's fictional ventures into necromancy, not exactly a Christmas diversion, featuring scenes that depict abuse of children by exposure to grisly and disturbing images. A computer game, *The Lost Crown: A Ghost-Hunting Adventure* (released in 2008), takes its inspiration from the story of a ghost-protected Anglo-Saxon crown in "A Warning to the Curious,"[11] an unquestionable masterpiece of the genre with a prominent element of suspense. Little wonder that the title has been popularised by being used allusively in an edition of the stories and a collection of critical essays.

Several fine scholarly editions of M. R. James's stories not only testify to his popularity but also lay down a much-desired foundation for further research. Especially worthy of notice is the two-volume collection edited by S. T. Joshi and published by Penguin (2005–2006), which includes a section containing twelve medieval ghost stories, appearing both in their Latin original and English translations and accompanied by M. R. James's footnotes.[12] There is, as already mentioned, a biography of "Monty," as his friends called him, by Michael Cox, in which one chapter is devoted to the stories. Available is also a "sheaf" of criticism (a collection of critical essays) on the stories, pertinently titled *Warnings to the Curious*, edited by S. T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe. *Ghosts and Scholars* is a periodical devoted to M. R. James's stories and ghost-lore.[13]

10 Re-enactments featuring the famous horror actor Christopher Lee (1922–2015) can be found on YouTube (in the series Christopher Lee's Ghost Stories for Christmas).

11 Very informative, if not strictly academic, is Stephen Jones's "Afterword: 'The Stony Grin of Unearthly Malice," in *Curious Warnings. The Complete Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (London: Jo Fletcher Books, 2020), 605–652.

12 More recently still, Darryl Jones put out his edition of the collected ghost stories, with an introduction (Oxford University Press, 2011). Worthy of notice is also a new edition, also in the Oxford World's Classics series, of Le Fanu: *Green Tea and Other Weird Stories* (2020, ed. Aaron Worth).

13 http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html#anchor88353, accessed May 1, 2022.

M. R. James's ghost stories are not all technique, as the subsequent pages will hopefully demonstrate. They are typically energised by cultural tensions and deploy numerous distancing devices while still allowing the reader to become a ghost-seer. As a scholar and an antiquarian, M. R. James expected his readers to be alert to "subtle suggestions"[14] and to be ready and able to follow up on clues — often in the shape of some Latin inscription — leading to uncanny mysteries. In many of the stories, an investigation, usually in the form of antiquarian research, leads to sinister disclosures and ends up in weird encounters. The first of the stories, "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," is set in France and depicts a visit that a tourist of antiquarian interests pays to an "centuried" church (to use Lovecraft's epithet) in "a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees." This protagonist, modelled after M. R. James himself, is a "Cambridge man" with a passion for old church architecture and antique books. The reader is made aware of the cultural distance that separates this enlightened Englishman from the all-but-lost world of superstition and demonology into which his fascination throws him. The ghost, somehow attached to the ancient scrapbook which the Englishman eagerly purchases, makes that lost world alive again... well, spectrally alive.

A recognised classic and a cultural presence for many decades now, M. R. James's stories seem to be fully entitled to scholarly attention, even though he himself may not have entertained an elevated opinion as to the artistic merits of his fiction. The ghost story was not, he opined, a special fictional genre; yet he insisted that the supernatural material, the soul of the genre, ought to be treated with finesse. Despite their malevolence and odiousness, ghosts must be "treated gently," as he put it.[15]

The ghost story may be a type of art horror (to refer Noël Carroll's theory), but, according to M. R. James, artistic-narrative handling of the supernatural is liable to evaluation in cultural and even moral terms. Even though his way of treating ghosts may have found appreciation in the eyes of H. P. Lovecraft, one would be hard-pressed to think of a greater contrast between the Englishman's reticence and the New Englander's cosmic-scale weirdness. A study of an author's narrative techniques, such as the one attempted here, must find

14 Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 93.

15 "Ghosts — Treat Them Gently!" is the title of a brief essay by M. R. James (published April 1931); see Appendix in M. R. James, *"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Cox.

a way to address their cultural embeddings. If a ghostly storyteller tends to avoid being explicit, let alone lurid or graphic, a critic — by assuming the position of the implied reader — must learn how to reverence and comprehend that attitude, no matter how remote and outmoded. M. R. James's fiction may offer little that could earn him the label of a modernist author, despite his purported "technical" self-awareness as a story-teller. Yet, as critics have shown,[16] his quarrel with modernity was passionate and his ghostly crew assisted him in mounting a defence of a world that he felt was in danger of obliteration. In "A Warning to the Curious," an Anglo-Saxon crown, buried in the coast of East Anglia with the mission to protect England against foreign invasion, has a ghostly guardian. An actual crown was melted down shortly after being found in 1687, a fact that M. R. James, profoundly reverential towards cultural heritage, found "painful to relate."

In the context of our considerations in Part I of this book, many of M. R. James's stories can be perceived as successful attempts to supply a home-grown and native product. "The Rose Garden," for example, justifies this horticultural metaphor. The ghost here is literally attached to a plot of land and the story depicts how an unwary unsettling of soil results in awakening a past evil. The reader may have the impression that the author is making here an attempt to provide a narrative illustration of the trope of digging into the past or digging up past secrets. To be sure, some of the best stories are set outside England: France in "Scrap-book," Denmark in "Number 13" and Sweden in "Count Magus." The variety of settings suggests a variety of distances, while the temporal distance plays a major role, as the collective title of his stories suggests: "ghost stories of an *antiquary*." Regardless of the setting, this eponymous figure of an Englishman driven by past-oriented, antiquarian curiosity (easily rising to the level of "over-inquisitiveness"), is the unifying element as well as distinctively M. R. Jamesian feature. The word "antiquary" in the title is intriguingly — perhaps also purposefully — ambiguous, referring to the author, to the narrator (typically identical with the implied author) *and* to the

16 For example, Andrew Smith in *The Ghost Story, 1840–1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010); in the introduction and a chapter on M. R. James. Patrick J. Murphy's *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017) is supremely informative in this respect.

type of protagonist and "patient."[17] At a certain level, the stories cannot fail to impress the reader as records of the author's powerful nostalgia for a cultural heritage threatened by obliteration.[18]

Superficially regarded, M. R. James's prolific use of Latin in the stories is one manifestation of his method of suggesting that the past remains uncannily present in the cultural heritage whose meaning is no longer transparent or relevant to the modern man. A dead language in the modern world,[19] the function of Latin in several stories seems to be that of a key to past secrets, and — possibly — past treasures, even though this key may be a little rusty. "A School Story" is set in a classroom and the ghost makes itself present to the teacher through some Latin sentences whose import is unknown to the student. "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas" opens with a long passage from a (fictitious) Latin tract "the Sertum Steinfeldense Norbertinum," which M. R. James's footnote describes as "an account of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Steinfeld in the Eiffel, with lives of the Abbots, published at Cologne in 1712." "'I suppose I shall have to translate this,' said the antiquary to himself as he finished copying the above lines from that rather rare and exceedingly diffuse book [...]" ("Treasure," 78). And so he does, which sets him off on a quest for the "*absconditus thesaurus*" (see below, 167 ff).

It is a curiosity in its own right, how little scholarly attention has so far been paid to this characteristic trait of M. R. James's fiction. Latin, including the Vulgate, seems to have been for him a veritable *thesaurus* of ideas, shrouded from the view and comprehension of the common reader, yet never failing to arouse the curiosity of his antiquaries. M. R. James himself, even though his Latinate vocabulary (as in the case of "patient") betrays his learning, does not draw attention to Latin in his theory of the genre of the ghost story. And yet, like the antiquarian pursuits of his protagonists, his use of Latin is a feature

17 "Patient" means here the person afflicted in some way by the supernatural presence or agency. The English word (used by M. R. James to refer to his ghost-afflicted protagonists) derives from Latin *patior* "to suffer."

18 If a pun be allowed here, M. R. James may be said to have inherited the nineteenth-century anxiety over heredity. His concern, however, is not biology but culture, not heredity but heritage. Both these words are related to "heir" (from Latin *hērēditās* via Old French *heredite* "inheritance"); "heir" derives from Greek *khēros* "bereaved" (DICTIONARY.COM, accessed February 20, 2022).

19 Relevant are Hobbes's comments on how Latin assisted the Kingdom of Darkness in perpetuating its doctrine by obfuscating the true nature of things.

and a symptom which distinguishes his fiction from that of his great predecessors, Dickens and Le Fanu, as well as contemporary horror authors.

M. R. James on the Ghost Story

To all appearances, M. R. James never thought of ghost stories as little more than a diversion. In the words of Julia Briggs: "It [M. R. James's fiction] was simply a bagatelle for an idle hour, the construction of a delicate edifice of suspense with which to entertain the young people whose company he so much enjoyed."[20] In his preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), he downplays his authorial ambitions and sounds typically modest as to the literary merit of this type of fiction: "The stories themselves do not make any very exalted claim. If any of them succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable [...] my purpose in writing them will have been attained."[21] This modesty leaves a critic with the problem of how to approach this literary material, which, though it may not have been motivated by any solemn artistic ambition, continues to enjoy masterpiece status. While some have taken M. R. James at his word and refused to treat his fiction seriously, others argue that only a few of the stories, especially the early ones, merit critical attention.[22] Few have tried to delve into the stories with the level of academic rigour customarily accorded to recognised classics.[23]

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20 Briggs, *Night Visitors. The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 125.

21 "Appendix: M. R. James on Ghost Stories," in James, *"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Cox, 337. All my subsequent quotations of M. R. James's opinions — marked MRJ, "Appendix" — are from this Appendix (337–352), which includes excerpts from the following texts: Preface to *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), Preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), Prologue to J. S. Le Fanu's *Madam Crowl's Ghost* (1923), Introduction to V. H. Collins's edition of *Ghosts and Marvels* (1924); as well as articles/essays: "Stories I have Tried to Write" (1929), "Some Remarks on Ghost Stories" (1929), and "Ghosts — Treat Them Gently!" (1931).

22 S. T. Joshi, the Penguin editor of James, is of the opinion that after the first collection, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), the fiction became formulaic: "It is also quite obvious that James's inspiration began to flag very early on. [...] All the later tales are dogged by hints of this sort of prolixity." Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 141.

23 Patrick J. Murphy's *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James* is, to date, the only book-length study of the stories. Simon Hay, in his *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story* (2011), gives them cursory treatment in one of the chapters.

A strategy worth adopting at the outset is to look into what M. R. James described as his "doctrine of reticence": "Reticence may be an elderly doctrine to preach, yet from the artistic point of view I am sure it is a sound one. Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories."[24] The doctrine condemns any conspicuous representation of the supernatural on account, not only of its tastelessness but also, and more importantly, its supposed artistic futility, both meanings covered by "blatant" in the sense of at once "flagrant" and "tasteless." As I shall argue, this "preacherly" statement also reveals M. R. James's debt to Ann Radcliffe's concept of terror (as opposed to horror). At the same time, as Jack Sullivan aptly observed, this *credo* may also be read in personal and psychological terms: "James's reticence probably relates as much to personal temperament as to the aesthetic problem of how to write a proper ghost story."[25] This observation makes us realise that we are talking here about a multifaceted tenet, a principle for an author to abide by but also a basic guideline for the reader, as every how-to-write has some how-to-read attached to it. In other words, the narrative devices M. R. James relied on may have been a reflection of his personal beliefs and taste, but his technique may and should also be considered a method of obliquely justifying the kind of experience that the fiction he practiced (and the aesthetics he advocated) offers to the reader.

M. R. James was not voluble when it came to sharing his views on ghost stories. Yet S. T. Joshi, who, as we have seen, finds little worthy of praise in the stories, commends our author's criticism and theory, saying that "perhaps James is rather more interesting as a critic and theorist of the form."[26] However, even though we read this towards the end of the chapter on M. R. James, the critic does not explain what he finds to be "interesting" about M. R. James's critical pronouncements or theoretical statements. As a matter of fact, some

24 MRJ, "Appendix," 347. The word "reticence," now a synonym of "restraint," is typically Latinate and derives from the verb "to keep silence." According to a dictionary, "from Latin *reticent-* (stem of *reticēns*), present participle of *reticēre* 'to be silent'" (DICTIONARY.COM, accessed February 23, 2022).

25 Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares*, 71. Yet M. R. James still insisted that the presence of the horrific was necessary: "[...] you must have horror and also malevolence. Not less necessary, however, is reticence" (Appendix, 351). Clearly, M. R. James does not give up on either, even though, commonly, authors sacrifice reticence.

26 Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 141.

of those statements are of a general nature, as when M. R. James denies the ghost story the status of an autonomous genre: "The ghost story is, at its best, only a particular sort of short story, and is subject to the same broad rules as the whole mass of them."[27] Another statement sounds similarly diffident or sceptical: "The truth is, I suspect, that the genre is too small and special to bear the imposition of far-reaching principles." M. R. James thus refuses to be specific and insists that a ghost story ought to be, first of all, a well-wrought piece of fiction. A badly written story — he seems to be suggesting — simply "won't work" as a ghost story. Hence what follows is, "Widen the question, and ask what governs the construction of short stories in general, and a great deal might be said, and has been said."[28] Many of M. R. James's stories owe their lasting appeal, at least as much to the supernatural content as they do to his skilful handling of the setting, which — as he insists in his praise of Sheridan Le Fanu[29] — he regarded as one of the essential conditions for effective haunting.

The doctrine of reticence notwithstanding, M. R. James is not evasive in his treatment of the supernatural content (the ghost) and desired effect (terror/horror).[30] These two aspects are closely related to one another, and both concern the calibration of distance. If some kind of shock is the desired effect, then the condition for its production is familiarity. M. R. James sounds typically humble when describing his goal as that of making his readers "feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours [...]."[31] At the same time, he insists

27 MRJ, "Appendix," 339.

28 MRJ, "Appendix," 339.

29 "Nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly" (MRJ, "Appendix," 338).

30 A "semiotic" approach is convenient in this respect: the content (the ghost), that is, the semantics, is to be distinguished from the response, that is, the pragmatics. See Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a Definition of Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24–26. See also the Appendix to this book, "Narrativity, the Fantastic and the Ghost."

31 MRJ, "Appendix," 337. The idea of "pleasing terror" has a well-established tradition behind it. Suffice it to mention the idea of "delightful terror" formulated almost at the outset of the Gothic. The seminal essay "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" by John and Anna Laetitia Aikin dates to 1773. See Mydla, *Spectres of Shakespeare*, 113–114.

that the supernatural content must be capable of delivering horror. Thus, while M. R. James argues that ghosts must be "treated gently," he also insists on two qualities conducive to fictional horror, odiousness and malevolence.[32] The task of criticism is to reconcile these two distinct features, horrific content and a gentle way of handling it.

A way to accomplish a reconciliation may be looked for in the plot format, or the structure and narrative dynamic. In his descriptions of the horror plot, M. R. James is not consistent in his rejection of the generic distinctness of the ghost story, for he insists on the necessity of building and delivering a specific type of suspense: "Let us, then, be introduced to the actors [i.e., the human protagonists] in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings; and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently, until it holds the stage." The two ingredients M. R. James considers indispensable are "the atmosphere and the nicely managed crescendo."[33] He thus uses two distinct metaphors, a musical and a theatrical one. While "crescendo" points to the gradual construction of the ominous atmosphere, "holding the stage" describes the climactic point in the story, one at which the ghost attains full manifestation, always keeping in mind of course the restrictions imposed by the doctrine of reticence. As we shall see in our analysis of the stories, the theatrical metaphor is especially enlightening, for ghostly manifestations must be mimetic in the sense that the ghost must be seen, must enter someone's field of perception. Emphasis falls on "technique," but the concern is both with narrative syntax (the plane of the *sjužet*) and pragmatics. There must be, as we my put it, a cooperation between structure and effect.

Turning to the idea of distance at this point, the first thing to observe is that M. R. James refers to its temporal meaning. In another celebrated

32 Let us observe in passing that there is a correspondence here with the idea of monstrosity put forward by Noël Carroll, who — not surprisingly — cites M. R. James stories ("Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," in particular) when expounding it; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 22. We shall discuss these issues in more detail in the section on philosophy.

33 The idea of crescendo suggests the desired gradual introduction of the supernatural element; the dictionary defines "crescendo" as "steady increase in force or intensity" (http://dictionary.reference.com/). The climax or finale needs to be properly prepared if it is to be effective.

passage, he explains just how much temporal distance he thinks is necessary in a ghost story: "For a ghost story a slight haze of distance is desirable 'Thirty years ago', 'Not long before the war', are very proper openings. If a really remote date be chosen, there is more than one way of bringing the reader into contact with it. The finding of documents about it can be made plausible; [...]."[34] The example of "thirty years ago" suggests that the events depicted in the main part of a story must slightly predate the now of the telling.[35] While a detective story should be set in a reality contemporaneous with the reader's,[36] a ghost story works best, he believes, when the portrayed world is seen through a temporal gauze, or "haze." He is thus decidedly in favour of "modern setting" as opposed to Gothic antiquities ("anything antique" must displease). It is temporal remoteness, "antiqueness," that makes Gothic stories like *The Castle of Otranto* "merely amusing in the modern sense."[37] The desired effect must then be that of emotional identification, or "sympathy": "No, the seer of ghosts must talk something like me, and be dressed, if not in my fashion, yet not too much like a man in a pageant, if he is to enlist my sympathy."[38] Clearly, what is at stake here is not so much time itself, but a shared cultural moment, or milieu.[39]

34 MRJ, "Appendix," 339.

35 Typical of the stories is the use of framing; the main narrative is then the embedded one and it is in this one that the haunting and ghost-seeing take place.

36 Aware of the affinity between ghostly and detective fiction ("The recrudescence of ghost stories in recent years is notable: it corresponds, of course, with the vogue of the detective tale." MRJ, "Appendix," 349), M. R. James does not develop this point. And yet, the investigative element in his stories is essential.

37 MRJ, "Appendix," 343. "A ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical: it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, 'If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'" (MRJ, "Appendix," 337–338).

38 MRJ, "Appendix," 345.

39 M. R. James's estimation of Le Fanu, whom — as already noted — he put in the first rank of ghost-story writers, merits repeating: "Nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly" ("Introduction" in the edition just cited, v; MRJ, "Appendix," 338). In 1929, he reaffirmed his praise of Le Fanu: "Upon mature consideration, I do not think that there are better ghost stories anywhere than the best of Le Fanu's; [...]" (MRJ, "Appendix," 346).

However, as will become abundantly clear in our analysis of the stories, many of M. R. James's stories revive a pre-modern past which is radically alien to the ghost-seer. To that extent, M. R. James's insistence on the "slightness" of temporal distance, is misleading, for his remarks are about *one* of the temporal layers of the stories. In his "modern" ghost stories, the *fabula* typically extends over a vast temporal expanse and involves a broad historical perspective. Consequently, the tension between the "ancient" and the "modern" plays a significant role. What M. R. James rejects is an "antique" setting for the *principal* events, those of ghost-seeing and ghostly persecution of the human protagonist, or "patient." The events that have a bearing on the supernatural content are buried in a remote past,[40] as he repeatedly revives something sinister in the spiritual history of the West. Thus, the Templars in "Oh, Whistle" and the Black Pilgrimage in "Count Magnus" answer very well to Walpole's "dark ages of Christianity." The insistence on a more or less contemporary ghost-seer agrees with the laying down of a remote past as a field of the protagonist's eager — and ill-omened — explorations.

In advocating "a slight haze of distance," M. R. James reveals a debt to his Victorian predecessors. Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" is a model illustration of an effective use of the rule, as are numerous other ghost stories of the period. What makes Dickens's ghost in *A Christmas Carol* terrifying is the fact that Scrooge can see a reflection of himself in Jacob Marley, who has been dead for seven eyars. What is even more terrifying is that, on the way to his spiritual awakening and reformation, Scrooge sees himself, from the ghostly perspective, as a dead body, a device by which Dickens further reduces the distance.[41]

40 Mieke Bal's definition of anachrony ("By 'distance' I mean that an event presented in anachrony is separated by an interval, large or small, from the 'present' [...]" (see below, 124, note 91)), makes it obvious that the distance in question is between the "now" posited as the narrative present and some of the events that are narrated. In a typical detective story, the inquest ends with an account of the principal event (murder) that, of course, predates it (anachrony). That account, in its turn, predates the narrative about the inquest (anachrony); say, Watson narrates Sherlock Holmes's inquest, which usually ends with the murder-story narrated by Holmes. The narrative present (Holmes's inquest) needs to be distinguished from the present of the narrating (Watson's narrating).

41 M. R. James commends Dickens's familiar setting as "contemporary and ordinary" and as such following Shakespeare's model in *Hamlet*: "Roughly speaking, the ghost should be a contemporary of the seer. Such was the elder Hamlet and such Jacob Marley" (MRJ, "Appendix," 350). The comparison between the two examples, which he calls "classic," may have

Familiarity with the circumstances of the principal events should produce in the reader the desired uneasiness and cause her to say, "If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'"[42] Even if M. R. James puzzles us by suggesting that "the ghost should be a contemporary of the ghost seer,"[43] what he means is the rather obvious idea that the experience of the haunting must not be a reported event but an actual one, furnished by a spectre that makes itself present. A different interpretation, that is, that the ghosts must be the "patient's" contemporary (like the recently deceased Marley), would be at odds with the actual content of the stories. While some of his ghosts can be regarded as modern, what shall we make of that primeval beast in "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book"?

M. R. James posits that the ghost story should have "some degree of actuality." At the same time, he cautions that this actuality should not be "very insistent."[44] This is another instance of reticence. He does not want his readers to forget that, after all, when reading his stories, they are cosily ensconced from *actual* actuality and dwell in the realm of artistic creation, at best only a semblance of the real world. At the same time, as we have seen, he insists on identification: the proper degree of actuality will "allow the reader to identify himself with the patient." Antiquity of the *Otranto* type should be avoided, for this much distance would preclude identification and prevent uneasiness: "[...] it is almost inevitable that the reader of an antique story should fall into the position of the mere spectator."[45]

As "mere spectatorship" does not satisfy M. R. James artistically, it does not satisfy us theoretically either. In our analysis of his use of focalization, we shall observe how he made sure that his readers participated in scenes of haunting. While he does insist on immediacy as a guarantor of readerly involvement, effective ghost-seeing goes beyond mere watching.

On the way to M. R. James's stories themselves, I want to dwell for a little longer on chosen theoretical aspects of the genre of the ghost story.

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been motivated by the fact that Dickens's story opens with a facetious allusion to the ghost in *Hamlet*.

42 MRJ, "Appendix," 338.

43 MRJ, "Appendix," 350.

44 MRJ, "Appendix," 339.

45 MRJ, "Appendix," 340.

Towards a Philosophy of Narrative Ghostliness

There are innumerable ghost stories out there and one might think that there are no bounds that restrain the invention of ghostly authors. Yet, as our brief examination of M. R. James's "doctrine" has shown, the genre is not without rules, especially if we take into account specific expectations as to how it should "work." In this section, I am going to discuss some philosophical aspects of the *narrative* ghost, or the artistic horror ghost, as it may be called, and I want to do so by building on M. R. James's insights. For, even though his reflections do not amount to a theory — he used the term "doctrine" in a facetious manner typical of his attitude to the matter — they do make us realise that a definition of the ghost story is both possible and desirable, that it may be thought of as a literary genre with an essence, and governed by a number of rules. As I develop my proposal, I will use the common division of philosophy into the three disciplines: ontology (the ghost as an existent and, possibly, an agent), epistemology (ghost-seeing), and the theory of value (comprising both the moral and the aesthetic aspects of haunting). This approach should help us arrange the possibilities open before a ghostly author as well as the conditions and constraints that he or she negotiates.

Ontology. To begin with the most obvious condition, a ghost story needs a ghost. This statement is as self-evident as it is problematic, for there is a long-standing tradition in Gothic literature of authors who have chosen — as the phrase goes — to "explain the ghost away." The device of the explained supernatural — a rather confusing designation — was invented, practiced, and preached by Ann Radcliffe. Her *Sicilian Romance* (1790), a story in which the supposed spectre turns out to be the villain's former wife imprisoned in an uninhabited part of the castle, is an excellent specimen. Yet, as we have mentioned, Radcliffe and her numerous imitators have been repeatedly censured for not playing fair by their readers.[46] Deliberate delusion on the part of the author must — critics argue — be resented by the reader. Rational, "natural," and often elaborate

46 For a historical context, see above, 58, ft. 71. See also Montague Summers, ed., "Introduction," in *The Supernatural Omnibus. Being a Collection of Stories of Apparitions, Witchcraft, Werewolves, Diabolism, Necromancy, Satanism, Divination, Sorcery, Goetry, Voodoo, Possession, Occult, Doom and Destiny* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 25: "Unfortunately, most novelists preferred to imitate Mrs. Radcliffe in her explanations [...]."

explanations, intended to supplant and annul what for dozens (sometimes hundreds) of pages is a source of supernatural thrills, must be felt as an anti-climax.[47] "Mrs. Radcliffe" — wrote Sir Walter Scott in his 1811 introduction to *The Castle of Otranto* — "[...] has endeavoured to effect a compromise between those different styles of narrative ["ancient" and "modern" romance], by referring her prodigies to an explanation, founded on natural causes, in the latter chapters of her romances. To this improvement upon the Gothic romance, there are so many objections, that we own ourselves inclined to prefer, as more simple and impressive, the narrative of Walpole, which details supernatural incidents as they would have been readily believed and received in the eleventh or twelfth century."[48] Upon this general observation, Scott proceeds to state his reason, which at this point we do not have to examine. What becomes immediately clear, however, is that, rather than simply of ghosts, Scott (like Walpole before him) prefers to speak of "prodigies," suggesting the need to consider a broader category of various supernatural phenomena, for instance, incidents such as the mysterious gigantic casket that crushes Manfred's son to death at the beginning of *Otranto*. Besides, and more importantly, Scott's reference to how things narrated are "believed and received" (i.e., to the larger cultural context of belief) makes us aware that, rather than of ontology in the abstract, we should perhaps speak of a worldview, or a representation of a specific historical and cultural context. In the case of Walpole's "Gothic story," the world is radically removed from that of the story's intended readers. The ideological aspect of this distance — examined in detail in Part I of this book — is made palpable by Scott's condescending tone, when he is referring to a world governed by "feudal power and papal superstition" (136). In our analysis of an episode in *The Monk*, we identified and examined a battle of sorts between two conflicting

47 This device, however, has never grown stale. For instance, Alfred Hitchcock used it in *Psycho* (1960). When we hear the sheriff say that Norman Bates's mother has been dead ten years, we are tricked into suspecting that the female figure we have seen may be a malignant ghost. The psychiatrist at the end (following the discovery of the mother's skeleton) supplies the necessary "logical explanation," which causes the "ghost" to be "explained away." Thus, the plot may be classified as "uncanny" in Todorov's terminology (see also ft. 51 below). For a discussion of the fantastic as well as some ontological aspects of this type of narrative, the reader is asked to go to the Appendix "Narrativity, the Fantastic and the Ghost."

48 Appendix 12 in Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Michael Gamer (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 137.

worldviews, this being an illustration of the cultural tensions which for decades energized the literary Gothic.[49]

In the terms proposed by Tzvetan Todorov, the supernatural effects a violation of the laws of the real world as they are commonly understood.[50] The assumption behind his understanding of the concept of "the marvellous" (in other words, the supernatural that the narrative does *not* explain away, as opposed to "the uncanny"[51]) is that the everyday world is conceived as the realm of empirically verifiable facts. This makes the appearance of a ghost an intrusion into or a forceful broadening and prying-open of this realm. The problem that immediately arises in the context of classic Gothic texts such as *Otranto* is that of setting the criteria (or "protocols," as we have called them after Smajić) by which we determine the seemingly self-evident concept of reality. A feudal world-order skilfully recreated in a "Gothic story" freely admits of the supernatural, as pointed out by Scott. That world's inhabitants believe in the reality of the supernatural and for them (and thus vicariously also for the intended readers) ghostly interventions make perfect sense. In other words, real ghosts and their actual interventions *explain* the incidents recounted in a story and "superstitions" perform significant explanatory functions.

M. R. James was among those who have objected to treating stories like *Otranto* as representative of the genre.[52] The ghost story, they argue, must pos-

49 In the context of fictional narratives of *various* nature (not only those with a supernatural dimension), ontology must be understood as culturally-determined, a worldview. At the same time, we need to be ready to address the overlapping, as we may call it, of ontology and epistemology, suggested by the combination of "world" and "view."

50 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 41. Todorov speaks of "'reality' as it exists in the common opinion" and "the laws of reality." These designations are hardly satisfactory: How do we define "common opinion"? What are the basic laws of reality and who decides what they are?

51 Todorov's "uncanny" must not be confused with Sigmund Freud's *unheimlich*. The medical explanation of Norman Bates's mental condition at the end of *Psycho* is a "natural" one, no matter how bizarre that we think that condition to be. In other words, it leads us into the realm of the uncanny in Todorov's sense of the term. This does not rule out the possibility of a Freudian analysis of the case. In fact, the story on which the film is based (Robert Bloch's novel of 1959) makes several allusions to psychoanalysis.

52 The reader will recall this statement, "*The Castle of Otranto* is perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre, and I fear that it is merely amusing in the modern sense" (M. R. James, "Appendix," 343; already quoted).

it scepticism, both in the reader and in the characters principally concerned. Shakespeare knew this, and, in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, cast Horatio in this role.[53] In other words, fictive reality must be modern, preferably enlightened, verified by protocols that allow us to distinguish real things, uncanny as they may be, from "marvels" and "prodigies," trickery from haunting, insanity from demonic possession, etc.[54] Even though the real ghost is an entity or an "existent" in the represented world of a story and is believed by the reader to be one, its manner of participation in that world is, in most cases, peculiar, justifying the concept of "haunting." Rather than comfortably inhabiting the daylight human world,[55] the world of the living, the ghost is a "visitation" from the past, a troubling and a disturbance, defying that world's laws and upsetting the temporal progression of things. The ghost can be described as a past that trespasses on empirical reality. We shall return to the temporal dimension of haunting later in this section.

Furthermore, in comparison with other human existents represented in a story, inevitably "skeletal," deficient in their ontological make-up,[56] a ghost's

53 In the words of Marcellus, "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him, / Touching the dreaded sight twice seen of us" (*Hamlet* 1.1.25–27).

54 Such protocols change and evolve; on the whole, they depend, not so much on how science defines them, but on popular representations of what exists in the sense of hard-boiled fact and what does not. By my estimate, around fifty minutes of *The Exorcist* (1973) elapses before the available natural explanations of the girl's, Regan's, bizarre behaviour are rejected (which involves performing a number of medical tests), whereupon the plot moves into the realm of supernatural horror (Todorov's fantastic-marvellous).

55 This makes the word "haunt" rather misleading if we take into account that it is etymologically related to "home." But Owen Davies explains: "[....] the vast majority of people died inside their homes. It was, therefore, the natural place for their ghosts to return. It was where people mourned the dead and were surrounded by memories of their presence." Davies, *The Haunted*, 47.

56 I am referring here to the idea of indeterminacy as defined by Roman Ingarden. Fictional objects, also those that are "real" in the fictive world of a story (tables, trees, human characters, etc.), lack determinacy. They have "gaps" in them and the reader can produce innumerable questions about these objects to which the text of the story or the play will supply no answers. See Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of* Art, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), §38 (246–254) and Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston: Northwerstern University Press, 1973), 13–14.

mode of being is that of a mere blurry presence, a skeleton's skeleton.[57] This, however, does not preclude the possibility of changing or influencing the course of affairs. To put it differently, it is possible and indeed desirable for the ghost to enter and become a link in the "chain of events" recounted in a story.[58]

Epistemology. A definition of the fictional ghost must include the idea of appearing. "What is a ghost?" — asks Owen Davies in his social history of ghosts, and provides the following answer: "the *manifestation* of the souls of the dead before the living."[59] But, since the ghost *must appear*, it must appear to someone; it must enter a person's field of perception. The words "apparition" and "spectre" both preserve the etymological connection between the ghost and perception. Similarly, in Polish, the word *widmo*, is related to *widzieć* ("to see") and the word *zjawa* to *zjawić się* ("to appear") and to *jawny* ("apparent," "evident").[60] There may be lonely ghosts, but in a story, we want someone to see them, or to come into some other sensory contact with them. This simple logic makes the perceiving subject (the percipient, the ghost-seer) necessary.[61] The mysterious "woman in

57 Many of M. R. James's ghosts are indeed skeletal and he repeatedly emphasises their "thinness" (e.g., "Mezzotint," 23, "School Story," 102).

58 The phrase "chain of events" repeatedly occurs in the original Sherlock Holmes adventures, the word "chain" implying causal connections between events. Its function is to emphasise the existence of the plane of *fabula* as a goal of the detective's investigation. On principle, Sherlock Holmes eliminates the possibility of ghostly interventions. See, for instance, Kyle Blanchette's "Eliminating the Impossible. Sherlock Holmes and the Supernatural," in *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Philip Tallon and David Baggett (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

59 Davies, *The Haunted*, 2; my emphasis. The idea of haunting understood as "the repeated appearance of a ghost before someone or in a certain location" (3) corresponds to this definition. In one of its meanings, "a vision" (occurring, e.g., in *Otranto*) is simply "a ghost." Another such word is "sight."

60 In Ludwig Lavater's classic ghost-lore tract, *Of Ghostes and Spirites* (1572), the Latin word *spectrum* is explained as referring to "a substance without a body, which being *hearde* or *seene*, maketh men afrayde" (quoted in Davies, *The Haunted*, 3; my emphasis).

61 Besides, as some narratologists claim, all narrative texts presuppose something like an "all-encompassing vision" (Bal, *Narratology*, 158). But this concept, connected with that of "external focalization" is too broad for our purposes. Another formulation of the general principle (close to an *a priori* axiom) can be found in Ruth Ronen: "[...] in fiction we do not assume that world-components exist prior to or independently of the perspectives arranging them" (*Possible Worlds*, 178). In her treatment of fictional worlds, Ronen comes close to

white" in Wilkie Collins's famous sensational novel (1859–1860), lonely as she seems, is still an object in the narrator's vision, as the text makes clear:

> There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road — there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven — stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London as I faced her.[62]

Ghost-seeing is an epistemological counterpart of the ontological condition of the actual presence of the ghost as an existent in the fictive reality, and possibly also as an agent.[63]

This issue concerns what narratologists call focalization and the distinction between its two basic types: external and internal. In the above passage from Collins, despite the use of the first person singular, there are no signals of internal focalization. There are plenty of them, however, in what immediately follows:

> I was far too *seriously startled* by the suddenness with which this *extraordinary apparition* stood before me, in the dead of night and in that *lonely* place, to ask what she wanted. [...]
>
> I looked attentively at her; as she put that *singular question* to me. It was nearly one o'clock. All I could *discern distinctly* by the moonlight was a colourless, youthful face, *meagre and sharp to look at* about the cheeks and chin; [...]. The voice, little as I had yet *heard* of it, had something *curiously still and mechanical in its tones* [...]. (my emphasis)

In these passages, stress is throughout on sensory perception. Yet there is also another emphasis, perhaps more important, for the narrator informs us

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a mild version of the philosophical theory of idealism, as summed up in George Berkeley's formula "*esse* is *percipi*"; in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710).

62 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 16. On the white dress of ghosts and the myth of "the ghostly White Lady," see Davies, *The Haunted*, 20–23.

63 The term "percipient" is consistently used by Ronald C. Finucane in his "cultural history of ghosts," *Appearances of the Dead. A Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984).

that and how his mind is processing the sensory data, both cognitively (how much can be reliably known, as in "to discern distinctly") and emotionally (what impression it makes, as conveyed by "extraordinary," "lonely," "curiously," and other epithets).[64]

Thus, assuming that ghost-seeing is a defining component of the genre formulated in the terms of narrative theory, a ghost story must make use of internal focalization. It must have a ghost-seer, regardless of the term we use to describe this character: a "reflector" (Booth's term[65]) or a "focalizer" (Bal's[66]). This is not to say that every story of this kind must be narrated in the first person singular, as the character who sees does not have to be identical with the narrator.[67] Indeed, various types of distance are possible here, as we have seen in Part I. At the same time, this feature of the ghost story turns the reader into a ghost-seer: ghost-seeing makes it possible for the reader to see a ghost vicariously, as it were, which no doubt is a major source of the thrills delivered by ghostly fiction.

At this point, however, and regardless of how convenient the term "ghost-seeing" may be, we must emphasise that "seeing" here is a synecdoche for sensory perception.[68] Consequently, when discussing instances of focalization, we

64 A broad theory of focalization must consider at least these three components of mental processing: sensory, cognitive, and emotive. For a similar typology, see David Herman, *Story Logic. Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 307–308. I developed it in Jacek Mydla, "A Fairy Tale in Focus: Ecstatic Focalizations in 'A Christmas Carol,'" in *Marvels of Reading. Essays in Honour of Professor Andrzej Wicher*, ed. Rafał Borysławski, Anna Czarnowus, and Łukasz Neubauer (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2015), 141–156.

65 Booth has borrowed the term from Henry James; see Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 153. They are "third-person 'centers of consciousness' through whom authors have filtered their narratives." For a seminal treatment of the issue, see Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," *PMLA* 70 (1955), 1160–1184.

66 Bal's spells "focalizor" (*Narratology*, 144 ff), but I have decided to use a spelling that is more common.

67 Gérard Genette insists on the distinction between mood and voice; he points out that there has been "a confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?* — or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*" Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 186; Genette's italics.

68 Commenting on his distinction, Genette has observed: "The distinction between the two questions 'Who sees?' (a question of mood) and 'Who speaks?' (a question of voice) is

need to apply distinctions that take into account impressions conveyed by the different senses. Traditionally, ghosts manifested themselves in a variety of ways, including experiences that fell far beyond the sphere of pedestrian visibility. "Many reported ghosts over the centuries" — writes Davies — "were not visible; their presence and sometimes their identity were revealed through the stimulation of senses other than sight."[69] Indeed, all the other senses, besides eyesight, can become channels that convey supernatural sensations, be they "the sulphurous smell of the brimstone" or the irksome noises produced by a poltergeist.[70]

To do justice to the variety of sensory perception, narratology has developed a sensualist terminology which might be of some assistance in our study. As reported by Manfred Jahn, William Nelles coined terms which designate different types of focalization depending on the "perception channel": "ocularization" (channel sight), "auricularization" (channel hearing), "gustativization" (channel taste), "olfactivization" (channel smell), and "tactivilization" (channel touch).[71] This vocabulary, somewhat cumbersome as it may be, is helpful in describing and distinguishing between different types of haunting, as several examples will illustrate. In a story by Elizabeth Braddon, "The Cold Embrace" (1862), we have a case of haunting by touch (haunting through the tactile experience of the focal character). The title itself is suggestive, and the "cold embrace" is depicted thus: "Suddenly someone, something from behind him, puts two cold arms around his neck, and clasps its hands on his breast." The narrator makes it clear that the other senses (vision, in particular) do not participate in this experience: "He turns quickly round — there is no one — *nothing to be seen* in the broad square but himself and his dog; and though he *feels*, he *cannot see*

generally accepted today [...]. My only regret is that I used a purely visual, and hence overly narrow, formulation." Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 64.
On ocularcentrism see Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 93 (in a chapter dealing with Berkeley's theory of vision).

69 Davies, *The Haunted*, 26.

70 Davies, *The Haunted*, 26–27.

71 Manfred Jahn, "Focalization," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. Herman, 99; the study by William Nelles referred to is *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1997).

the cold arms clasped around his neck."[72] In a story by Vernon Lee, also with a suggestive title: "A Wicked Voice" (1887), the experience is auricular: "I continued to be haunted by that voice. My work was interrupted ever and anon by the attempt to catch its imaginary echo; [...]."[73] Here the narrator, a composer, is the focalizer and the haunting is repeatedly described in musicological detail: "a note, high, vibrating, and sweet, rent the silence, which immediately closed around it" (177). The thus afflicted musician ends up with his mind inhabited by an alien experience: "My head is filled with music which is certainly by me, since I have never heard it before, but which still is not my own, which I despise and abhor [...]" (181). In one of M. R. James's stories, in which the haunting takes place in a library, the ghost-seeing is preceded by a strange smell: "a musty smell," "a sort of unnaturally strong smell of dust" ("Middoth" 121).

Perceptions of spectral existents naturally raise the problem of objectivity, as indeed does the issue of internal focalization. Even though, on the strength of well-established convention, we tend not to question the reliability of personal experience, "fantastic" tales consistently gnaw away at this conviction. But, as Dorrit Cohn has noted, the issue is one of universal nature: "[...] the real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit it [...]."[74] In the language of contemporary cognitive studies, the problem has been redefined as that of the reality of the experience-content, referred to as *qualia*. David Herman, after Thomas Nagel and John Searle, defines *qualia* (plural) in the following way: "The sense or feeling of *what it is like* for someone or something to have a given experience."[75] As Herman explains, the issue is as central to the theory of narrative as it is to the philosophy of the mind: "The research at issue suggests not only that narrative is centrally concerned

72 Miss [Mary Elizabeth] Braddon, "The Cold Embrace" [1862], in Summers, ed., *The Supernatural Omnibus*, 150 (both passages); my emphasis. There is a an example — of "haunting by touch" — also in one of M. R. James's stories (see "Poynter," 208).

73 Vernon Lee, "A Wicked Voice," in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough: Broadview, 2006), 168.

74 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.

75 David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), "Glossary," 192; Herman's italics in reference to the title of Thomas Nagel's 1974 article bearing the intriguing title "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?". See Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974), 435–450.

with *qualia*, a term used in the philosophy of the mind to refer to the sense of what it's like for someone or something to have a particular experience, but also that narrative theory bears importantly on debates concerning the nature of consciousness itself."[76] No matter how fanciful the terminology used by scholars may be, the problem at bottom is that the experience-content must be granted the status of reality. After all, even dreams and illusions are real. Besides, there are story-worlds in which spectres and phantoms are not explained away but posited as real. At this point the issue may seem intractable; unnecessarily, in my opinion. The category of intersubjectivity may help a great deal. Qualia are not intersubjective, which is not to diminish or cancel their reality. The perplexing nature of internally focalised narratives is that they render intersubjectively accessible what normally remains concealed in the recesses of an individual consciousness. After all, this is one of the prime roles of fiction, at least in its modern guise. As Adrian Poole, the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists*, put it, "We look to novelists to help us imagine what life *looks and sounds and feels* like to other people."[77]

There are two further points I would like to make before concluding this section. Both have to do with the apparent need to go beyond a narrowly sensualist notion of experience. First, to obtain a comprehensive view on sensory perception, we must not ignore some basic phenomenological insights. According to Roman Ingarden's theory, an act of perception has the following components: (1) sensory data (the passively received sensory content); (2) intentionality (the activity of grasping an object by the perceiving subject); (3) assertion of existence (the subject's belief in the reality of the object perceived).[78] Not all these components of the act of perception will be found in a particular case of ghost-seeing. The percipient may not be performing *an act* of consciously grasping a "vision" and may see it peripherally; or he may refuse to believe (accept, assert) the reality of it.

Second, perception may not be strictly and narrowly natural. Even if we widen the notion of perception so that it covers the hazy and shady realms of

76 Herman, *Basic Elements*, 144; the chapter is titled "The Nexus of Narrative and Mind."

77 Adrian Poole, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists*, ed. Adrian Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5; my emphasis.

78 Roman Ingarden, *Studia z teorii poznania* [Studies in the Theory of Cognition] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995), 134–135.

inner experience (intuitive fear, etc.), there are still to be considered, at least hypothetically, mental states whose cognitive value may be dubious, such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition.[79] Late in the nineteenth-century, proponents of spiritualism (including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)[80] made attempts to redefine the idea of cognitive experience, going so far as to grant superiority to inner perception. How effective a ghost story based on the idea of an experience of the invisible can be is shown on the example on Guy de Maupassant's "vampire" story "Le Horla" (1887). Typically, the narrator (in this case, a first-person, diary-type of narration) conscientiously hints at the kind of experience that makes the story so impressive: "The mystery of the invisible is quite incomprehensible; we cannot fathom it with our poor weak senses [...]. If only we had other organs to perform other miracles for us, how much more we could discover in the world around us!"[81] This wish, expressed at the outset of the diary is, of course, a tragically ironic prelude to the recounting of the affliction to which the narrator is about to fall victim.

Finally, I would like to return to the connection between the idea of ghost-seeing and that of the scene. Ghost-seeing as the focalization of the narrative through the experiencing consciousness makes necessary the use of scenes, séances of sorts, as the necessary means of allowing the ghost to show itself.[82] Illustrative is a comparison between the dramatic representation of the supernatural encounters in the play *Hamlet* and their narrative rendition by the Lambs in their *Tales from Shakespeare*. The *Tales* version gives us a third-person summary of what in the play is a scene, vivid and brimming with terror. In the Lambs version, even direct speech — the customary method of making narrative episodes dramatic — has been turned into this indirect equivalent:

79 Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 182; in a reference to Nancy H. Traill's study, *Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction* (1996).

80 The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882. For a discussion of its operations, see chapter 7 in Finucane's *Appearances of the Dead*. See also chapter 5 in Maurizio Ascari's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

81 Guy de Maupassant, "Le Horla," trans. Roger Colet, in *The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories*, ed. J. A. Cuddon (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 210.

82 For this basic distinction, see Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 154.

> At the sight of his father's spirit, Hamlet was struck with a sudden surprise and fear. He at first called upon the angels and heavenly ministers to defend them, for he knew not whether it were a good spirit or bad; whether it came for good or evil: but he gradually assumed more courage; and his father (as it seemed to him) looked upon him so piteously, and as it were desiring to have conversation with him, and did in all respects appear so like himself as he was when he lived, that Hamlet could not help addressing him: he called him by his name, Hamlet, King, Father! and conjured him that he would tell the reason why he had left his grave, where they had seen him quietly bestowed, to come again and visit the earth and the moonlight: and besought him that he would let them know if there was anything which they could do to give peace to his spirit. And the ghost beckoned to Hamlet, that he should go with him to some more removed place, where they might be alone; and Horatio and Marcellus would have dissuaded the young prince from following it, for they feared lest it should be some evil spirit, who would tempt him to the neighbouring sea, or to the top of some dreadful cliff, and there put on some horrible shape which might deprive the prince of his reason. But their counsels and entreaties could not alter Hamlet's determination, who cared too little about life to fear the losing of it; and as to his soul, he said, what could the spirit do to that, being a thing immortal as itself? And he felt as hardy as a lion, and bursting from them, who did all they could to hold him, he followed whithersoever the spirit led him.[83]

No matter how skilful this type of relation, no candid reader will confess to having a sense of terror, which is precisely the experience that theatrical productions usually succeed in eliciting.[84] This makes us aware of one of the principal challenges of ghost stories: the need to build ghost-seeing *scenes*. Also, the passage from *The Lady in White* examined earlier in this chapter is much more effective than the Lambs's decorous summary of the encounter between Hamlet and the awe-inspiring and majestic Shade. One of the reasons is

83 Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 258–259.

84 David Punter has recently called Shakespeare's *Hamlet* "perhaps the best-known ghost story of all." David Punter, "The English Ghost Story," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Brewster and Thurston, 179. In fact, in the Ghost episode, we can identify essential elements of a universal format for an artistically effective handling of the supernatural.

Collins's capacity to convey the state of mind of the protagonist with the help of a wide range of focalizing devices.

Theory of value. The two remaining aspects of literary ghostliness that I would like to discuss in this chapter are related to values and value-judgments rather than to the more fundamental issues of being, reality, and knowledge. While moral concerns fall within the purview of ethics and are linked with the idea of agency, aesthetic values inhere in perceptive qualities of objects. These are two distinct sets of values, but as values they are qualities that make indifference toward an object (a ghost, in our case) impossible. The creature/monster in *Frankenstein* supplies a helpful material. In the early stages of his existence, he is ugly and repulsive but benevolent. Humans, however, persist in treating the negative *aesthetic* value as confirmation of a negative *moral* value and thus regard him as malevolent. The turning point comes when the creature accepts this evaluation as his nature and fate, whereupon he decides to act like the kind of fiend people believe he already is. Thus, monstrosity in the aesthetic sense is united with moral monstrosity. In this way, this masterpiece of terror literature demonstrates how strong the responses may be to "a demon," both moral and aesthetic, both within the story-world and in the readers.

Among M. R. James's statements concerning the fictional ghost, the following one succinctly captures its nature with the help, unsurprisingly, of two Latinate words: "the ghost should be malevolent or odious."[85] These qualities place the ghost in the sphere of values in that they plainly state that the supernatural in fiction must not be indifferent. M. R. James does not seem to want to insist that *both* these qualities must inhere in the object,[86] that every ghost must be both willing to inflict harm on the victim — the "patient" — as

85 "Malevolent" means "wishing evil or harm to others," while "odious" — "hateful, distasteful, repugnant." For the latter the *Modewort* "abject" may be a fitting synonym. For definitions and etymology, see http://dictionary.reference.com/.
This of course is yet another imprecision; but in fact, some of M. R. James's ghosts are simply "odious" ("disgusting" or "repulsive"), while others, besides their capacity to cause revulsion, can also inflict actual harm, death not excluded. Self-inflicted harm by the "patient" (as a consequence of an encounter with a ghost) is a significant factor.

86 Some of M. R. James's ghosts are little more "odious" (see previous footnote), while others, their capacity to provoke disgust notwithstanding, do harm; the hapless prospector for hidden treasure in "A Warning to the Curious" ends up with his face smashed, evidently on account of a collision with (or an assault by) a vengeful apparition.

well as provoking disgust. I believe that his fiction justifies the view that both are needed to produce the full horror effect. Whatever the final verdict might be, the distinction conveniently and pertinently names arguably the strongest negative qualities and values in the respective, moral and aesthetic, spectrums.

We need to add that malevolence has an ontological dimension. A malevolent entity is an ill-willing existent in the represented world, a being that *wills* the harm of a person or persons. We should assume further that this being must have the power to carry out the threat. This is to say that "real" ghosts are not mere puppets. In other words, from malevolence should follow maleficence. The question is not whether a given human character *believes* (perhaps wrongly) that the ghost they have met is a wicked one: supernatural wickedness must attain some manifestation in the story-world. In this way, the ideas of malevolence and maleficence raise the issue of agency. If the ghost is not a scarecrow or so much harmless fluid, then it must be capable of effectively entering the causal chain of events in the represented world.[87] M. R. James's stories provide numerous examples that, in extreme cases, the fictional ghost may kill its human victims. Malevolence, however, is not free from ambiguity, in that it suggests a wickedness of satanic proportions. In particular cases, however, it may be limited to just one or several persons. The ghost in *Hamlet* is certainly malevolent, but not universally so.

One of M. R. James's earliest ghosts, the spidery creature in "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," answers to our profile of the "proper" fictional ghost in that it is both odious and malevolent. The first encounter between the protagonist and the demon is mediated by a picture in the ancient album of curiosities (the scrap-book): "At first, you saw only a mass of coarse matted black hair: presently it was seen that this covered a body of fearful thinness — almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusk pallor, covered like the body with long coarse hairs, and hideously taloned." This much for odiousness. But the description does not end here, and with the next sentence, there is a shift towards malevolence, as the gaze moves towards the "face":

87 Here, in my opinion, lies a huge difference between the stories of M. R. James and those of Dickens. Most if not all of the latter's stories lack these elements, which the former regarded as essential. This is not to say that M. R. James was incapable of writing as story like "The Portrait-Painter's Story" (1861), but a ghost who elicits compassion and a story about the strength of a father-daughter relationship that transcends death did not conform with his idea of the genre.

"The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned king with a look of beast-like hate" ("Alberic," 8). The same progression, from odiousness to malevolence, is found in the scene of the actual encounter: "The shape [...] was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his [Denistoun's, the protagonist's] scalp. There was black tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin — what can I call it? — shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips. There was no nose: [...]." Here, again, we observe a shift from repulsiveness to universal malice. The beastliness of the creature changes its meaning accordingly: "There was no nose: the eyes of fiery yellow against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them, intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man" ("Alberic," 10–11).

Perverse and enigmatic in their actions and motivation, fictional ghosts are agents; they are purpose-oriented.[88] Even though our minds recoil from the idea and human evil itself remains a perplexing philosophical riddle, perverseness does not entirely cancel out humanness. Agency must be distinguished from causation, and one way of defining it is to call it causation in the realm of human affairs. A zombie in a horror movie is an automaton, and thus not an agent. In this respect, it is distinct from, say, the Frankenstein monster, another creature raised from the dead and indeed frequently referred to as a "ghost" or "demon." This monster — Mary Shelley's creature as distinct from its "zombified" versions in film and elsewhere — is an agent and we see him undergo a moral transformation from a benevolent agent to malevolent one, which culminates in the Satanic revaluation of values. "Evil," he confesses, "thenceforth became my good."[89]

Malevolence and odiousness can be examined from an epistemological perspective, that of a character's awareness and response. We can imagine a story

88 Definitely an interesting aspect of ghost lore. On the diminishing purposefulness of ghosts, see Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 194–195.
More on the ideas of agency and purposefulness in the appendix "Narrativity, the fantastic and the ghost."

89 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 188. This is an echo of Milton's Satan's "So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear, / Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost; / Evil, be thou my good; [...]." Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, l. 108–110; John Milton, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 423.

in which the protagonist is indifferent to both these qualities in the ghost he encounters; however, this response would effectively cancel fear and suspense. The ghost-seer must not be aesthetically or morally indifferent and the reactions of horror and repugnance are essential for the building of suspense. The ghost scene in *Hamlet* initially suggests that the apparition may pose real danger to those who see him, which produces an amount of horror. In the scene in which Hamlet speaks with the ghost alone (1.5), however, the sense of danger vanishes and is replaced by other emotions, chiefly that of moral shock and disgust.[90] In a ghost story proper, there must be an element of threat, and the thus-generated suspense ought to be maintained.

Finally, we need to address one more aspect of literary ghostliness: time. As has already been mentioned, the "Gothic" feature of ghost stories consists in their making the past return and trouble the present. Both metaphorically and literally, a ghost is an intrusion of the past upon the present, a visitation from a world that ought to lie buried and to remain forgotten. In other words, by crossing the gulf between life and death, between the living and the dead, ghosts upset the temporal order, the future-ward progression of time. This intrusion may be the principal thing that makes ghosts *ontologically* repugnant, if it makes sense to put it this way. Among the disturbing features of ghost stories is their capacity to enact a traumatically affected memory, as in a person who is doomed to reliving a shock they have sustained. This feature makes for an allegorical potential of some stories as depictions of the ways in which trauma can arrest temporal progression. *Vice versa*, many trauma narratives have an unmistakable supernatural aura about them.

The term "anachrony" refers to any disturbance — on the plane of discourse — of the orderly temporal progression of events, a succession of causally linked events that make up the *fabula*.[91] Anachrony has been in operation ever since

90 This is in sharp contrast to what happens in the 2014 "cybernatural" horror film *Unfriended*, where — despite some debt to the Shakespearean manner of handling ghosts — the spectre causes its human victims to die in torment despite the fact that it (she?) haunts them on Skype. See my analysis in "Old-Type Hauntings by New Ghosts? Word and Image in the 'Cybernatural Horror' *Unfriended*," *in esse: English Studies in Albania. Journal of the Albanian Association for the Study of English* (ASSE) (2017): 64–82.

91 Mieke Bal (drawing on Gérard Genette) defines anachrony thus: "By 'distance' I mean that an event presented in anachrony is separated by an interval, large or small, from the 'present' [...]." *Narratology*, 89.

poets began "plotting" their narratives; Genette's brief analysis of the opening of the *Iliad* is enlightening in this respect.[92] Following his predecessors and models, John Milton opens *Paradise Lost* with the sin of disobedience and loss of Eden, then performs a proleptic leap to the regaining of Paradise by Christ, and finally, at the end of the invocation, takes us all the way back (by means of an analepsis of truly cosmic proportions) to the time before God brought the world out of chaos. Indeed, an unravelling of all the anticipations and retrospections in the first forty lines of Milton's poem could take up a dozen pages. There is no doubt that in a ghost story both analepsis and prolepsis have a distinct role to play, the former in the fetching forth of the past, the latter in raising the reader's apprehensions about how the reanimated past may affect the future course events. As I hope to show in the interpretations of M. R. James's stories, a ghostly author must work out a method of making these narrative devices work in unison.

Ghostly Phenomenology: Focalization and Distances

This chapter expands the ideas touched upon in the previous one, specifically in the section on epistemology. As I want to examine M. R. James's handling of perception and perspective, I will call the angle a phenomenology of the ghost. In my view, this is a significant component of a comprehensive theory of focalization. I need to add emphatically that the idea of putting together "phenomenology" and "ghost" is not a clandestine allusion to G. W. F. Hegel's monumental tract of 1807. If anything, it is an expression of my great debt of gratitude as a literary scholar to Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden, and in particular to the latter's theory of the literary work of art.

Many stories emphasise the specific, peripheral nature of ghost-seeing. In "A Warning to the Curious," for instance, the idiom "the tail of the eye"[93]

Genette introduces the idea of anachrony in a chapter on order and defines it as designating "all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative [...]." Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 40.

92 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 36–37.

93 The phrase occurs also in "Mr Humphreys," in a passage that depicts a haunting: "It was a still stuffy evening; windows had to stand open and he [Humphreys] had more than one grisly encounter with a bat. These unnerving episodes made him keep *the tail of his eye* on

occurs in the inset narrative told by the story's ghost-seer and patient, Paxton. Describing his experience, he says, "There was always somebody — a man — standing by one of the firs. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him *with the tail of my eye* on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him" (265; my emphasis).[94] The passage illustrates — to indulge in a little punning — how *tales* of haunting depend for their effects on the "tail" of vision, on what we may describe as the centrality of the peripheral.

The phenomenology of the ghostly corresponds to M. R. James's doctrine of reticence in the proper fictional treatment of the supernatural and is related to his handling of the voice/mood distinction. Narrative embedding allows him to deploy distance between the teller and the ghost-seer, as the principal narrator tends to be safely removed from the recounted events and scenes of haunting. This distancing *both prevents and enables* immediacy: while the experience is conveyed through first-person eye-witness narration, embedding weakens — as it were — its legitimacy. For instance, "A Warning to the Curious" has a prologue which may at first strike the reader as redundant. It frames the main part of the story, that about Paxton and the two men he befriends and who soon become participants in the uncanny adventure, which eventually turns them into ghost-seers. "Still" — says the framing (authorial?) narrator — "it [Seaburgh] keeps its place in my affections, and any tales of it that I can pick up have an interest for me. One such tale is this: it came to me in a place very remote from Seaburgh, and quite accidentally, from a man I had been able to oblige — [...]" (258). At this point, this "man" takes over. Not much later, the narrating is passed on to the "patient," Paxton, and then it is handed back to the "man," now himself a participant in the events. Again and again, in M. R. James, direct experience penetrates embedding; internal focalization, as it were, pierces through the narrative layers and allows the conveying of perceptual contact with the supernatural.

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the window. Once or twice it was a question of whether there was — not a bat, but something more considerable — that had a mind to join him. How unpleasant it would be if someone had slipped noiselessly over the sill, and was crouching on the floor!" (196; my emphasis).

94 It is not easy to figure out the exact meaning of "tail" in the expression; if "tail" should be taken to mean "the margin at the foot of a page" (see the online dictionary already consulted), then the metaphor would suggest that M. R. James's ghosts do not occupy a focal position in his stories.

Let us examine the situation in "A Warning to the Curious" a little more closely. As we have seen, Paxton's account of his experiences conveys a great emotional strain ("nerves"). There is a build-up, in other words, that produces conviction in the listeners, the narratees, who themselves begin to see the ghost, a malignant entity that has followed Paxton. At the same time, M. R. James's principles do not allow his ghost to attain full, "day-light" manifestation. Thus, the ghost is never perceptively thematized. In fact, it simply refuses to come into the patient's field of vision, which explains the obscure references and the emphasis on what is felt and intuited rather than directly perceived. The situation here conforms to a pattern, which admits of a degree of variation. For instance, in the assault scene at the end of "Oh, Whistle," the ghost is actually veiled. In an often-quoted passage, we read that "what he [the story's patient] chiefly remembers about it is a horrible, an intensely horrible, face *of crumpled linen*" (75–76; M. R. James's emphasis).[95] The sentence that immediately follows is typically evasive: "What expression he read upon it he could not or would not tell, but that the fear of it went nigh to maddening him is certain" (76). This shifts the emphasis: away from the actual sensory perceptive content — which the author/narrator refuses or finds himself unable to render explicit — and towards the effect, the impact and the response.

This evasiveness, conveyed in the "would not tell," puts M. R. James in a venerable tradition of representing the supernatural. Traditions, in fact. For, in his ghostly fiction, we find blended two seemingly incompatible approaches to the supernatural, two varieties of "Gothicness." His ghosts, unlike Radcliffe's, will not be explained away. Nor, unlike Walpole's, do they appear in outlandish settings and superstitious eras. M. R. James's ghosts invade the here and now, and not only refuse to melt into thin air, but are persistent in their desire to do harm to humans, even if the manner is as grotesque as an assault by horribly contorted bed-clothes.[96] At the same time, however, and because of the distancing devices, an element of evasion and obscurity is nearly always present. In other words, M. R. James's method is to plant this Radcliffean element

95 This scene is one of the few that have been illustrated by James's untimely deceased friend, James McBryde. It has been used for the cover of Penguin's *"Count Magnus" and Other Ghost Stories.*

96 Criticism has underlined the difference between proper ghost-story ghosts and those of the Gothic classics, which Sullivan describes as "largely decorative" (*Elegant Nightmares,* 6).

in the midst of terror. To put this more accurately: his terrors, like those in Radcliffe, depend for their efficacy on the reader's imaginative participation. It may not have been his wish to "expand the soul of the reader" — to use Radcliffe's quizzical phrase[97] — but it certainly was to make the reader "wander in the regions of terror," to use a pertinent phrase from *The Romance of the Forest*.[98] The difference between the two authors would be — to follow up on this metaphor — that Radcliffe is obscure as to what those regions are, while M. R. James gives the reader a sketch of the nightmarish terrain she, the reader, is expected mentally to traverse. Radcliffe takes evasion and obscurity to the limit of acceptability, if we consider the length of her novels and the long-term arcs of suspense she built. M. R. James, despite his narrative economy, is more *definite* about the terrors he *implies*. His readers avert their gaze at moments and in situations that have been designed to make them shudder. Do we really want to "see" an infant being abducted by a half-rotten human carcass? The protagonist's gratitude for not having seen more of the scene in "The Mezzotint" is no mere facetiousness on the part of the author.

In our preliminary observations on the narrativisations of the supernatural, we put forth the hypothesis that the ghost story must contain a scene (understood in the technical sense explained above) that depicts the manifestation of a ghost. M. R. James describes this in his theory as the moment when the ghost finally "holds the stage." I want to reapproach this idea and see whether the literary material in hand verifies this proposition. Bearing in mind the verbal economy that the form necessitates, scenes in short stories may be difficult for the author to deliver, as there is little space for scene-painting or for generous depictions of setting, character, and dialogue. There is also the need to carry on with the plot. In a novel of the Dickens type, the rule has been to interchange scene and summary: a summary chapter followed by a scene chapter, which is not possible in a short story. And yet, M. R. James seems

97 From Radcliffe's posthumously published essay: terror "expands the soul, and awakens the faculties" while horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them"; Ann Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," in Clery and Miles, eds., *Gothic Documents*, 168. I call her definition dubious because it has never been clear to me what exactly Radcliffe meant by these sanative properties of terror.

98 "While she [Adeline, the heroine] sat musing, her fancy, which now wandered in the region of terror, gradually subdued reason." Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134 (chapter 9 of vol. II).

to have negotiated the conflicting demands of scope and concentration with a great deal of success. His method, as we shall see presently, is the inverse of what might be expected from the "novelistic" point of view, were we to regard the short story as something like a promise or a suggestion of a much longer narrative. M. R. James seems to have seen clearly that the short-story teller's task was to trim and to compress, hopefully without frustrating the mimetic expectations: the story to be told must contain "a material" that — to recall Lubbock's phrase quoted at the outset — can be "shown."

But we must go a step or two further. The averted gaze of the Jamesian ghost-seer and also — as in the case of the spectre in "A Warning" — the perceptive evasiveness of some ghosts ought to make us consider broadening the idea of perception. Ghosts are not only ontologically incomplete "skeletons," as I have called them. Their ontological fuzziness seems closely linked with their epistemological ambiguity, which I have tried to capture by using the idea of periphery. Yet while the concept of peripheral perception is couched in the tradition of empiricism, in ghost stories we find repeated attempts to broaden the range of experience. In the case of the afflicted figure of Paxton, the uncanny conviction builds up in his mind, of being haunted by a malevolent spectre. We have noted M. R. James's depiction of a process of nervous infection whereby such mental states are transmitted to other persons. Such experiences can be described in different ways, perhaps, but they unmistakably hearken back to the Gothic tradition in that they weaken, in both the protagonist and the reader, the habitual grip on reality. What in Radcliffe's fiction is represented as superstitious awe is precisely the effect of conveying the mind of the reader beyond the realm of cognitive clarity and certitude. It was Radcliffe's desire to communicate this experience to the reader via the mind of the heroine.[99] Ghost-seeing as the chief mimetic or scenic component of the ghost story is

99 See for instance a passage on superstition early in *A Sicilian Romance*: "superstitious terror" occurs here and is chiefly ascribed to the servants at the castle ("the minds of the vulgar"). At the same time, the young heroine cannot suppress a violent bodily response ("a sudden tremor") at the sight of what seems to be an apparition; Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9–10. The *locus classicus* is found in *The Castle of Otranto* at the moment when Isabella descends into the subterranean passage or "cavern": "An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions [...]. Every murmur struck her with new terror; – yet more she dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics to pursue her" (27). Incidentally, this and similar passages illustrate the distinction between supernatural and mundane terrors.

to be regarded as ghost-feeling and, ultimately, as ghost-believing. Thus the internal focalization in narratives of this kind is given a depth, a dimension that lies beyond the narrowly empiricist realm of perception.

M. R. James's stories depict a wide spectrum of experiences of this type. Parkins, the supernaturally afflicted "Professor of Ontography" in "Oh, Whistle," cannot put the light off before going to bed for fear of "seeing" disturbing sights.[100] Here is a passage in which M. R. James toys with the idea of some uncanny special sense or another sight:

> *Experto crede*, pictures do come to the closed eyes of one trying to sleep, and are often so little to his taste that he must open his eyes and disperse them.
>
> Parkins's experience on this occasion was a very distressing one. He found that the picture which presented itself to him was continuous. When he opened his eyes, of course, it went; but when he shut them once more it framed itself afresh, and acted itself out again, neither quicker nor slower than before. What he saw was this: [...]. (66)

Here follows a scene on a sea-shore: a man running for his life, pursued by a ghost. What makes it unusual among scenes of haunting is the fact that it takes place in the mind of the protagonist. This "moving picture" is indeed like a film sequence, with the spectator (which is what Parkins is called; 67) avidly watching, asking the suspense-building questions about the likelihood of the running man's chances of escape. Several suggestions sustain this impression of spectating: "continuous [picture]," "it framed itself," "it acted itself," etc. Eventually the pursuer comes into view and gradually becomes more and more distinct. Then we read this distinctive Jamesian sentence: "There was something about its [the figure's] motion which made Parkins very unwilling to see it at close quarters" (67). Finally, at a moment fraught with absurdity, Parkins decides to open his eyes so as *not to see* how the scene will end:

100 These experiences are of course a consequence of the blowing of the whistle and the sound thereby produced: "It [the note] had a quality of infinite distance in it, and, soft as it was, he somehow felt it must be audible for miles around. It was a sound, too, that seemed to have the power (which many scents possess) of forming pictures in the brain" (65). The experience can be described as a blending of the visual and the auricular.

> [...] Parkins always failed in his resolution to keep his eyes shut. With many misgivings as to incipient failure of his eyesight, over-worked brain, excessive smoking, and so on, he finally resigned himself to light his candle, get out a book, and pass the night waking, rather than be tormented by this persistent panorama [...]. (67)

Parkins makes an effort to be reasonable about his disturbing visions, to "explain the ghost away." The problem is, of course, that despite all the haziness of the imaginary spectacle he has seen things far too clearly to retain the composure of a Hobbesian sceptic. His emotional involvement — again, paradoxically — does not allow him to continue watching.

Finally, I would like to address one more issue related to scenes of haunting. The thankfulness of the collector in "The Mezzotint" for *not being able to see more*, the opening of the scholar's eyes in "Oh, Whistle" in order *not to see more* — such moments make us aware of the significance of the scope and intentionality of perception. Technically, M. R. James as a ghostly author relies on internally focalised experience: on what his characters come into direct contact with and the beliefs that arise in their minds. At the very same time, the stories ask their readers, How much do you really *wish to see*? This question raises the issue of curiosity, its thrills and perils, which in many of the stories is the essential theme. Curiosity, however, is an ambiguous term in that it suggests excessive interest, or overinquisitiveness, while being etymologically related to "care." Parkins, for example, becomes a "curator"[101] of the eponymous whistle, which intrigues him to the point of becoming an obsession.

Thus, M. R. James's stories are indeed "warnings to the curious," in that they repeatedly preach the lesson of restraint and warn against transgression. M. R. James seems to be restating the warning which Milton clad in that supremely paronomastic line towards the end of book IV of *Paradise Lost*: "know to know no more" (Book IV, l. 775).[102] With these words, Milton puts Adam and Eve to sleep in their prelapsarian bed and explains to his readers that a desire

101 According to a dictionary entry: "from Latin *cūriōsus* taking pains over something, from *cūra* care"; "from Latin: one who cares, from *cūrāre* to care for, from *cūra* care" (the entries "curious" and "curator," respectively; DICTIONARY.COM, accessed February 10, 2022.

102 Milton, *The Major Works*, 440. "Sleep on / Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek / No happier state, and know to know no more."

to know more than they should, must plunge them into loss of innocence and misery. Surely Milton was conscious of the broad biblical meaning of the verb "to know." The question that a reader of *Paradise Lost* cannot fail to ask is: What is the position of the cautioning author? Does the word of caution come from the Holy Ghost or does it come from the fallen man? M. R. James's question is: Do you really wish to know the truth about the past? And what if this involves coming into contact the past's spectres? For, regarded allegorically, they are spectres of wickedness and crime. M. R. James knows the capacity of language to replicate for a listener or recipient an immediate contact with what ought to have remained concealed. But both Milton and M. R. James know that the desire to see and find out is not easily suppressed.

The Radcliffean conception of terror and the narrative devices it recommends may be related to the notion of the uncanny summed up in Sigmund Freud's famous essay in the words of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling: "*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible."[103] M. R. James's protagonists, unlike Radcliffe's heroines, are typically plagued by spectres that they have been instrumental in raising. Moreover, even though scenes of haunting in the stories deliver on the promise of ghost-seeing, haunting is typically followed by hunting, in which the ghost-seer is the game. "Count Magnus" is a perfect realisation of this pattern. Standing near the wicked count's "mausoleum," the protagonist, Mr Wraxall, makes a wish: "'Ah,' he said, 'Count Magnus, there you are. I should dearly like to *see* you'" (49; my emphasis). This wish is virtually subliminal, as Wraxall is speaking to himself (this being his habit), which is a symptom of obsession or possession.[104] He is becoming estranged from himself as he is finding it difficult to account for the curiosity that is propelling him in his investigation: "'It is

103 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" trans. Alix Strachey, in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature* (London: Penguin, 1990), 345. Later in the essay Freud shortens this definition to "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light." He then adds the following comment: "Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead and to spirits and ghosts" (364). Unlike Schelling's definition, Freud's formulation — despite the mention of the dead and ghosts — disregards the element of perception.

104 For an interesting theological interpretation of this state of isolation in M. R. James's stories, see Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology, from Le Fanu to James* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 83 ff.

strange, the interest I feel in the personality of this, I fear, somewhat ferocious and grim old noble'" (53). The wish to see the "rascally" count is repeated (54), whereupon the lid of the sarcophagus begins to rise. Absurdly, Wraxall does not wait to shake hands with whatever is to emerge from it. Back in England, he spends the two last days of his life "expecting a visit from his pursuers" (56). Although he cannot *see* the faces of the two cloaked figures, he does seem to recognise them, "He had seen them before" (55). External circumstances, such as the violent start of a horse, are sufficient confirmation that Wraxall has come into intimate contact with evil and is doomed.

Essentially, Wraxall's case is not different from those of other Jamesian patients, in that his story is narrated from an external point of view, being a reconstruction of events based on some notes. M. R. James takes great care to separate the teller of his stories from the portrayed events and those who participate in them. We have, so far, paid little attention to what, in the opening section on distances, we called — after Wayne Booth — distances of personal nature. This manner of narrating, in which the teller is not the person principally concerned, is made possible thanks to the temporal distance as a primary condition for the detachment between the narrator and the afflicted character. Professor Parkins, the patient in "Oh, Whistle," is introduced as a sceptic, unshaken in his beliefs concerning the supernatural (that "[...] such things [ghosts] might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred," 59). He is, typically, greatly attached to his customary ways and habits and does not easily tolerate the company of others. Little wonder that his university colleagues find it easy to taunt him. The fact that at the end of the story a ghost unceremoniously intrudes on Parkins's cosy seclusion in the shape of a crumpled bedsheet sounds like a practical joke and adds a touch of uncanny humour to this otherwise traumatic event.[105]

At the end of the introductory passage of "Oh, Whistle," the narrator explicitly distances himself from his protagonist: "In repeating the above dialogue I have tried to give the impression which it made on me, that Parkins was something of an old woman — rather hen-like, perhaps, in his little ways; [...]" (59).

105 I addressed this aspect of the stories in "Horror czy kpina? Groza, humor i demony przeszłości w opowieściach niesamowitych M. R. Jamesa" [Horror or Mockery? Terror, Humour and Demons of the Past in M. R. James's Tales of Fantasy], in Rafał Borysławski, Justyna Jajszczok, Jakub Wolff, and Alicja Bemben, eds., *HistoRisus. Historie śmiechu / śmiech [w] historii* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 57–67.

This comment reveals the prologue's goal, which is to introduce a personal distance between character-actor (the principal character) and narrator-observer, and which, after Booth, we can define as psychological. After reporting on the conversation he witnessed, the narrator leaves Parkins to himself, and the latter becomes now the story's focal character. In this way, despite the initial distance, the narration moves into Parkins's mind, as it were, and we have seen how far this kind of *in*spection can take us.[106] The finding of the whistle is conveyed by means of reported monologue: "'I might walk home tonight along the beach,' he reflected — yes, and take a look — there will be light enough for that — at the ruins of which Disney [his university colleague] was talking" (61). The free indirect speech allows the reader to overhear the character's thoughts, reporting on them as they pass through his mind.[107]

The intimacy created in this manner is not without its ambiguities and perils. Like Wraxall and other patients, Parkins is something of a loner and actually tends to talk to himself. Overhearing his interior monologue, we become aware of our own psychological detachment, which we share with the narrator. While exploring the ruins of the preceptory, Parkins discovers what is described as "an artificial hole in masonry" (62). At this point we again hear him talk to himself: "*Of course* it was empty. *No!* As he withdrew his knife he heard a metallic clink, and when he introduced his hand it met with a cylindrical object lying on the floor of the hole" (62; my emphasis). These instances of free indirect discourse make the reader into an accomplice in Parkins's quest. Simultaneously, in the narrator's comments we hear a note of criticism: "Few people can resist the temptation to try a little amateur research in a department quite outside their own, if only for the satisfaction of showing how successful they would have been had they only taken it up seriously" (61). This allows us to speak of a moral and not only a psychological type of distance, as the words "temptation" and "mean desire" suggest. For all his self-righteousness and scepticism, Parkins becomes victim to intellectual vanity. This encourages us to read the story as a parable of sorts, a lesson in humility. Not unexpectedly, we find another remark at the end of the story: "There is really nothing more to tell, but, as you may imagine, the Professor's views on certain matters are less

106 I borrow the word "*in*spection" (with these italics) from Dorrit Cohn (*Transparent Minds*, 14).

107 See, for instance, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 26.

clear cut than they used to be" (77). Temptation — vanity — transgression — punishment: this narrative formula cannot strike us as new. Rather, it makes us aware of ideological involvements of M. R. James's stories, despite their presumed preoccupation with "technique."

Ghostly Chronotopes and Uncanny Artefacts

My concern in this section is with the time and space in M. R. James's fiction, or the spatiotemporal background for the manifestations of spectres. The term "chronotope" is of course Mikhail Bakhtin's, from whom I borrow the insight of the interdependence between time and space in a fictive world: "We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."[108] Bakhtin confesses his debt to the theory of relativity and the idea of "the inseparability of space and time." This may not sound like a new idea and Immanuel Kant's theory of pure forms springs to mind.[109] Yet the idea of dynamic interdependence, as in space travel, certainly expresses a modern way of thinking about time and space. Applied to fiction, it helps us to regard fictive worlds as dynamically spatiotemporal, and it allows us to regard topography as filled with temporal relationships.

Narrative progression inevitably brings along with it modifications in both the spatial and the temporal dimensions of the represented world. For instance, with every new chapter of a novel, say *David Copperfield*, the world expands in both space and time; as the hero grows up, new layers pile up and old ones recede. The eventual migration of David's friends to Australia is a radical leap

108 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in *Narrative Dynamics. Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 15; italics in the original.

109 At the beginning of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (first published in 1781), as part of "The Transcendental Aesthetic," Immanuel Kant defines space and time as "pure forms," that is, as *a priori* conditions for perception. In order to for things to appear in the outside ("real") world, the mind has to be equipped as it were with the ability to arrange them according to spatial and temporal dimensions. See Lisa Shabel, "The Transcendental Aesthetic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's* Critique of Pure Reason, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Unlike Bakhtin, Kant is not concerned with historical time or with values attached to the dimensions of space and time.

into a new territory with a bright future before them, which does not mean that the reader is allowed to forget about the enduring presence of the departed, the mother and the wife, who linger in the memory of the living. We may say that the Bakhtinian insight has an operational side to it, for it instructs us how to interpret fiction: focusing on the representation of space entails focusing on time as well. At the same time, the spatial expansion of the represented world may, in the manner just illustrated, be accompanied with its temporal expansion in either of these two dimensions: the past or the future, or both simultaneously. In some genres, for example, the detective story and the ghost story, the progression of the narrative consists in substantively expanding the past of the fictive world. As analysis will show presently, in contrast to the steady progression and expansion in typical stories, in ghost stories the interdependence of space and time has a characteristic dynamic. On the example of M. R. James's stories, I wish to examine what happens to their chronotopes when a ghostly invasion from *and of* the past disturbs the mundane and orderly spatiotemporal arrangements of things in the represented world.[110]

In a typical M. R. James story, a material object, an artefact, functions as a device that takes off the cap of the magic bottle and sets free the restless and mischievous imp of the past. In "Canon Alberic," for instance, this function is performed by an ancient scrap-book, an album filled with authentic curiosities, to one of which a malignant ancient demon has remained attached. In "The Mezzotint," a picture representing "a not very large manor-house of the last century" ("Mezzotint," 16) becomes a window — almost literally — through which its new owner, one of M. R. James's unfortunate collectors, becomes an involuntary and appalled witness to a scene of a ghostly — and ghastly — abduction. "A View from a Hill," similarly, makes this type of witnessing bizarrely literal: here the past is viewed through a pair of field-glasses. To name some other objects of this kind: a whistle, a prayer-book, the stalls of a cathedral, runic symbols, a maze, a wooden post in a garden, a doll's house, a wallpaper pattern.

110 Steven Mariconda's essay is especially abundant in this respect: "antique horrors [are] malignantly active in the present"; "the past and present become enmeshed"; M. R. James's work conveys "the intrusion of the past into the present" and "the uncanny commingling of temporal realities"; there is "pervasiveness of the past's influence upon the present"; the "history [of a building, etc.] is an active, present danger." Steven J. Mariconda, "'As Time Goes On I See a Shadow Coming': M. R. James's Grammar of Terror," in *Warnings to the Curious*, ed. Joshi and Pardoe, 205–215.

Often the titles announce this revealing object, although its function as the principal means of introducing the supernatural may not be fulfilled as directly as in the case of the eerie field-glasses or the haunted dolls' house. In the stories whose titles are not suggestive in this manner, the case might be more intriguing. In "Count Magnus," for instance, there is a bundle of hand-written papers. In terms of the representation of time and space, however, there are great similarities, and the overall effect is nearly always the same: an invasion into the here-and-now by some there-and-then, causing a radical extension of the typically mundane chronotope.

Phrases like "an invasion" and "a radical extension" suggest the presence of a double chronotope and the idea that M. R. James's stories depict the reviving and rendering actual of an alien world, the alienness becoming apparent against the backdrop of ordinary surroundings meticulously laid out to make this appearance effective. As I have mentioned, in "A View from a Hill," the bizarre field-glasses are the artefact that makes possible the chronotopic leap. Through them, a scene of execution, an incident from quite another time-space, comes into view: "That *is* one of the oddest effects" — says one of the characters (Fenshawe) — "The gibbet is perfectly plain, and the grass field, and there even seem to be people on it, and carts, or *a* cart, with men in it. And yet when I take the glass away, there's nothing" (124; italics in the original). There is distance in the basic physical sense, as suggested by the title, but there is also an intrusion, as disclosed in the character's mental disquiet: "The sensation which *invaded* Fenshawe in the small hours that something had been let out which ought not to have been let out" (125; my emphasis). The "letting out" carries a hint at the "where," the *topos* of the ghostly that has just invaded the everyday and ordinary world. Let us observe that a merger of two chronotopes — no matter how forceful and disquieting — would not suffice to produce *terror*. The readers and the characters must not be indifferent to the past which the artefact helps to reveal. A gibbet with "a man hanging on it" is suggestive enough to make the observer feel uneasy ("Hill," 124). At the same time and typically of M. R. James's perceptual reticence, there is an element of indistinctness: it is just a glimpse, mediated through the lenses.

A passage in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* will help us grasp the way in which the representation of time in ghost stories is related to moral concerns. The lawyer makes the following comment:

> "Poor Harry Jekyll," he thought, "my mind misgives me he is in deep waters! He was wild when he was young; a long while ago to be sure; but in the law of God, there is no statute of limitations. Ay, it must be that; the ghost of some old sin, the cancer of some concealed disgrace: punishment coming, *pede claudo*, years after memory has forgotten and self-love condoned the fault." And the lawyer, scared by the thought, brooded awhile on his own past, groping in all the corners of memory, lest by chance some Jack-in-the-Box of an old iniquity should leap to light there.[111]

Even though we cannot ascribe this intention to R. L. Stevenson, this passage contains a number of phrases with which we may sum up the chronotopic aspect of the Jamesian ghost story. First, the stories render literal the phrase "the ghost of some old sin." The other metaphor, that of some Jack-in-the-Box, with similar succinct aptitude describes the way in which James's ghosts surprise present-day patients. "Iniquity" is "injustice" or "wickedness," but the etymology of this word suggests (moral) imbalance[112] which calls for redressing, possibly through retribution. In M. R. James's stories, we find a broad spectrum of iniquities, from wholesale dedication to the unholy through necromancy and witchcraft to common cases of wrongdoing and malice, while they also express concern with justice and the need to restore moral order.

We can now appreciate why M. R. James's phrase "a slight haze of distance" would put us on a false scent, if we were to assume that the only type of temporal distance he had in mind was that between the present of the act of narrating and the past of the events. What matters to a far greater extent is the distance between the present events and actions and the past, in some cases very remote, that those events and actions awaken and somehow cause to trouble

111 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17. *Pede claudo* — literally "on limping foot" — the Oxford editor explains as a borrowing from an ode by Horace: "seldom has Punishment, on limping foot, abandoned a wicked man, even when he has a start on her" (explanatory notes, 186). A Shakespearean equivalent can be found in Ariel's speech on "the powers delaying, not forgetting" (*The Tempest*, 3.3.73). Appropriately, Ariel lists here the iniquities committed against Prospero. See also Lear's speech on the heath about "undivulged crimes, / Unwhipp'd of Justice" (*King Lear*, 3.2.52–53).

112 According to DICTIONARY.COM: from "Latin *inīquitās* unevenness, unfairness, equivalent to *inīqu*(*us*) uneven, unfair," accessed February 13, 2022.

the present. It is similarly easy to misconstrue M. R. James's dismissal of the antique setting of *The Castle of Otranto*. What he objects to, as already argued, is not a narrative that throws the reader back to the dark ages of Christianity, but to a narrative chronotope that is exclusively medieval and thus totally disconnected from the present.[113] It is necessary, then, to distinguish the following *three* temporal planes: the "now" of the narrating, the "now" of the principal events (*sjužet*), and the "then" of the events that come to light during the unfolding of the principal events. In the tradition of the round-the-fire Christmas diversion, the teller of the ghost-story meets his audience in the same present. The story tells us about something that already happened, but preferably not long ago, where by "happen" we mean events in the life of the principal character (a "collector" or an "antiquary"). Among those events is the action of the appropriation of an artefact, followed by the manifestation of a spectre and its consequences. In M. R. James's stories, there seems to be no limitation on how remote the ghost is from the story's principal chronotope. This makes the ghost story different from the detective story: if the culprit is to be caught, both the crime and the clues must be recent; indeed, often the culprit remains active while the investigation is in progress. Basically, the principal events, involving chiefly the actions of the detective, occur in the same chronotope as the crime; the detective and the criminal share the same chronotope, no matter how "cold" the case might be. In yet different terms, the investigation as the story's *sjužet* is part of one all-encompassing *fabula*: crime is committed, crime is concealed, inquiry is opened and completed, culprit is punished.

In the ghost story, there is no such continuity; there is no smooth temporal progression. As we shall see presently, the embedded narrative that in a crime story provides the solution by means of a retrospective/reconstructive account (Sherlock Holmes telling his audience how the crime was committed) is replaced in a ghost story by a handful of hints and suggestions strewn around the principal narrative. The temporal disjointedness typical of ghost stories consists in untying the knot that links the crime and the punishment. Already the general title, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, suggests a large temporal frame, that of history itself. As we have mentioned, the ambiguity of the

113 "If the story was written near the time when it is supposed to have happened, it must have been between 1095, the æra of the first crusade, and 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards" (the 1764 preface, already quoted).

preposition (stories told by/stories about) may be regarded as intentional: the stories are both stories *told by* a man of antiquarian pursuits (especially if we identify the implied author with M. R. James) and stories *about* men of antiquarian pursuits. Antiquarianism then works on two levels: as we accompany the principal characters in their curiosity-driven pursuits, we are also drawn into a game of hide and seek by the author. We can only make sense of and enjoy a story of this kind if we follow up on the clues that he throws in our way, especially those that the protagonists have ignored.

Principally, there is always a narrative attached to the revelatory object, as we may call the artefact.[114] I say "principally" for two reasons: one is of a general nature, the other specific. All artefacts participate in large-scale historical processes, but they are also connected with small-scale personal stories. It is this narrative that represents a layer of another world, alien and distant, and conveys that world into the primary narrative set in the cosy everyday world inhabited by the protagonist. This merger is attained by means of narrative embedding. Jack Sullivan has commented approvingly on the economy of M. R. James's style; also, he repeatedly uses the term "distance" to describe the aspect of M. R. James's narrative technique which is a direct consequence of the principle of reticence. We read, for instance, that "James's narrators maintain an almost pathological distance from the horrors they recount."[115] To create distance, says Sullivan, M. R. James uses "deliberate obscurity" (87). In a story like "The Mezzotint" distancing of this kind is extreme: "The narrative is a third hand account of a story which itself concerns something never directly experienced" (85). In the preceding section, we addressed the "directness" of ghost-seeing; our immediate concern is M. R. James's handling of embedded narration and the relation of this device to the merger of chronotope(s).

114 We may say that M. R. James's stories exploit the natural impulse in the reader to comprehend and make sense of events by means of a narrative. We all tend to "narrativise" things, which allows us to regard narrative as some sort of "Kantian" pure form with which we bestow order on and thus make comprehensible the muddled substance that we call world or life. I call it exploitation because of M. R. James's reticence, that is, the scarcity of the material offered to the reader.

115 Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares*, 82. The obvious consequence of this type of distance is that it precludes the emotional involvement of the reader. The reader may be intrigued and perhaps thrilled by supernatural horror, but she will rarely feel compassion towards James's "patients."

In "Oh, Whistle," as we have seen, the supernatural *is directly experienced* by the principal character, Professor Parkins. At the same time, M. R. James is extremely taciturn when it comes to the revelatory artefact. Described as "a cylindrical object," "a metal tube about four inches long, and evidently *of some considerable age*" (62; my emphasis), this thing spell-binds the Professor. Not being able to restrain his fascination, Parkins blows it and soon the whistling summons a ghost. As the narrator/author does not supply an embedded narrative, the reader is incapable of constructing one from the scant suggestions and hints (mainly, the Latin inscription on the tube). And so, the object remains enveloped in obscurity.

Earlier in the story, as we have seen, Parkins finds the whistle among the ruins of a preceptory that once belonged to the Knights Templar.[116] It bears Latin inscriptions, which he, however, is hardly able to translate into English and therefore fails to understand. Especially the warning encoded in one of the two — "*Fur, flabis, flebis*" — is unintelligible to Parkins.[117] "A very little rubbing rendered the deeply-cut inscription quite legible, but the Professor had to confess, after some earnest thought, that the meaning of it was as obscure to him as the writing on the wall to Belshazzar" (64). The inscription throws us back to the Middle Ages, a radically remote world with a barely intelligible chronotope. Both the cultural remoteness of Latin and the ambiguity of the message emphasise the gap between the two chronotopes: the medieval and the modern. Technically, the protagonist, hapless and a little dumb, may not be a thief, and yet the narrator — who typically distances himself from the principal events and their "patient" — makes a hint at trespassing earlier in the story: "Few people can resist the temptation to try a little amateur research in a department quite outside their own, if only for the satisfaction of showing how successful they would have been had they only taken it up seriously" (61). As we have already

116 "Preceptory" (also called "commandery") was "a subordinate house or community of the Knights Templar"; http://dictionary.reference.com/. Available are websites that document the Templars' presence in Britain; sample finds discovered at a preceptory site in South Witham can be seen at http://www.papadonkey.net/templars/templarbritain/southwitham/swithamhome.htm.

117 S. T. Joshi, in the Penguin edition of the story, explains: "Perhaps the best conjecture is that it is the Latin phrase *Fur, flabis, flebis* ("Thief, you will blow, you will weep"), suggesting that Parkins (a "thief" in obtaining the whistle) will blow upon it and come to regret the act" (explanatory notes in James, *"Count Magnus,"* 272, note 11).

remarked, the moral lesson, lighter in tone than in other stories, is to caution against the sin of intellectual vanity. M. R. James's intention may have been to ridicule this sin in the other "ontographers"[118] of the Parkins type, modern "professors" ignorant of previous epochs and their half-buried and "dead" heritages.

Let us examine another story. "Count Magnus," as we have seen, features another "overinquisitive" scholar ("Magnus," 44), a Mr Wraxall. Here the reader is given comparatively more puzzle pieces to work with. Again, however, hardly enough to build a satisfactory or complete narrative. For instance, a passage about the evil count's ways ends in a puzzling reference to a trip called the Black Pilgrimage: "[He] had brought *something* or *someone* back with him" (47; my emphasis). Again, we note M. R. James's methodical reticence and obscurity in such evasive utterances. At one point, the authorial narrator even responds to the reader's frustration as he somewhat tauntingly addresses the narratee in the following manner: "You will naturally inquire, as Mr Wraxall did, what the Black Pilgrimage may have been. But your curiosity on the point must remain unsatisfied for the time being, just as his did" (47). This remark virtually puts the reader in the position of the principal character and hapless investigator. This is M. R. James's method of whetting our curiosity, and indeed, with each turn of the page, we discover more and more pieces of the puzzle, including an embedded narrative in the shape of "one little tale" told to Wraxall (50). Yet we never get to assemble the entire picture, to make the *fabula* satisfactorily complete. We may conclude, then, that in this sense of incompleteness consists the ultimate gratification for the connoisseurs of this literary genre.

The stories vary greatly in terms of the inset narrative. In "The Mezzotint," for instance, M. R. James is far less reticent as elsewhere in this respect. The changes taking place in the uncanny picture are accompanied by an inquiry conducted by the two main characters, one of whom is the new owner of that picture. Eventually, they come upon a brief account in a guide-book, and, laconic as it is, this narrative carries us back in time to the turn of the eighteenth century. Complemented by the information provided at the end of story by one of the protagonists, this satisfies our curiosity. The mystery solved, the back story consists of this gruesome series of events: poaching and manslaughter punished by hanging, abduction of an infant by the ghost of the culprit, extinction of the

118 M. R. James invented the discipline of "ontography" for Parkins. See more on this in the last section of the book.

family of the punisher. Typically, the artefact, the eponymous picture, changes its significance in the course of the present-day "investigation." Ceasing to be a mere collector's item, an object that elicits no moral interest and is disconnected from any personal narrative, it becomes a crevice in the present-day chronotope for evils of the past to peer through and make a spectral manifestation.

Arguably M. R. James's most daring experiment with the merging of chronotopes can be found in "The Haunted Dolls' House."[119] The story opens with a transaction that reminds us of "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book": another avid collector, Mr. Dillet, acquires a precious item which seems to be an unbelievable bargain. As in "The Mezzotint," the thing comes alive, but in this case, instead of a succession of freeze-frames, the new owner is witness to a succession of scenes. This spectacle is facetiously described later in the story with a tinge of the vernacular: "a regular picture-palace-dramar in reel [sic] life of the olden time, billed to perform regular at one o'clock A.M." (87). The spectator is thus treated to a sort of rough-hewn silent horror show. On the first night following the purchase, having carefully unpacked the dolls' house and placed it near his bed, Mr. Dillet is awakened by "a bell tolling One" (82). Of course, this bell is no part of his daylight world. He is as it were corporally transported into another time-space, "He seemed to be conscious of the scent of a cool still September night. He thought he could hear an occasional stamp and clink from the stables, as of horses stirring. With another shock he realised that, above the house, he was looking, not at the wall of his room with its pictures, but into the profound blue of a night sky" (82). As in the case of "The Mezzotint," some ugly facts from the alien chronotope are revealed near the end of the story. Again, the embedded mystery concerns revenge from beyond the grave in which two children are the innocent victims.

There is an aspect of "The Haunted Dolls' House" which I find particularly worthy of note. Namely, the story may be regarded as an intertextual joke on the part of M. R. James, despite the fact that its inset narrative may not convey laughing matter. The alien chronotope which makes the spectral invasion upon the principal time-space is for M. R. James an occasion to play

119 Patrick Murphy also found the word "to merge" relevant in this context; see *Medieval Studies*, 82. We read here about the "leisured present merging with the perspective of the presecularised, preindustrial, preprofessional past." However, I find the phrase "one seamless outlook" not felicitous in the context of the stories.

with the idea of Gothicness, and not only in its architectural sense. The house's new owner cannot help facetiously referring to the Gothic revival's famous specimen: Walpole's mock-Gothic castle at Strawberry Hill.[120] For Walpole, his castle was a materialisation of his desire to be carried body and soul into another chronotope, as we might put it, the one revived in his "Gothic story." In M. R. James's story, Mr. Dillet murmurs to himself: "'Quintessence of Horace Walpole, that's what it is: he must have had something to do with the making of it'" (81). Because the man says this upon unpacking the house and before unearthing some relevant information in the parish register that suggests that the "picture-palace-dramar" may *actually* have taken place in the year 1757, we have reasons to suspect that Walpole did indeed have something to do with M. R. James's idea for another ghost story. Bearing in mind the latter's distaste for the medievalism of such stories as *The Castle of Otranto*, we might even detect rivalry of sorts going on here. Instead of fantastic visions of pieces of gigantic armour flying about the place, M. R. James ousts Walpole and puts some "reel life of the olden time" into Strawberry Hill.[121] Besides, we must not overlook the common theme of ownership and appropriation that connects the several oddly interlacing stories: *Otranto* with its prime usurper Manfred, the dolls' house's domestic drama with the poisoning of an old man, apparently the rightful owner of the property, and, finally, the fateful "bargain" that opens the story. To all this we must add the authorial dispossession, as it were, of Walpole by his "Gothic" successor, M. R. James, in the manner just described.

Let us once more return to the idea of M. R. James's deployment of distance, which, in the eyes of Sullivan, is "almost pathological." We have seen again and again that the distance that M. R. James deploys in this story is that of perception and thus has to do with mood ("who sees") rather than voice ("who tells"). "The Mezzotint," for instance, regarded on the plane of discourse, the *sjužet*, is about seeing and depicts a series of close examinations of the haunted picture. These bring the observers in a relatively close contact with the supernatural, "the vision." Thus, the final stage of the abduction, before the disappearance of

120 For a minute analysis of the styles and Walpole's antiquarian mindset, see Stephen Clarke, "Horace Walpole and the Gothic," in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic. Volume 1: Gothic in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Wright and Townshend, 120–140.

121 It is difficult to say whether the ambiguity suggested by the spelling "reel"/"real" is intentional on the part of M. R. James. The former word suggests a motion-picture-like succession of scenes; this would enhance the realism of the show.

the ghost, is described in the following way: "What was *visible* made the *spectators* profoundly thankful that they could *see* no more than a white dome-like forehead and a few straggling hairs. [...] the arms were tightly clasped over an object which could be dimly *seen* and identified as a child [...]" ("Mezzotint," 23; my emphasis). This and similar passages/scenes in other stories demonstrate the emphasis that M. R. James placed on perception, various degrees of reticence on the part of the author notwithstanding. This characteristic use of ekphrasis adds a new meaning to narrative embedding: the picture occupies the central position. The experience of the supernatural is mediated, to be sure, but retains the intensity of an unmediated impression, the kind of directness which we can reasonably expect in a ghost story. We can justifiably submit that mediated ghost-seeing in the sense just elucidated, seeing into alien chronotopes, was for M. R. James more important than the embedding of those alien chronotopes through narrative.

Before concluding this section, I would like to examine one more example, "A Warning to the Curious," unquestionably a masterpiece. Here the element of investigation, present in many other stories, has a pronounced position, which makes narrative embedding essential as well as complex. The story depicts the plight of a prospector for hidden treasure, a man named Paxton. As we have observed, Paxton is the protagonist and the patient, rather than the framing narrator,[122] despite his baffling anonymity (emphasised at the very end of the story). In the main part of the story, Paxton takes over and tells the narrator and the narrator's friend about his search for an Anglo-Saxon crown.[123] Paxton's narrative, with a pronounced element of detection, makes up the main part of the story proper and from it we learn that the crown — which Paxton has been able to locate and dig up — is protected by a ghost.[124] When the two

122 The framing narrator provides the present-day chronotope and thus sets the stage, as it were, for ghost-seeing.

123 After the publication of the story (1925) and not long after M. R. James's death (1936), excavations in Suffolk uncovered an Anglo-Saxon burial mound containing invaluable treasure. Sutton Hoo soon became known as the major archaeological discovery in England. A ceremonial helmet is perhaps the most famous find. See, among numerous publications, Martin Carver's *Sutton Hoo. Burial Ground of Kings?* (London: The British Museum Press, 2011); the helmet is the main motif in the picture on the book's cover.

124 Paxton inquiry brigs to light the legend attached to the crown: it was supposed to protect England against foreign invaders; this puts him in the position of the common looter.

gentlemen meet him, Paxton seems to be in the grip of a monomania, as they see it. His narrative emphasises the contrast between his own attitude to the past and that of the family of the Agers,[125] local patriots going back many generations.[126] In contrast to the last of the Agers, who died prematurely at his post, discharging his duty as the crown's protector, Paxton is a man of undisclosed identity. He has been driven by his passion for buried treasure, which, represented as irreverent intrusion and appropriation, eventually leads to his death at the hands of the avenging spectre and the guardian of the sacred crown.

In "A Warning," narrative embedding takes on a deeper meaning. Here, it is not the odious supernatural entity that encroaches upon ordinary surroundings. Rather, it is the other way round: an intruder literally invades a territory that is ghost-protected. As Paxton unearths the crown, he unleashes the wrath of its ghostly guardian. Paxton's is a double offence: against the sacredness of the earth and whatever lies buried therein. The land has spirits attached to it and protecting it. "A Warning" resembles in this respect another story, "The Rose Garden." In the latter, a couple attempts, harmlessly enough, the reader would think, to have a rose garden built on what turns out to be an ancient execution site. Another horrid chapter of the past is thus revealed, and an innocent man burnt at the stake in the times of Charles II returns to disturb the modern couple's peaceful existence immediately after an attempt to remove an old post "that's been there a number of years" (107). The last-but-one sentence provides a moral in Latin, *quieta non movere* (116).[127] Embedding takes here an uncanny turn: instead of a bed of roses, the couple end up having their minds disturbed

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The site at Sutton Hoo had been repeatedly looted before the great find of 1939. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Hoo. There is evidence that M. R. James strongly disapproved of such irreverence towards the nation's past, and in particular towards the land as the time-space that represents a significant part of the overall heritage. M. R. James found the incident of the melting down of an *actual* Anglo-Saxon crown "painful to relate"; see editor's note in the Oxford edition of the story (334; see above, 100). Another story expressing this sentiment — among many in which this motif is less explicit — is "An Episode of Cathedral History," in which the renovation work inside the edifice releases a vampiric creature.

125 Significantly, the Latin word *ager* means "field," "farmland," or "land."

126 During his enquiries Paxton comes across a "poem" dated 1754 that reads "Nathaniel Ager is my name and England is my nation, / Seaburgh is my dwelling-place and Christ is my Salvation, [...]" (262).

127 Literally, "do not disturb things resting in peace" ("let sleeping dogs lie," according to Michael Cox). This throws into ironic relief the name Paxton with its suggestion of peace (Lat. *pax*).

by nightmares of past iniquity and suffering. In "A Warning," Paxton ends up buried in the earth he has disturbed, "his mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits" (273). There is a cruel logic at work here, considering the nature of his offence. Impossible as it is to ignore the vividness of this picture, its message seems to be that this nowhere man has been claimed and almost physically absorbed by the element he has desecrated.

In "A Warning," M. R. James skilfully harmonises three types of narrative embedding: literal, narrative, and metaphoric. To be able to locate and unearth the crown, Paxton has first to acquaint himself with a local legend, which is related to the family of patriots. In the terms we have been using, this means entering and possibly transgressing upon an alien chronotope, "alien" to him, but, from another point of view, local and native. This inquiry leads him to the site of the crown, at which point, narrative (the legend) and topography meet and blend, and the verbal becomes literal, as time merges with place. When he has taken possession of the crown, the place with its legend seeks to take possession of him: "I've never been alone since I touched it" (265). Represented by the ghost, this new "attachment" is something that Paxton is never able to shake off, not even after replacing the crown.

As I have mentioned, the narrator stresses the rootlessness of Paxton's existence, his unbelonging and his alienation: "The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in Sweden, and he had dismantled his flat and shipped off his belongings [...]" (270). It is ironic that Paxton befriends the two gentlemen at a moment when he has already sealed his fate by the act of appropriating the crown. We have seen how the mechanism of retribution has rendered Paxton back, as it were, to the land and the soil he has violated. This "burial" suggests his having become united with the earth, but it may have a metaphorical sense as well, for Paxton may now have become part of the local legend, the legend that he was so eager to discover and to make useful for his purposes. Whether he has found peace is doubtful. Rather, he may have become another spectre and haunter. The narrator confesses at the end: "And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it, since" (274).

"A Warning" contains the suggestion that the avenging spectre is an angry dog on a leash which can snap any moment. See 159 below.

Gothic Anachronies and Terror

Suspense and the Ghost

In this section, I want to look closely at the ghost story's characteristic narrative progression. As a type of the mystery story, the ghost story is past-oriented or even counter-progressive. This is obvious in view of the genre's preoccupation with the past and its secrets. We detect a paradox here, for, as the narrative progresses, more and more of the past comes into light. The plane of discourse, or the *sjužet*, consists in revealing the back-story as the main part of the *fabula*. This past-oriented and revelation-driven narrative progression is of course also that of the detective story, another subtype of the mystery story.[128] Past-orientedness in the ghost-story proper, however, is combined with terror, an element which, for good reason, is regarded as synonymous with suspense, but also one that a detective story does not need to have. The source of terror is supernatural, the ghost being an entity which is alien to the present chronotope as well as odious and malevolent.

We need to say more about the difference between mystery and suspense as distinct types of narrative arrangement. As I have just suggested, the work of detection is essentially past-oriented but in itself deprived of suspense. Similarly to any riddle-solving, the reader expects the process of solving a crime to be "gripping," but these "thrills" are mainly intellectual. However, the presence of an element of danger will turn a detective story into what we call "a thriller," a suspenseful narrative. As we go through the Sherlock Holmes cannon, we observe that the thrills of suspense are occasional and incidental.[129] And *vice*

128 In the words of Julian Symons: "[...] although the Gothic novel bears a relationship to the detective story in the sense that it often poses a mystery to be solved, the solution is never in itself of much interest. The Gothic novelists wanted to arouse in their readers feelings of terror and delight at the horrific plight of the central character, and they used mysterious events to enhance those feelings." Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London, Sydney, and Auckland: Pan Books, 1992), 33.

129 Some notable exceptions notwithstanding, as for instance in "The Speckled Band," *The Sign of Four*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Noteworthy is the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle used the word "thriller" (in a letter to his mother dated Oct. 1891) to describe the former, which he regarded as one of his best stories; see "Explanatory notes," Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 362.

versa: an "action-packed" narrative of the James Bond type will be brimming with suspense but may be entirely deprived of mystery.

The device of past-oriented suspense is the hallmark of the Gothic romance, particularly in its "Radcliffe" or "terror" variety. As we have seen, despite his explicitly stated distaste for the technique of the explained supernatural (discussed above), M. R. James's stories owe a great deal to the Radcliffean conception of terror, defined in opposition to horror (see above, 128, ft. 97). Past-oriented suspense may not occur in narratives of the horror variety. It would be difficult to find an example in *The Monk*, for instance, as far as the main plot is concerned. Ambrosio's unknown past, when it is eventually revealed, may be a source of moral repugnance, but never poses any real or imaginary threat. Basically the same is true of the Bleeding Nun episode. The episode with the sacred statue, on the other hand, analysed in Part I, is constructed on the past-oriented principle of the explained supernatural. The apparently supernatural properties of the awe-inspiring statue are "explained away" as mere mechanical trickery. In this respect, Lewis was Radcliffe's attentive disciple.

Past-oriented suspense is in my opinion the defining feature of the Gothic as far as *narrative structure* is concerned. The meagre scholarly attention it has received must be found baffling,[130] while indirectly it justifies the need for a systematic study, such as the one attempted here. Even though the historical context fully justifies the alternative term "Gothic suspense," the mysterious ways of literary influence allow us to trace its sources back to the opening scenes in *Hamlet*. Here Shakespeare introduces the Shade of Denmark as an awe-inspiring and potentially harmful figure, even though it soon becomes clear that the terrors it unleashes are of intensely personal nature. Radcliffe's narratives imitate the ghostly episode in *Hamlet* by substituting a young and typically vulnerable female for the Prince, and a wide range of quasi-supernatural phenomena, some produced by the heroine's superstitious fears and overheated imagination, for an actual ghost.[131] Crucial in both cases is the personal involvement of the protagonists. Hamlet is convinced that his "fate"

130 I pointed this out in my *Spectres of Shakespeare*, where I attempt to define past-oriented (or "Gothic") suspense. See also my article on "Narrative Progression and Gothic Suspense in Wilkie Collins's *The Dead Secret*," in *Gothic, Sensation, Detection*, ed. Grażyna Bystydzieńska (Warsaw: Pracownia "Ośrodek Studiów Brytyjskich," Instytut Anglistyki UW, 2017), 39–62.

131 See my analysis in *Spectres of Shakespeare*, 132 ff and 218 ff.

depends upon the disclosure of the mystery "buried" in the ghost,[132] and Gothic romances replicate this type of involvement.[133]

Suspense Proper

Before we return to the idea of past-oriented suspense, provisionally defined at the beginning of this section, it is necessary to review major recent conceptualisations of narrative suspense. For this purpose, I will discuss a summative treatment of the subject by Hilary Dannenberg in her book on coincidence and couterfactuality.[134] Dannenberg refers to a number of scholars — Tzvetan Todorov, Meir Sternberg, Manfred Pfister, Noël Carroll, among others — and stresses several points that will be useful in our subsequent analysis of M. R. James's stories. I would like to point out, however, that when reviewing the existing literature on suspense, one inevitably arrives at the conclusion that there is still a great deal of confusion around the subject. Again, this may and should be regarded as a motivating rather than a discouraging factor.

To begin with a point that does not seem objectionable, suspense is oriented towards the future. In the words of Dannenberg, "narrative suspense [...] stimulates the reader to imagine multiple versions of the story's future."[135] Suspense thus occurs only when the reader is able to form "hypotheses" (Pfister) or "scenarios" (Dannenberg) about the future, based on the state of affairs at a particular moment in the narrative. The future-ward orientation of suspense

132 There is of course a very long, pre-Christian tradition behind the idea that the dead return to deliver a message. The point I am making here is that suspense depends for its effective deployment on the conviction in a human character that the message is somehow vital for him or her personally.

133 Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* may be called a "study" in the reception of Gothic romances in that it gives us valuable insights into the kind of suspenseful engagement with narrative that the Gothic romance elicits. Catherine, Austen's impersonation of Radcliffe's target or implied reader, is a typical "victim" of past-oriented curiosity, kept on edge by mysteries hidden behind black veils for hundreds of pages. Typically, she admits to being "wild to know" and, at the same time, is unwilling actually to finish the book. See the conversation between Catherine and Isabela at the beginning of vol. I chap. 6 (*Northanger Abbey*, 25; see also below).

134 Hilary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality. Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 36 ff.

135 Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 36.

is obvious, as is what after Dannenberg we may describe as the reader's cognitive immersion in the fictive reality. But the phrase "the story's future" has to be made less ambiguous, for what we are talking about is *not* the future "of" or "in" a story, but the "actional present of the narrative."[136] This "present" would be a point located on the plane of discourse (the *sjužet*) at which the text encourages — perhaps "urges" is a better word — the reader to formulate scenarios of events yet to come. To this we must add a necessary condition, namely, that these scenarios must be realisable within the time frame delimited by the *sjužet*. Hitchcock's classic example of a suspenseful situation, a ticking bomb hidden under the table,[137] to which Dannenberg repeatedly refers, works only when we know that the bomb is set to explode, not merely at an indefinite point in the future, but at a point that falls within the frame of the *current* discourse. The bomb's clock, in other words, is measuring discourse time, and it is discourse time that is running out. The future here is clearly not *any* future, an empty may-happen; rather, as the idea of immersion already suggests, it is a current future. In other words, as Pfister points out, there must be a deadline (in an hour, tonight, etc.).

Let us look more closely at the idea of the deadline. The metaphor of time's current conveniently and pertinently compares fictive reality to a stream, carrying the reader along towards a destination. In the terms proposed by Gérard Genette, the prolepsis responsible for the creation of suspense must be internal; narrative anticipation must fall within the designated time frame ("There's a bomb and it's going to go off in five minutes.").[138] This is to say that the reader must believe that her scenarios will be realised in a foreseeable future. We can make this clearer by availing ourselves of the concept of closure. "Closure" — writes Porter Abbott in his *Introduction to Narrative* — "is [...] best understood

136 Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 38.

137 "The essential fact is, to get real suspense you must have information. [...] Tell the audience at the beginning that under the table — and show it to them — there's a bomb and it's going to go off in five minutes." This quotation comes from a television documentary aired in 1973; Gene Adair, *Alfred Hitchcock. Filming Our Fears* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52.

138 For the distinction between internal and external analepses and prolepses, see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 49. Genette uses the term "reach" to designate the distance between the moment when an anachrony occurs and the past or future moment (stretch of time, period, etc.) or event that this anachrony points to.

as something we look for in narrative, a desire that authors understand and often expend considerable art to satisfy and frustrate. [...] In fact, narrative is marked almost everywhere by its *lack of closure*. Commonly called *suspense*, this lack is one of the two things that above everything else give narrative its life. The other thing is *surprise*."[139] On the one hand, narrative closure can be defined with the help of the categories that Genette uses to describe anachrony; on the other, Abbot offers here a hint that "surprise" is the other thing that, besides suspense, keeps the reader "at it."[140] The term "closure" is no doubt helpful, yet we must enquire further and ask: Does *any* progression towards closure produce suspense?

Before answering, let us name two aspects of narrative suspense: moral and cognitive.[141] So far, following in the footsteps of the existing research, we have been discussing the cognitive processes. The assumption is that suspense is essentially related to knowledge, that it thrives on the reader's curiosity, her desire to know the outcome. However, besides the cognitive, there is another essential factor, that of moral involvement, for there can be no suspense without danger. Noël Carroll takes a universal position and states that suspense has to do with good and evil.[142] On the one hand, he proposes a compelling

139 Porter H. Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57; emphasis in the original.

140 Worth considering is this exchange from *Northanger Abbey*: "'Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?'" — asks one of the female readers in *Northanger Abbey*; the black veil is a major source of mystery and suspense in Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. The answer is symptomatic: "'Oh! yes, quite; what can it be? — But do not tell me — I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton [...]. Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it'" (*Northanger Abbey*, 25).

141 It must be noted that much scholarly attention has been bestowed upon a third aspect: emotional or, more broadly, psychological. In these considerations, without ignoring this aspect, I want to concentrate on suspense as a feature of narrative. I find Pfister's approach supportive; he argues that a reader's emotional involvement is not a subjective concomitant, whimsical and ungraspable, but rather should be regarded as elicited by features inherent in the narrative: "The degree of identification and empathy is not left to the audience entirely, but it is also determined by the text itself" (Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 99).

142 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*; especially relevant is the section on horror and suspense ("The Structure of Suspense"; 136 ff). Dannenberg critiques Carroll for narrowing the issue to the binary opposition of alternatives. A "pluralistic" approach should take into account

theory of the *mechanism* of suspense based on the "erotetic" (question/answer) model.[143] On the other, to complement this model, he proposes a typology of possible outcomes ("answers" to questions that arise in the reader's mind while reading): "I am suggesting" — writes Carroll — "that [...] suspense in popular fiction is (a) an affective or emotional concomitant of a narrative answering scene or event which (b) has two logically opposed outcomes such that c) one is morally correct but unlikely and the other is evil but likely."[144] This rule of "the unlikelihood of a positive outcome" has an equivalent in Pfister's theory. Pfister uses the term "risk," which is less ethically-charged than "morally correct" and "evil": "As far as the plot sequences themselves are concerned, the suspense potential increases in proportion to the amount of risk involved."[145] Carroll's way of putting things is pertinent, for, even though it may make the theory sound unnecessarily "dramatic," it emphasises that suspenseful situations are not morally indifferent.

Ideas such as evil, risk, and danger suggest the futility of any purely cognitive notion of suspense. A suspenseful situation is not merely an intellectual riddle or a chess-board puzzle with human figures instead of the wooden pieces.[146] Scholars seem to agree that identification of the reader/viewer with the characters principally concerned is indispensable. Some — for instance Dannenberg, as we have seen — go further and postulate immersion. Carroll, fittingly for the art-horror context within which he operates, uses the time-honoured idea of sympathy: "It is appropriate to describe the audience's emotional state as one of sympathy; but" — he hastens to add — "the character does not sympathize with himself."[147] Carroll devotes a separate section of his *Philoso-*

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that, besides "what" hypotheses, also "how" hypotheses are capable of generating suspense. In Hitchcock's bomb scene, the questions might be asked: "*How* might the people sitting at the table notice the bomb [...]? If they do discover the bomb [the basic "what" question having been settled: the bomb has been discovered], *how* might they react to the threat [...]?" (*Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 38; italics in the original).

143 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 130.

144 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 138.

145 Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 99.

146 Once more: suspense proper may not occur in a detective story. An investigation may be devoid of any danger, in which case the narrative recounting it will elicit cognitive interest instead of building suspense.

147 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 91.

phy of Horror to character-identification, but he advises us not to simplify the issue: "when a character is involved in a life and death struggle with a zombie, we feel suspense. But this is not an emotion that the character has the opportunity to indulge; she will be, one surmises, too involved in getting quit of the zombie to feel suspense about the situation."[148] Identification does not imply the reader's loss of her sense of personal identity. A narrative may be successful in generating a high level of suspense without necessitating feeling-copying or feeling-reproduction ("replication," as Carroll puts it). Regarded as a psychological phenomenon, rather than a feature of narrative, suspense is more puzzling than its common occurrence in adventure-survival video games, for instance, might suggest.

We may now return to the type of suspense that is produced by Gothic narratives and is also found in the ghost story.

Past-oriented Suspense

M. R. James's antiquaries are driven by their curiosity about the past. This, as we have seen, has the effect of reviving the past, of fetching it, as it were, into the present. We have also repeatedly stated the definition of the ghost story as a narrative which recounts how the present is *disturbed* by the past, which of course is another word for haunting, for a past that refuses to "rest in peace." The past thus reanimated has the form of a spectre. In this section, I want to apply the ideas of anachrony and suspense to M. R. James's stories.

In its preoccupation with the past, the Gothic narrative current runs counter to the natural, that is to say, future-oriented flow of time in real life and in "normal" narratives. In other words, despite the *sjužet* being oriented towards closure, in Gothic stories it is also moving in the opposite direction, as every step leading towards closure deepens the reader's immersion in the past. By increasing the reader's knowledge of the past, the sense of mystery created at the beginning is gradually dispelled until the initial frustration vanishes. However — as we have seen in the previous section — the reader's wish for a gratifying closure in the shape of a satisfying retrospection may not be fulfilled. In fact, many stories have been devised as puzzles, the author relying on the reader to construct a *fabula* out of the scraps of information strewn around

148 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 91.

the narrative. It is time now to turn to M. R. James's use of the suspense potential of this type of narration.

The simple and common method of fetching the past into the progressing *sjužet* is that of analepsis, defined as follows: "an anachrony going back to the past with respect to the 'present' moment; an evocation of one or more events that occurred before the 'present' moment (or moment when the chronological recounting of a sequence of events is interrupted to make room for the analepsis)."[149] An analepsis is not limited in form to a recollection of a past event by a character, an inset story about something that happened before the commencement of the *sjužet* (say, a client visits Sherlock Holmes to state his or her case). By itself, such manner of verbal fetching of the past will not create suspense. Of course, an embedded narrative may be suspenseful in its own right; it may build an "arc" of suspense (to use the term proposed by Pfister[150]) independently of the main narrative, but this is not our concern here. Some critics regard Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a fine example of Gothic fiction. However, suspenseful as they are in themselves, the major inset narratives (Victor's and the creature's) are not Gothic in their structure. The monster's story is fenced off, as it were, from those told by Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton, and basically progresses steadily towards the future, similarly to Victor's. Retold from the perspective of, say, Elizabeth, the story would be "more Gothic" by casting the monster in the role of a demon from an alien realm. Actually, we get a sense of a Gothic mystery in Walton's framing narrative: Victor represents mystery, while the monster — a danger from the past, which eventually bursts upon the present.

The reader of a ghost story is not interested in past tales as such, no matter how suspenseful in themselves. A ghostly author must therefore fashion a link between the past and the present, and, moreover, that past must be restless and threatening. Besides, the *fabula* must extend backwards to a more or less remote past, while the *sjužet* must be propelled by past-oriented curiosity, a desire to piece together the essential events that make up the past in the *fabula*. In some stories, the reader is at a loss. In "Oh, Whistle," for instance, we are made to ask, What can possibly be the link between the mysterious cylindrical

149 Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 5. "Flashback" and "retrospection" are of course the common synonyms.

150 Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 101.

object and Professor Parkins, who happens to find it? One can think of no such link. And yet, his decision to blow the whistle causes a ghost to become his unwelcome guest for the night. In other stories, the reader has enough data to be able to build a *fabula* in the sense of a satisfactory back-story. This type of reconstruction may allow the reader to participate, not so much in the efforts of the main protagonist as in those of the framing story-teller. Such is the case in "Count Magnus," where the protagonist's "research," which involves the piecing-together of some facts relating to the evil count into a coherent narrative, culminates in the raising of a demon and the protagonist's death. This ill-fated research has a parallel in that of the framing narrator. The reader's awareness of the existence of this parallel is, in my opinion, M. R. James's major artistic objective and a source of "pleasing terror."

Because only progression in the sense of "future-wardness" can create suspense, Gothic suspense is also future-oriented; it occurs and plays itself out in a story's *sjužet*. This means that the events recounted in the *fabula* must have immediate impact on the character principally concerned, the ghost-seer. In "Count Magnus," the information about the Black Pilgrimage and about that enigmatic companion, "something or someone," that the count brought back with him to Scandinavia, is connected with the fate of the hapless antiquary. His obsession awakens the sleeping evil, which leads to his ruin. Flashbacks in such stories are not mere reminiscing glimpses into the past with no consequences in the present. On the contrary, the Gothic flashback impacts the present, and the protagonist may realise that the present is a re-enactment of some past horrors, as ghost stories illustrate time and again. Even though, in phenomenological terms, the character's contact with the past may be little more than a glimpse, the past thus awakened becomes a presence and an agency in the present, in the story's *sjužet*.

Now, to examine more closely how M. R. James's handling of anachrony relates to the past-oriented suspense in his stories, we shall revisit "A Warning to the Curious" and return to Seaburgh, the setting for a tragedy brought on by overinquisitiveness and overconfidence.

Let us first consider the cognitive side of the issue: the "lacunae of knowledge" planted by the author to whet the reader's curiosity.[151] In M. R. James's

151 Dannenberg speaks of "lacunae in the past narrative world"; *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 38.

stories, there is a metafictional layer which serves as a guide for the reader on her "erotetic" itinerary, as she moves from question to answer. After a double introduction (the main part of the story has a double embedding), the protagonist, Paxton, takes over, his audience consisting of the two men he meets in the hotel. They are riveted by the revelations, "'You'll think it very odd of me' (this was the sort of way he [Paxton] began), 'but the fact is I've had something of a shock'" (259). This reference to a very recent past is obscure. In fact, Paxton's narrative comes in two parts, the first part broken off at the moment when he shows his listeners the Anglo-Saxon crown. Only afterwards does he go on to explain the nature of the "shock" he has sustained. Another way of capturing the attention of his audience consists in his plea for friendly advice and assistance. In the first part of his narrative, Paxton recounts his methodical research conducted among the inhabitants of Seaburgh, involving a series of interviews. This method, the use of direct speech, puts us vividly in his position as the investigator. Paxton describes himself as someone who is "very much interested in architecture" (259) and also as an amateur archaeologist or simply a treasure hunter: "I know something about digging in these barrows: I've opened many of them in the down country. But that was with owner's leave, and in broad daylight and with men to help" (263). This statement ominously suggests that now he is going to open a barrow *without* its owner's permission.

It is of key importance for this part of the story that Paxton *wrongly* assumes that, its guardian being dead, the crown is left unprotected. At one point, an old man near the local church asks Paxton: "'[...] and do you know, sir, what's the meanin' of that coat of arms there?'" When Paxton answers in the negative, another question follows: "'[...] and do you know the meanin' of them three crowns that's on it?'" Paxton of course soon finds out about the three crowns, and then talks to the rector, who whets his curiosity even further: "'[...] that's a very curious matter, isn't it. But I don't know whether the gentleman is interested in our old stories, eh?'" (260). The old man answers for Paxton: "'Oh, he'll be interested fast enough [...],'" at which point the name of the Agers is mentioned, the guardians of the crown. The rector introduces this part of local "folk-lore" (260) in the same way: "[...] now that's another curious story" (261). These two conversations set Paxton firmly on the track. Indeed, the attractive power of the hints and innuendos is too great for him to resist, "[...] you can fancy" — says he, addressing his audience — "how interesting I found it. The only thing I could think of when I left him [the rector] was how

to hit upon the spot where the crown was supposed to be" (262). But he adds immediately: "I wish I'd left it alone." The avid investigator from a week ago is very different from the ghost-ridden teller of the story. We have thus been prepared for the "odd" revelation about the ghostly guardian of the crown, and yet the research portion of the narrative, preceding that revelation, is typically driven by intellectual curiosity where the danger of the pursuit is negligible.

Paxton's investigation is directed towards the past in more than one sense. By learning about the last guardian of the crown, he will be able to locate the artefact. The use of free indirect speech gives us insight into Paxton's thoughts: "A little judicious questioning in the right place, and I should at least find the cottage nearest the spot. Only I didn't know what was the right place to begin my questioning at" (262). And he keeps adding: "there was fate." This superadded "present" perspective lends the narrative of the investigation a sense of the ominous. The search culminates in the raising of the ghost; the crown and the spectre guarding it turn out to be inseparable. This point, at which Paxton produces the actual crown he has dug up, is crucial for the story's narrative dynamic. He starts behaving strangely: he "was in a worse state of shivers than before [...]" (264). He stops the two gentlemen from touching the crown: "'Don't *you* touch it [...]'" (264; emphasis in the original). The ghost appears, albeit in a clandestine way, and the story has now entered into a new mode, as it were, with the supernatural asserted for a fact. Even though the ghost-seeing is mediated through Paxton's point of view, his two listeners have been shaken out of their passivity (so far they have been "comfortably settled"). Vicariously, they have also become ghost-seers, an effect of uneasiness known from "Mad Monkton." This becomes clear when one of them, the main narrator, takes over from Paxton for a moment to say: "fancying [...] that a shadow, or more than a shadow — but it made no sound — passed from before us to one side as we came out into the passage" (264–265).

The ghostly part of Paxton's narrative is also one that places emphasis on the two types of agency involved: human and ghostly. For this reason, attention shifts to the moral aspect of the events. Paxton has been haunted by a presence that has tried to "thwart" him and he despairs of ever being forgiven for his trespassing and sacrilege. He reports on a sense of menace: "All the while he [the ghostly guardian] was there trying to thwart me" (266). What is important to note is that this part is no longer occupied with knowledge, but with actions. Also, typically of M. R. James's stories, the researcher has now turned

into the hounded "patient." Moreover, Paxton's troubled mental state is transmitted to the two men: "nerves are infectious," we are told (264). When assisting Paxton in a fervid attempt to put back the crown, they become sensible of the ghost's malevolence: "An acute, an arid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment" (268). Unlike an angry dog's, however, this hostile presence is inconspicuous, avoiding the focus of his patients' vision and feeding on, as it were, their "nerves" and superstitious dread: "Sometimes, you know, you see him, and sometimes you don't, just as he pleases, I think: he is there, but he has some power over your eyes" (266). The metaphor of an angry dog emphasises the presence of suspense in the concluding part of the story. Paxton's research being over, the reader's curiosity is oriented towards the future. As the main offender and patient must be punished, closure is to be expected: "[...] the snares of death overtook him" (270). The reader may doubt how well-founded Paxton's fears are as he keeps repeating that is a doomed man: "'[...] but I'm not forgiven. I've got to pay for the miserable sacrilege still'" (269–270). Also the main narrator assures us of the inevitability of the retribution, and does so in a rather straightforward language: "I think he would have been got at somehow, do what we might. Anyhow, this is what happened" (270). Accordingly, the final chapter of the story recounts how Paxton and his friends are "thwarted" in their attempt to prevent the anticipated ghostly retribution.

This type of arrangement of events on the plane of the *sjužet*, in which discovery is followed by pursuit and confrontation, roughly corresponds to Noël Carroll's theory of the discovery plot.[152] It is common in M. R. James, without being used as a fixed format. It makes a great deal of sense, then, to regard his ghosts as agents that fall under the category of the monster as defined by Carroll, especially those whose malevolence is manifest (among them "Count Magnus," "An Episode of Cathedral History," and "The Ash-Tree")[153] and where discovery is followed by confrontation. In "The Mezzotint" and "The Rose

152 On Carroll's theory, the "complex discovery plot" "has four essential movements or functions. They are: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation" (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 99). This general model admits of numerous variations, including the "subtraction" of one or more of the movements (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 108). Carroll arrives at as many as fourteen "basic plot structures" (116).

153 Carroll makes reference to "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book" (*Philosophy of Horror*, 22).

Garden," the *sjužet* is arranged differently. The discovery "movement" (to use Carroll's term) is protracted, and no confrontation follows.

Generally, in M. R. James's stories, past-oriented suspense belongs to the discovery movement of the *sjužet*. The readers are aware that the "discovering" character, the researcher into past secrets, must also at some point become the patient. The readers must get a sense that his investigation may get him into trouble, possibly unleash some malignant presence, as in the case of "A Warning to the Curious." The unleashing itself belongs to the confrontation movement, which may be as facetious as the attack of crumpled linen in "Oh, Whistle" or as grisly as the protagonist's violent death in "A Warning" and "Count Magnus." We conclude, then, that the stories offer a combination of two types of suspense and that M. R. James tried out different arrangements of the two basic movements of the *sjužet*. It must be added, however, that the shift from the one to the other movement has the nature of a shock, if not exactly for the reader, then for the protagonist, who, fixated on his pursuit, tends to ignore "warnings" of danger, which in themselves are obscure and fanciful at best. In more general terms, the Jamesian protagonist, unlike that of the classic Gothic narrative,[154] is separated from the secrets of an alien past he is eager (not only figuratively) to dig up. A shock awakens him to the realisation that he has not been *isolated* from that past, which, when discovered, turns out to be actual as well as threatening.

Uncanny Disclosures: The Pleasures and Perils of Antiquarianism

As we have observed, haunting is possible due to a separation of the past and the present. At the same time, ghost stories express the belief that this temporal disjointedness can be overcome. They are fantasies of continuity restored by supernatural interventions. Variations of scale are of course possible. In *Hamlet*, the ghost intervenes to repair, as it were, the discontinuity caused by his

154 For a recent attempt at refining the concept of "Gothic" suspense in the context of Oedipal and detective narrative, see my article "The Oedipal and the Gothic: The Mechanics of Suspense in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Two Poirot Investigations." *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature* 10 (2022): 39–51.

violent death. His intervention makes it impossible for Claudius to start a new era in Denmark's history, as announced in the public speech he makes when we see him for the first time at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 2. The line "Now for ourself..." (1.2.26) is suggestive of this hope. But the ghost has already appeared and the castle is haunted; the present is in the grip of the past.[155] Similarly, but on a much greater scale, supernatural powers in *The Castle of Otranto* are at work to prevent another usurper, Manfred, from establishing his "race" in the place of the previous, lawful one. The gigantic helmet falling from the sky at the beginnig of the story crushes Manfred's son to death, thus making sure that the crime that made the usurpation possible is not forgotten. At the bottom of such narratives is a misrepresentation of temporality as we know it from the realm outside human affairs. Ghost stories represent and expose the absurd nature of human time, which in extreme cases may not only cease to progress, but even change its course. If ghost stories are fantasies of unnatural time, this makes them, not less, but more human.

In Part I of this book, we examined one major historical discontinuity, that between ancient and modern times, between "the dark ages of Christianity" and the "empire of superstition" (to recall Walpole's phrases) and enlightened Protestantism. In Part II, we have already seen how M. R. James's stories are concerned with vagaries of human time. Now I want to address the way in which uncanny manifestations of the past reveal cultural and ideological tensions between superstition and modernity, tensions which make haunting effective. If M. R. James's allegedly trivial pursuits make any serious claim — as I believe they do, despite his disclaimers — then it consists in the way they make the readers aware that human time, in addition to its personal dimension, is also profoundly historical and cultural.

Generally, the antiquarianism of his protagonists comes down to the idea that the past — for instance, a particular period in local or national history — has no actual meaning for how things are in the present. Thus, in "Oh, Whistle," Professor Parkins, having cleaned his find and having in part deciphered the Latin inscription, considers presenting it to a museum (74). This, however, will not be allowed to happen. Instead, M. R. James has Parkins *use* the artefact. The act of blowing into it *re*animates it. This, in turn, causes the past to reappear in the shape of a spectre, which is even more difficult to make sense

155 This is one way to interpret Hamlet's line "The time is out joint" (1.5.196).

of than the inscription. As I have emphasised, the use of Latin is significant. For one thing, it seems to be as inscrutable as the ghost. But also, both the scholar, whose Latin is a little "rusty," and the reader are alike in the failed attempts to make sense of what is happening. This is M. R. James's way of making the discontinuity palpable.

As we have seen, M. R. James has invented a scientific discipline for Parkins, making him a "Professor of Ontography" (57).[156] The term suggests a descriptive science of being, a science of what is, of reality, fact, nature.[157] The language in which he expresses his views at the beginning of the story does allow us to label Parkins as a materialist: the opinion that "[...] such things [ghosts] might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred" ("Oh, Whistle," 59; already quoted). Clearly, his refusal to admit ghosts into his world has a religious and ideological underpinning; in other words, we may see in him a model rationalist of the Hobbesian kind, for whom there is no conflict between religion and empiricist ontology. If Parkins is a man who believes that he has left behind a world of exploded superstitions, then M. R. James's irony consists in making him step right back into that other world. Enlightened scientism, with its empiricism and materialism, is also a type of hubris. The temptation to do a little research outside his narrow field of expertise leads to the discovery of the whistle, and this in turn to the haunting, first imaginary, then real. These uncanny experiences and events eventually make Parkins change his opinion on certain matters. He has been "cured" of his blinkered worldview, which in principle eliminated the supernatural.[158]

We have observed M. R. James's reticence about the supernatural element in the story as preventing the reader from fully making sense of the ghostly

156 In "The Mezzotint" we read about "ophiology," which S. T. Joshi identifies as a science of serpents (editor's note in *"Count Magnus" and Other Ghost Stories*, 265, note 13).

157 S. T. Joshi translates the title into "Professor of Reality" and explains that *onto* refers "to existence in general or specific existing entities," adding that there is the suggestion of scepticism concerning "the existence of spirits or of the supernatural" (*Count Magnus" and Other Ghost Stories*, 271). Brian Cowlishaw's gloss, namely that Parkins "studies what-writing-is," is dubious; "'A Warning to the Curious': Victorian Science and the Awful Unconscious in M. R. James's Ghost Stories," in *Warnings to the Curious*, ed. Joshi and Pardoe, 165.

158 This worldview is of course that of Sherlock Holmes with his method for the empirical verification of facts. As he famously says in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire": "'The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply'" (Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, vol. II (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 1558.

intrusion. Critics have tried to unravel the meaning of the sparse allusions. Brian Cowlishaw notes that "the Templars, who some believe to be the precursory organization to the Freemasons [...], have long figured in conspiracy theories both supernatural and secular."[159] John A. Taylor observes a connection of the disreputable Templars with the larger problem of Catholicism:

> [B]ecause Parkins found the whistle in the ruins of a Templar chapel, with the Templars reputed to be heretics and idolaters, the reader is persuaded to accept the terrifying consequence – especially when accompanied by the anti-Catholic rantings of Parkins's golf partner Colonel Wilson, who sees the sinister hand of the Papacy everywhere and calls him a Sadducee when he doubts the existence of ghosts.[160]

This comment pertinently points out that an M. R. James story is not indifferent to the ideological tensions which energised the Gothic. In opposition to the scepticism of Parkins, we find not only the heresy and idolatry represented by the Templars, but also the character of Colonel Wilson, who – his "ranting" notwithstanding – represents moderation in matters of belief. When discussing common superstitions, like the belief that a strong wind can be summoned by whistling, the Colonel readily admits that "there's generally something at the bottom of what these country-folk hold to, and have held to for generations" (69). When Parkins reaffirms his scepticism concerning the supernatural ("I am, in fact, a convicted disbeliever in what is called the 'supernatural'," 69), the Colonel calls him a Sadducee, a designation which – it will be recalled – Hobbes's polemicists levelled against (his) materialism.[161] Taking this into account, we cannot be stretching things too far if we transfer "Hobbism" to our Professor of Ontography. We have seen that such leaps over vast periods of historical time are not uncommon in ghost stories.

In fact, M. R. James consistently revives anti-Catholic prejudice in making the Colonel suspect the local vicar of crypto-Catholicism:

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159 Cowlishaw, "'A Warning to the Curious,'" 166.

160 John Alfred Taylor, "'If I'm Not Careful': Innocents and Not-So-Innocents in the Stories of M. R. James," in *Warnings to the Curious*, ed. Joshi and Pardoe, 197.

161 At the end of the seventeenth century, ghost stories were propagated in order to fight "Sadducism" and "Hobbism"; see Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World*, 42. See 41–42 above.

> And then Parkins narrated the manner of his discovery of the whistle, upon hearing which the Colonel grunted, and opined that, in Parkins's place, he should himself be careful about using a thing that had belonged to a set of Papists, of whom, speaking generally, it might be affirmed that you never knew what they might have been apt to. From this topic he diverged to the enormities of the Vicar, who had given notice on the previous Sunday that Friday would be the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle, and that there would be service at eleven o'clock in the church. This and other similar proceedings constituted in the Colonel's view a strong presumption that the Vicar was a concealed Papist, of not a Jesuit; and Parkins, who could not very readily follow the Colonel in this region, did not disagree with him. (70–71)[162]

While Parkins's scepticism represents an attitude opposite to the rampant and possibly demonic superstitiousness of the Templars, the Colonel occupies a middle position. At the same time, the passage shows that, as well as making him a figure that stands for moderation as regards the existence of ghosts, M. R. James uses him to summon the spectre of "Popery," which apparently has never lain quietly in the cultural grave to which it was committed by the Reformation.[163] As a matter of fact, both these gentlemen, albeit in two different ways, represent the post-Reformation mind-set.

The assault of "ancient" superstitions upon the sceptic culminates in the farcical attack already mentioned. A ghost with the "face *of crumpled linen*" may not meet Carroll's criteria of monstrosity ("There seemed absolutely nothing material about it save the bed-clothes of which it had made itself a body," 77), and yet, the encounter is a powerful shock.[164] So much so that the hapless scholar is brought to the verge of this world: "He would either have fallen out of the window or else lost his wits. But it is not so evident what more the creature that came in answer to the whistle could have done than frighten" (76–77). For the Colonel, the incident is a confirmation of his theory of some Papist

162 Worthy of note in this passage is the allusion to Doubting Thomas.

163 It is perhaps pointless to speculate which of the conflicting beliefs were M. R. James's own. Michael Cox suggests in his edition of the stories that M. R. James may have conceived at least some of his stories as ironic attacks on "rationalistic debunking of supernatural events" (see note above, in the section devoted to Hobbes; 41–42, ft. 21).

164 In the 1968 BBC adaptation, we see Parkins (played by Michael Hordern) in a foetal position, sucking his thumb. This is an excellent way to convey his shock.

conspiracy: "The whole thing, he said, served to confirm his opinion of the Church of Rome" (77). Oddly, this prejudice rubs off onto Parkins. Both his scepticism and his powers of self-control seem to have been considerably weakened and he now responds with something like superstitious fear to various objects, among which is found a priestly garment: "He cannot even now see a surplice hanging on a door quite unmoved [...]" (77). In this way, in the final sentence of the story, M. R. James finishes his account of a revival of a long-buried-yet-undead-past, the whistle supplying a vibrant linkage of sorts between the ancient and the modern worlds. The joke is on the traumatised sceptic.

In his earliest story, "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," M. R. James uses similar devices,[165] but arguably to a more powerful (less facetious?) effect, given the pronounced demonic content (see the passage describing the "monster," already quoted on pp. 122–123). It will be recalled that in this story an English tourist ("a Cambridge man" by the name of Dennistoun) pays a visit to Saint Bertrand's Church in "a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees, not very far from Toulouse" (1). From the start, the cultural distance between "our Englishman" (who is a Presbyterian, as we find out at the end of the story) and the French "sacristan" is made prominent. The odd behaviour of "the little, dry, wizened old man" makes him "an unexpectedly interesting object of study" (1). Dennistoun is in no small degree surprised when he sees evidence of this man's idolatry, which is related to a picture that depicts one of Saint Bertrand's miracles. Ominously, the scene represents the rescuing of a man from the clutches of the devil. The Englishman, typically conceited, is sure that this is merely "a daub," devoid of artistic value. He is utterly confounded when, upon turning round, he sees the sacristan "on his knees, gazing at the picture with the eye of a suppliant in agony [...]" (3). This makes Dennistoun put down the Frenchman as "a monomaniac," which he does with satisfaction, having thus been able to label and file off this unintelligible and disturbing behaviour.

Dennistoun's suspicions are not fully dissipated. After leaving the cathedral and being offered to examine some old books, he wonders whether he is "being decoyed into some purlieu [district] to be made away with as a supposed rich

165 Cox calls "Canon Alberic" "in many ways the quintessential M. R. James ghost story." Cox goes on to explain: "Here, as elsewhere, James dramatises with great skill — and with touches of characteristic humour — the unlooked-for revelation of an alien order of things, of a wholly malevolent Beyond, linked to our world by a perplexing and dangerous logic [...]" ("Introduction," xxi–xxii).

Englishman" (4). What arrests his attention when inside the sacristan's house is "a tall crucifix which reached almost to the ceiling on one side" above the chest containing the priceless scrapbook mentioned in the story's title. After striking what seems to him an unbelievable bargain, Dennistoun is on his way out, at which point the sacristan's daughter presents him with "a silver crucifix and chain for the neck" (9). He accepts the gift out of politeness and conceals his scepticism. Free indirect speech reveals his thoughts: "Well, really, Dennistoun hadn't much use for these things; what did mademoiselle want for it?" (9).[166] This ends the first part of the story, and the several hints just examined make palpable the cultural distance that M. R. James deploys between his protagonist and the alien setting. Dennistoun may be an expert in church architecture and medieval manuscripts (he can immediately assess the value of an "ancient" volume), and yet he has what he believes to be a sane distance of rational disbelief as regards the world to which belonged the objects that attract his interest. We find in him the familiar if odd blending of knowledge and expertise with ignorance and cultural aloofness. Typically of the Jamesian protagonist, Dennistoun's "antiquarianism" consists in a blinkered interest in the past, in artefacts dislodged from their proper context and function. The stories repeatedly set this attitude up for shock and ridicule.

The story's ironic conclusion stages a restoration of both the context and the function: the demon visits Dennistoun and the crucifix protects him against its assault. There is no need to study the passage (already quoted) that describes the appearance of the ancient demon. Instead, let us examine Dennistoun's response, which has the expected admixture of superstitious terror. No trace left now of the aloofness of an educated Englishman, this scene of confrontation

166 The crucifix business is reminiscent of the scene in *Dracula* (1897) in which an old Romanian woman presents Jonathan Harker — on his way to Dracula Castle — with a similar gift: "[...] taking a crucifix from her neck offered it to me." Bram Stoker makes the cultural distance more explicit than M. R. James: "I did not know — comments the confused Englishman in his journal — what to do, for as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous [...]." The Norton editor's footnote is also helpful: "After the Oxford Movement of the 1830s and early 1840s, which sought to revitalize the Church of England by reviving certain Roman practices, Victorian Anglicanism was particularly suspicious of anything that smacked of Catholic relics and rituals." Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 13 (both the passage and the footnote).

(like that in "Oh, Whistle") is one of shock and humiliation. The narrator recounts the event with a degree of compassion:

> The feelings which this horror stirred in Dennistoun were the intensest physical fear and the most profound mental loathing. What did he do? What could he do? He has never been quite certain what words he said, but he knows that he spoke, that he grasped blindly at the silver crucifix, that he was conscious of a movement towards him on the part of the demon, and that he screamed with the voice of an animal in hideous pain. (11)

There is in this incident the expected degree of obscurity, but, at the same time, also typically of M. R. James's little nightmares, a *re-enactment* of past horrors. Dennistoun relives a scene represented in one of the pictures found in the scrap-book, which he believed to be a collection of ancient and therefore harmless curiosities. The story leaves us with a lingering suspicion that the original owner of the book, Canon Alberic de Mauléon, like the sacristan after him, was to the end of his life pestered by the demon represented in the picture. Dennistoun destroys the picture after his sinister encounter, and then, his scepticism gone, ends up ordering "a trental [a series] of masses for Alberic de Mauléon's rest" (12). We can see in his decision an attempt to bridge the gap between "the dark ages of Christianity" and the post-Reformation world.[167]

It would be pointless to draw conclusions concerning M. R. James's use of religious content on the basis of only two (out thirty odd) of his stories. There is no doubt that in both "Canon Alberic" and in "Oh, Whistle" he conjures up so-called Catholic superstitions to produce the desired effect of ghostly assault and affliction. This is not to imply that M. R. James found this element indispensable. Superstitious beliefs belong to a larger framework without which it would be impossible to imagine a credible ghost story. In the simplest terms, the ghost story thrives on the tension between the "ancient" and the "modern," and in our analysis of Hobbes's debunking of pagan demonology *and* its perpetuation in Christian ghost-lore we could see the strength of this tension. From Hobbes's point of view, the demon in the scrapbook illustrates such pagan

167 On the (Catholic) tradition of prayers for the dead at the end of the Middle Ages, see Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 21. We read here that trental is "a set of thirty requiem masses, said on the same day or on successive days." See page 32 above.

pollutions of the Christian world. On the one hand, the demon is an antediluvian creature; mention is made — in an allusion to Isaiah — of "night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon" ("Canon Alberic," 12). On the other, it responds to the crucifix in the expected fashion, which testifies to its belonging to that world. A review of the other stories discloses a similar narrative pattern, that of the bringing to life of seemingly exploded or "long buried" beliefs. Seen from a slightly different perspective, the pattern means overcoming scepticism in the afflicted protagonist though a shock, but also making him alive, as it were, to the meaning of remnants of the past.

Little wonder, then, that religion plays a significant role also in stories in which Catholicism (or rather, ideas related to Catholicism) is not expressly mentioned or dealt with, as is the case in "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas," which has an ostensible medieval setting, with a figure of a clergyman not unlike that of Canon Alberic in its centre. Demonology and witchcraft are a major theme in other stories: "Count Magnus," "Casting the Runes," "Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance," "Ash Tree," "An Episode of Cathedral History." Religious controversy is an explicit concern in "The Uncommon Prayer Book," and in "The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral" M. R. James has chosen an Anglican minister, Cambridge-educated Doctor of Divinity and archdeacon, Dr Haynes, for the story's patient. The last-named story in the above list will merit a closer analysis.

"The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral," which recounts the persecution of a clergyman by a demonical animal, is similar in this respect to a ghost story by Sheridan Le Fanu regarded as "archetypal,"[168] namely, "Green Tea." However, unlike Le Fanu's protagonist, the afflicted archdeacon in M. R. James's story, Dr Haynes, is guilty of causing the death of the man he wanted to supplant in this office. "The Stalls" has the usual element of detection with a supernatural twist to it. The narrator (another Jamesian alter ego, an antiquary busy cataloguing manuscripts in a college library) conducts his inquest on the basis of Dr Haynes's diary discovered in a tin box. The story opens with a quotation from an obituary, but the circumstances of his premature and "appalling" death are withheld from the reader. This revelation is postponed to the one-but-last page, the story proper recounting the events that lead up to the incident. The supernatural element is related to a written curse, "a charm or a spell," inside

168 In the words of Jack Sullivan (the title of chapter I in his *Elegant Nightmares*). Scholars differ on this point.

a sinister wooden figure. These "figures of death" — previously found "on the stalls" of the cathedral, but carved from the local "Hanging Oak" — are capable of detecting and then punishing any "bloody hand" that has come near them. In this case, the bloody hand is that of the guilty archdeacon. The antiquary's investigation takes him far into the past, the date stated on the card with the curse being 1699 and the death of the former archdeacon taking place in February 1810. Throughout the main part of the story, based on Dr Haynes's diary, the latter's religious zeal is emphasised, in contrast not only to his predecessor, but also to such irreligious freethinkers as Shelley, Byron, and Voltaire (179). However, the investigation leads to the discovery of a second story, a story of murder, committed — in the opinion of the culprit — for the good of the church and the community ("acted for the best," 168). The solution to the mystery is supplied by a letter to the archdeacon from a former maid-servant, whom Dr Haynes used as an accessory to the crime offering her the substantial reward of "a quarterly payment of £25" (167). Also here the conclusion is bitterly ironic, as an intervention of dark forces seems to be needed to bring justice to the powerful, whose crimes might otherwise go unpunished. This Gothic pattern is familiar, but in this story the setting is Protestant and therefore domestic, the distance being chiefly temporal.

Before concluding this chapter, let us examine "The Treasure of Abbot Thomas," a story which is among the best known in M. R. James's ghostly *oeuvre*. I want to focus specifically on how Latin is used to set in place links between the past and the present. Common in the stories, here this linkage plays an especially pronounced role, as becomes evident at the very beginning, where the reader finds a page-long paragraph of a text in Latin dated 1712. Helpfully, the story's "antiquary" translates this passage; indeed, the fact of the English immediately following the Latin original may be a suggestion on the part of the author that his reader's knowledge of the dead language a little "rusty" (as in the case of Professor Parkins in "Oh, Whistle"). If that was M. R. James's joke, then it is hidden behind the protagonist's internal monologue: "'I suppose I shall have to translate this,' said the antiquary to himself as he finished copying the above lines from that rather rare and exceedingly diffuse book, the *Sertum Steinfeldense Norbertinum*. [...]" (78). The passage mentions some hidden treasure which, as the legend has it, belonged to the abbot named in the title. It soon turns out that the Latin text also contains clues to its location. Swallowing this bait, the researcher follows up on those clues, which involves

unriddling inscriptions in painted glass, adapted from the Vulgate. The research ends in a masterly Jamesian crescendo: as the antiquary attempts to extract the treasure from the well mentioned in the passage ("*puteo in atrio*"), he falls into the embrace of an obscene creature guarding it.

The overall pattern is of course familiar: antiquarian research leading up to sinister disclosure. But an expert reader is perfectly aware of the importance of the circumstantial detail in M. R. James, the sketchy but all-important historical frame which comes into view as the protagonist unravels the skein of the mystery. To begin with, the date of the abbot's death is put down as 1529. The information that follows the Latin passage explains why the research will be carried out in England, in "the Abbey Church of Steinfeld," while the original setting is Germany:

> Shortly after the Revolution, a very large quantity of painted glass made its way from the dissolved abbeys in Germany and Belgium to this country [England] and may now be seen adorning various of our parish churches, cathedrals, and private chapels. Steinfeld Abbey was among the most considerable of these involuntary contributors to our [England's] artistic possessions (I am quoting the somewhat ponderous preamble of the book which the antiquary wrote) and the greater part of the glass from that institution can be identified without much difficulty by the help of either of the numerous inscriptions in which the place is mentioned, or of the subjects of the windows, in which several well-defined cycles or narratives were represented. (79)

This "somewhat ponderous" passage, fine evidence of M. R. James's erudition, puts the reader in the turbulent context of the Reformation, and, while doing so, mentions a genuinely fascinating historical fact, Protestant England serving as refuge to Catholic artwork that may have sustained damage during religious upheavals on the continent. Does this fact — the reader wonders — throw light on the primary narrative, the account of the research, and the story of the Abbot embedded in it?

To be sure, the figure of Abbot Thomas is cast into the mould of monastic concupiscence, the issue itself at the root of the Reformation. For his vice he is duly punished, not only by a premature death (hinted at, at the end of the *Sertum Steinfeldense* passage; "he died rather suddenly," 79), but also by an unquiet hereafter. Like Marley's ghost chained to his cash-boxes and ledgers, the abbot's

ghost is tied to the "ten thousand pieces of gold" (88–89) and haunts the vicinity of the well, keeping guard over the treasure in the company of a frog-like monster. Not unexpectedly, the narrative about the research tells a similar story, if not as gloomy as the legend about the abbot. By way of justifying his pursuit of the treasure, the antiquarian brings up the idea of temptation: "'Well, what would any human being have been tempted to do [...] in my place? Could he have helped setting off as I did to Steinfeld and tracing the secret literally to the fountain-head? I don't believe that he could: anyhow, I couldn't [...]'" (89). And so, like the abbot before him, he will fall into the clutches of the demon: "It [...] *put its arms round my neck*" (95; emphasis in the original).

There are, as I see it, two dimensions to this story. On a small-scale and personal level, it is about the curse or vice of possessiveness attached to any wealth, as the treasure's exorbitant value makes it irresistible.[169] Seen in the larger historical context, things look a little different. The dispossession of monasteries during the Reformation was followed by the transference of some of the most precious possessions (culturally speaking) to another country, to adorn edifices belonging to another era in the religious history of Europe. Thus, on a less personal level, the story hints that a clean transference of property is impossible, for there is always some cultural heritage attached to it. To be sure, no heritage seems to be attached to the mysterious treasure as such; the principal narrator, summoned to Steinfeld by the convalescent antiquary, puts it back where it belongs, which emphasises its mirage-like nature. From a cultural point of view, the stained glass windows are far more important and valuable, as are the Latin texts. M. R. James is suggesting that the historical expertise of the antiquary puts this cultural heritage back in circulation, thus reanimating it. Similarly, the shock sustained by this antiquary is of little consequence. What was important for M. R. James himself, the *actual* antiquary, was the disclosure for the reader of the interpenetration of the divergent religious traditions, and of the way in which the pre-Reformation world haunts "our parish churches, cathedrals, and private chapels" (79).

169 There is a palpable touch of blasphemy in the way snatches of the Latin Bible serve as clues to the riddle of the treasure.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Montague Rhodes James's ghost stories disclose a great deal about his antiquarian fascination with history in general and the medieval cultural heritage in particular. This is not to say that his beliefs and sentiments, to the extent that the stories allow us to construe them, were free from ambivalence. In his capacities of historian and professional antiquarian but also as a person with profound reverence for cultural heritage, he might have been motivated in writing the stories by a desire to shake his readers out of a state of indifference to that heritage and also, more generally, to the innumerable and often tragic personal involvements in historical transformations and doctrinal controversies. No matter how apparently insignificant a remnant or a trace may be, it motivates his fictional antiquaries in their research, and his task as a ghostly author is, as it were, to infect the reader with similar enthusiasm.

Accordingly, we have seen ample evidence that M. R. James's narrative devices have the goal of making the reader into a participant and he does so by representing antiquarian research as an activity capable of generating suspense. At the same time, he seems to have been aware of the deep and widening gap that separates the past from the present, which explains the importance he attached to a cosy setting at the outset of the adventures. For his protagonists, the past is a land glimpsed at a distance, a fairyland devoid of significance for the present. They are dimly aware of the possible consequences of their pursuits and discoveries until they are shocked out of their complacency. We might recall Parkins's idea that the whistle that used to belong to the Templars would make a fine museum exhibit. The fact that his blowing into it summons a ghost has the meaning of restoring the artefact to its original function, premodern and magical. In "An Episode in Cathedral History," which perhaps ought not to be hastily dismissed as M. R. James's silly attempt at a vampire narrative, a death-dealing creature is released to plague the neighbourhood when renovation of the cathedral begins. Seen in cultural terms, the moral seems to be that renovation means obliteration. Like the digging up and melting down of an Anglo-Saxon

crown in the context of "A Warning to the Curious," it may be an act of barbarism. M. R. James's ghosts are active in preventing modernity from obliterating the past. At the same time, they are only what they are: spectres, and therefore virtually powerless to stop the futureward progress of history and modernity.

The narrative movement in an M. R. James story is counter-temporal in the sense of preventing erasure and making traces of the past signify and live again. He repeatedly makes the readers assume the position of his protagonist, a person who is at best dimly aware of the cultural heritage of the artefact he is handling, which however does not make him the least bit less presumptuous. The narrative movement may be from the initial obscurity and ignorance towards disclosure and awareness, but the ghosts and demons that accompany disclosures suggest that the past will never be entirely perspicuous or transparent. Latin inscriptions and the difficulty of translating them and deciphering their meaning make both the protagonists and the readers aware of the temporal and cultural distance over which the narrative is suspended. In Part I of this study, I approached this gap with the help of the enlightened philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and then examined its role in the rise of the literary Gothic. I also looked closely at two Victorian ghost stories to identify similar sources of inspiration in authors writing a hundred years after the publication of *The Castle of Otranto.* M. R. James's stories supply further evidence of the inspirational power of the "ancient"/modern divide.

S. T. Joshi in his history of the weird tale has objected to M. R. James's reluctance to construct fictive alternatives to the real world, a deficiency which, in his opinion, greatly impairs the weirdness of the latter's fiction in comparison with such masters as Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and H. P. Lovecraft. Joshi's observation is pertinent, although the critique thus implied is open to debate, as is, incidentally, the applicability of the category of weirdness itself. True, M. R. James's ghost stories are not conceived as so many doors through which readers may access another world, a world — like Lovecraft's Arkham and Innsmouth or Blackwood's Egypt — open for thrilling yet comfortable immersion. Without attempting to measure the depth or extent of M. R. James's weirdness, let us observe that his malevolent revenants and odious demons invade a world that the readers are expected, nostalgically, to recognise as theirs, despite the "slight haze" of temporal distance. Not only does this not impair the uncanny effect, but may, and in fact does, enhance it. M. R. James's intention was to make his readers a little uneasy about their

daylight world: "If I'm not very careful" — the reader is expected to conclude — "something of this kind may happen to me!"[1] His use of Latin, his quotations from the Bible, his profound cultural references, his allusions to remote historical events — these are not only hints to mysteries within the stories, but are also intended as warnings. Human life may be future-oriented, but it is impossible to cut it off from history and cultural heritage. The antiquaries in the stories seem to be aware of this, and their fascination with the past still leads them into trouble. Fascination — M. R. James seems to be saying — may be disrespectful, especially when it is coupled with intellectual presumption. The safest realm for its exercise is fiction.

In the ghost stories, the device which conveys the inalienable obscurity of the past is that of narrative embedding. This is somewhat paradoxical considering that an inset narrative's function is to fetch the past into the discourse, or *sjužet*. However, as we have seen, in M. R. James, embedding is coupled with obscurity and reticence. In other words, the flashbacks never attain the form of a coherent narrative. Rather, they are skeletal, like many of the ghosts, in contrast to the materiality of the artefact, the latter tangibly present but virtually mute. The deficient and frustrating manner of representing the past is intentional on the part of the storyteller, whose goal is to make the reader actively participate by fashioning a tale of horror based on data sparingly provided by the author/narrator.

The essential insight is as obvious as it is vital. There is always a narrative attached to an artefact. Indeed, narrative is a legitimate defining characteristic of the artefact. Like cultural heritage itself, the artefact is also fundamentally "narrativist." M. R. James's reticence and his use of obscurity are not merely frustrating. They should be seen as an invitation, which he extends to readers, to participate in attempts to "read" artefacts. Ultimately, in my opinion, his fiction is underpinned by reverence towards the past and its secrets, many of them bizarre and horrific, spectrally present in its obscure and mute remnants. The antiquarian pursuits of the protagonists, their occasionally questionable motivation notwithstanding, are driven by a desire to reduce distance, but the past repels even as it attracts, and historical research has its perils. The fact that, in a gifted author, the ghost story is capable of producing suspense is evidence that the past may be as unpredictable as the future is usually thought to be.

1 MRJ, "Appendix," 338.

Appendix
Narrativity, the Fantastic and the Ghost

In this appendix, I address the concept of the fantastic due to its role in discussions of ghost stories and supernatural fiction.

I will proceed in the following manner: First, I will discuss the fantastic in the context of Tzvetan Todorov's theory and its development by Noël Carroll in the latter's theory of art-horror. I will go on to briefly analyse three examples of the fantastic in ghost stories by Charles Dickens and Sheridan Le Fanu. Next, and to conclude, I will discuss the fantastic within a broad definition of narrativity.

1.

The concept of the fantastic has been present in studies of the ghost story and Gothic fiction due to the influence of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic genre as well as the criticism and developments it elicited.

Todorov defined the fantastic as an evanescent genre, directly related to hesitation as a state of mind of the reader related to the nature of a fictional event or events. In his essay "The Ghost Stories of Henry James" (1969), Todorov gives the following one-paragraph summary of his theory:

> An inexplicable phenomenon occurs; to obey his determinist mentality, the reader finds himself obliged to choose between two solutions: either to reduce this phenomenon to known causes, to the natural order, describing the unwonted events as imaginary, or else to admit the existence of the supernatural and thereby to effect a modification in all the representations which form his image of the world. The fantastic lasts as long as this uncertainty lasts; once the reader opts for one solution or the other, he is in the realm of the uncanny or of the marvelous.[1]

1 Tzvetan Todorov, "The Ghost Stories of Henry James," in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 179. For an alternative passage

Even if faulty as to its promise of theoretical universality,[2] Todorov's definition has proven both inspirational and useful in discussions of Gothic, supernatural, horror fictions, which, it seems to me, indirectly confirms its relevance. In what follows, I examine Noël Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* as an example of a critical development of Todorov's theory.[3]

While Carroll recognizes his debt, he finds Todorov's definition unsatisfactory when applied to horror plots. As Carroll points out, "[...] the category of the fantastic-marvelous is not tight enough to give us an adequate picture of art-horror. [...] The concept of the fantastic-marvelous, that is, doesn't zoom in on the particular affect that the horror genre is predicated upon. Even if horror belongs to the genus of the fantastic-marvelous, it constitutes a distinctive species" (17). Similarly to the horror story, the ghost story is also "predicated on" fear rather than hesitation. In other words, if there is hesitation, then it is fearful, or "horrific." Carroll's analysis of horrific suspense has the aim of "zooming in on" this specific "affect." His complex discovery plot consists of four "movements" (onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation), and the fantastic (in Todorov's sense) characterizes only one of them, confirmation, or the making sure that the monster exists.

The difference between the two genres (the fantastic and art-horror) becomes clearer when we consider the idea of agency (as part of the extended definition of narrativity, presented below). The categories with which Todorov defines the fantastic (hesitation, uncertainty) are mental ones. Yet horror stories are not about mental happenings, no matter how real these can be, let alone about those in the mind of the reader.[4] The monster is a physical

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in Todorov's book, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 40.

2 It is not my goal here to defend the idea against the accusations — mostly virulent and destructive — levelled against it by Stanislaw Lew in his 1974 article "Todorov's Fantastic Theory of Literature" (trans. from Polish by Robert Abernathy), *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 1 (4/1974): 227–237, https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/4/lem4art.htm, accessed September 3, 2022.

3 "The Fantastic" is the heading of a section of Carroll's book (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 144 ff). Writes Carroll: "[...] though the pure fantastic plot is not an example of the horror narrative, thinking about the fantastic reveals important features of many of the horror stories of literature and film" (144).

4 We must not forget that when Todorov speaks of hesitation he means a state of the *reader's* mind (the text makes the reader "hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation

entity and must be confronted as such. What matters is the extent to which the course of events is affected by non-human (monstrous) agency; it is not what protagonists think or believe, but what they are able to undertake and do to combat the evil that the monster represents and embodies. Even if, for a duration of the discovery and confirmation phases, the human figures may have doubts as to the reality of the monster and its nature, the plot eventually moves on to the next phase, that of confrontation. Crudely speaking, horror plots are about real events, not mental ones. It is the active nature of the monster that makes sure, as it were, that the plot moves forward after the hesitation has ceased.

For the above reasons, the categories of hesitation or uncertainty are not relevant as genre-defining. Moreover, the ontological essence of the monster — whether it is natural (e.g., the shark in *Jaws*) or supernatural (the demon in *The Exorcist*) — is, from the point of view of the plot, irrelevant as long as it is appropriately "horrific" (17).

Moreover, also in plots in which hesitation never ceases, examples of what Todorov calls "pure fantastic," agency rather than hesitation may be of paramount importance. In Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," regardless of the reality of the ghosts (their status as real in the world of the story), significant is the human factor, which is the governess's belief in the ghosts' presence and their active malignity (the ghosts' desire to corrupt or otherwise harm the children in her charge). It is this belief that makes her act, and thus human agency is the essential factor that drives the plot of the story forward.

2.

As should become clearer presently, ghost stories may, and often do, zoom in on the idea of belief, thus raising various metaphysical questions in the minds of readers and in those of the protagonists. The question remains open, however, about the role which the fantastic type of hesitation plays in the plot. We need to ask, in other words, about the relation between hesitation and agency.

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of the events described"; "the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text [...]"). Hesitation in the mind of the protagonist is of secondary importance as it does not determine the fantastic nature of the plot; *The Fantastic*, 33.

Let us now examine the idea of fantastic hesitation in the following three stories: Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and Sheridan Le Fanu's "Green Tea" and "The Familiar" (both from the 1872 collection *In a Glass Darkly*).[5]

To start with the relatively simple case of the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, the opening chapter, "Marley's Ghost," recounts an exchange between the Ghost and Scrooge in which, in a facetious mode, Dickens rehashes the usual doubts and rebuttals. Scrooge's famous pun on "grave" — "There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are" (67)[6] — is in fact (as the narrator assures us) an attempt on the part of the old man to suppress his mounting conviction that the ghost may in fact be real: "He tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones" (67). There is indeed in this scene, and in the figure of this Ghost itself, a combination of "smartness" (entertainment) and terror, for what convinces Scrooge (and the reader) of the reality of the apparition is not so much the evidence of the senses as the "bone marrow" certitude that the spectre represents something real, if not in the shallow sense of "fact," which as we know Dickens vehemently despised. Accordingly, the reality of the ghostly in the story is confirmed in the spiritual transformation of the protagonist, from an egoist into a benefactor. The reader also, if she finds herself capable of similar reformation, will in equal measure attest to that reality. If there is an element of fantastic hesitation that Dickens's story elicits, it consists in the challenge the story as a whole makes upon the reader's moral sense.

For one thing, Le Fanu's supernatural stories are designed to make a more profound *intellectual* impression on the reader than those of Dickens in the sense of being attempts to shake the reader's metaphysical complacency and involve her in speculations on the nature of the universe.[7] This — it seems to me — is the purpose of having the stories in *In a Glass Darkly* mediated

5 Details of the publication history of Le Fanu's stories ("Green Tea" was serialised in Dickens's *All the Year Round* in 1869) can be found in the Oxford World's Classics editions: *In a Glass Darkly* (1993/2008, ed. Robert Tracy) and *Green Tea and Other Weird Stories* (2020, ed. Aaron Worth).

6 Charles Dickens, *Complete Ghost Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2009).

7 In the context of supernatural fiction, I find the term "metaphysics" especially useful, as referring to the philosophical features of a story's fictive world. Stories like those in Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly* tease the reader with suggestions of a worldview and a philosophy

through the figure of Dr Martin Hesselius, the metaphysical physician and an advocate of the metaphysical system of Immanuel Swedenborg. In other words, Le Fanu's handling of the supernatural, due to its intellectual seriousness, is closer to Todorov's notion of the fantastic than Dickens's. And yet it is doubtful whether it was the author's goal to produce in the reader a state of hesitation in the sense of metaphysical uncertainty.

"Green Tea" recounts a bizarre case of persecution. A clergyman, Rev. Mr Jennings (as Hesselius refers to him) is tormented and finally driven to suicide by a malignant supernatural creature in the shape of a monkey. Le Fanu does leave a "loophole" for a "natural" (scientific) explanation — to use the phrase which Todorov borrows from M. R. James[8] — the suggestion being that Jennings may have suffered from hereditary insanity ("hereditary suicidal mania"[9]). The conceptual solution, however, is not what matters. What does is the patient's (i.e., Jennings's)[10] conviction, or the interpretation he puts on his affliction as a clergyman and a theologian. Religiousness — as a set of beliefs that ought to make human life comprehensible — might be expected to come to his succour in this dire need. In fact, it condemns him, as he is trying to deal with his affliction, which — from a rational point of view — is little short of absurd: persecution by a malignant spectral monkey brought on by the habit of taking green tea.

In "The Familiar," the situation seems to be both different and similar in interesting ways. To begin with, here the victim of supernatural oppression, Sir James Barton, or Captain Barton, is a "reputed free thinker" and "a sceptic,"[11] in sharp contrast to Mr Jennings. As in the case of Scrooge, the reader

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alternative to theirs (and possibly systematically developed in the writings of a philosopher like Hesselius).

8 A loophole "small enough to be unusable"; Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 46. M. R. James's full statement is as follows: "It is not amiss to sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation; but, I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable." "Appendix," in M. R. James, *"Casting the Runes" and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Cox, 339.

9 Sheridan Le Fanu, "Green Tea," in Sheridan Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

10 The word "patient" is here used in the sense M. R. James uses it in his essays on the ghost story: the ghost-afflicted, haunted human protagonist of the ghost story.

11 Sheridan Le Fanu, "The Familiar," in Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly*, 43; "[...] the doctrines upon which he insisted, were, in reality, but too truly the basis of his own fixed belief, if it so

might expect a course of events in which a supernatural experience of some sort would humble or even humiliate such presumption. Moreover, the reader would expect that this protagonist would gladly embrace the rational explanation offered him by other characters (e.g., Barton's would-be father-in-law, who is of the opinion that "the figure which haunted his intended son-in-law was by no means the creation of his [Barton's] imagination, but, on the contrary, a substantial form of flesh and blood, animated by a resolution, perhaps with some murderous object in perspective, to watch and follow the unfortunate gentleman," 68). This, however, is not the case; surprisingly, Barton is disinclined to accept a natural explanation and interprets the otherwise incomprehensible prosecution as retribution. Once more we can observe that the reader's hesitation as to the nature of the fictional events (the actual source of the persecution) is a marginal issue. What matters is the patient's construction of the events and the manner in which his belief influences his mental condition and his decisions.

3.

Finally, I will present an extended definition of narrativity as a theoretical frame for the discussion of issues of the genre of the fantastic, the art-horror and the ghost story.

This definition is a development of an earlier version (published in 2014[12]), which in turn is based on a definition proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan.[13]

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might be called; [...] the subject of the fearful influences I am about to describe, was himself [i.e., Barton], from the deliberate conviction of years, an utter disbeliever in what are usually termed preternatural agencies" (45). Barton's "scepticism" is named on the occasion of the first instance of his persecution by a mysterious stranger who seems to be following him (46). The narrator comments: "So little a matter, after all, is sufficient to upset the pride of scepticism and vindicate the old simple laws of nature within us" (47). This suggests that belief in the reality of the supernatural, rather than disbelief, is the "natural" attitude.

12 Jacek Mydla, "Weird Tales — Weird Worlds," in Jacek Mydla, Agata Wilczek, and Tomasz Gnat, eds., *Nature(s): Environments We Live By in Literary and Cultural Discourses* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014), 91–104.

13 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 8; and Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," in David Herman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29. In her definition, Ryan is chiefly concerned with what the conditions *eliminate*.

The basic conditions of narrativity are as follows:

1. Humanness

The story-world (the represented/portrayed or fictive world) must be populated by human beings or beings who have features essential and common to humanity. There are four such features:

(a) individuality: the protagonists are not types or abstractions;
(b) freedom: they have the capacity to act freely and purposefully. (This defines human agency in the strict and narrow sense, as distinct from habitual, mechanical or purely physiological behaviour.);
(c) intelligence: they have a mental life of their own;
(d) emotional responsiveness: they are capable of a range of emotional responses to what happens to and around them; emotional responsiveness makes possible interactions with others, including empathy.

2. Reality

Significant events and states of affair that make up the plot must be asserted as real.

3. Significance and relevance

They have two aspects, internal and external:

(a) The events and states of affairs must concern the protagonists who inhabit the story-world; these events must be of significance to them and elicit an emotional response from them.
(b) Readers must find the story relevant.

4. Chronology and causal links

Significant events must succeed one another, thus making up a plot (a "chain of events," a "course of action"). There must be causal links between these events. This constitutes the "plane of story" (or the *fabula*).

Rearrangements (violations of chronology, or "anachronies") are possible; they lead to the creation of a "plane of discourse" (or the *sjužet*).

5. Agency

Acting as free, purpose-seeking, and intelligent individuals, the protagonists must bring about some of the events that make up the *fabula* (human agency must co-constitute the *fabula*).

6. Interaction

Some of these events and states of affairs must be brought about by interactions between the protagonists.

7. Participation and closure

The chain of events makes sense in view of human participation in it; it must lead to closure.

Let us now examine the fantastic and art-horror through the lens of this definition of narrativity.

Hesitation in the reader belongs to an order radically different to that of the protagonist. In the latter case, the protagonist's convictions matter to the extent to which they have impact on the course of events in the world of the story (to the extent to which they "translate" into agency). They may and usually do.

The extent to which a story affects the reader's own worldview (here belongs Stanislaw Lem's example of a Borges story[14]) is thus to be regarded as a separate issue, one that concerns reception and not the structure of the fictive world. In other words, this issue belongs to literary pragmatics (the literary work's relation to its readers) as distinct from semantics (the work's relation to what it represents). While the reader's worldview (including her beliefs concerning supernatural phenomena) may be affected by a story (the extent to which she finds the story relevant), that worldview must not be confused with the metaphysics of the fictive world. In fact, as the useful phrase suggests, in the case of ghost stories, the reader's attitude is typically that of "suspension of disbelief." In other words, a ghost story usually does not affect the reader's worldview; it does not engage the reader's "metaphysical" convictions, even when the reader's identification with the protagonist is profound. The difference between Dickens and Le Fanu and their respective treatment of ghostly matter in their fictions is illustrative of this difference.

Lastly, there is the issue of framing. A comprehensive definition of the fantastic must consider stories which represent events as "read," that is, as mediated through a narrative and an interpretation. In such cases, hesitations in the framing narrative may, and commonly do, affect the manner in which a story is read, especially as regards the ontological status of the supernatural. In particular, the teller in his role of the framing narrator may undermine the veracity of the ghost-seeing by suggesting an alternative interpretation of the events which the story's patient has interpreted as marvellous. Of course, it would still be up to the individual reader to decide which "construction" of the events to accept.

14 Lem, "Todorov's Fantastic Theory of Literature," 227–237.

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Jacek Mydla

Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James

Summary

My main goal in *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* is to explore selected "Gothic" narratives and Montague Rhodes James's (1862–1936) ghost stories using the tools of narrative theory. I identify and describe the narrative technique of the classic ghost story, a literary genre of which, in popular recognition, M. R. James is one of the most prominent representatives. A guiding category is that of distance, which binds the analyses together and justifies the division of the book into two parts. In Part I, I focus on the ideological meaning of distance, which animated the rise and future development of the literary Gothic in England of the "Enlightenment" (second half of the seventeenth century) and the Victorian period (second half of the nineteenth century) England. In Part II, I examine M. R. James's use of a wide range of distancing devices whose main purpose was to transform readers into ghost-seers, a category in common use in contemporary subject literature, for example, in Srdjan Smajić's 2010 study *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists. Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*.

What makes ghost stories problematic in the eyes of a literary scholar is the element of the supernatural. Theoreticians tend to sidestep the fictional ghost; even though much has been written about the fictionality of realist and historical narratives, less attention has been paid to works that flaunt their fictionality by depicting supernatural phenomena. In the twenty-first century, however, interest in unrealistic narrative genres is constantly growing. Ghost stories are narratives that manifest their fictionality, but an important assumption is that scepticism (manifested by the characters and the reader, and perhaps also by the author) is a prerequisite for a successful ghost story. My intention is to create a platform for an encounter between narrative theory and the ghost story. I believe and try to show that such encounters and dialogues can be productive, and, in this way, I try to fill the gap in research caused by the fact that narrative theory, for a considerable period of its development, focused on realist fiction. The motivation behind the analyses undertaken in this book is the desire to estimate the extent to which narrative theory can be applied productively to genres such as the mystery story, terror fiction and weird fiction and, more generally, the literary Gothic. M. R. James successfully made ghostly storytelling the chosen province of his activity as fiction author (which occupied him for more than twenty years), which may be an indication that ghost stories are a genre with their own narrative rhetoric.

My perspective in this study is not limited to purely technical issues. It is not only about the possibility of applying the categories offered by narrative theory to ghost stories, but also about a more comprehensive view, one that places narrative technique in a broader cultural and ideological context. In the model of narrative communication proposed by Seymour Chatman (*Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 1980), which presents literature in the form of a box diagram, author and reader represent culture, history and ideology. Just as there are no "culture-free" authors and readers (real or implied), there are no "cultureless" narrators or narratees. It is obvious to the reader of M. R. James's stories that ignoring the broader historical and cultural context means ignoring the very "stuff" from which these stories are made. An important element

of this broader context is the emergence of Gothic literature and the theme of the transition which Horace Walpole (1717–1797), in the preface to *The Castle in Otranto* (1764/1765), described as one from the "ancient" to "modern" world. According to the widely accepted narrative, the ghost story (in the form of Walpole's "Gothic Story") first appeared at a cultural moment that allowed Walpole to portray this "ancient" and distant pre-Reformation world as immersed in the "dark ages of Christianity." Awakened in this way, the spectres of this "ancient old" proved impossible to ward off, and the next century saw an outpouring of ghost stories. Victorian celebrities in the persons of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873), and Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) contributed to the flourishing of the genre, and Dickens's reviving and celebrating the tradition of the Christmas ghost story had a significant impact. This golden period in the development of the genre culminated in the "antiquarian" tales of M. R. James.

Seen in the historical perspective outlined above, the story of "fantastic" or "supernatural" fiction appears in a specific cultural context, which is characterized by rebellion against realism. In this sense, Walpole is the precursor of a story legitimizing content that, in the era in which he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, was not only culturally alien, but also politically suspect, which resonated in the violence of "anti-Gothic" critics. These are represented in this study by Jane Austen (1775–1817) and her satirical novel *Northanger Abbey*. In the novels published during her lifetime, Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), the author with whose popularity Austen was forced to compete, supernatural phenomena are explained rationally, a procedure (the so-called explained supernatural) which can be considered a sign of the author's submission to the Enlightenment. Even Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818), the *enfant terrible* of the genre, constructed in his scandalous novel *The Monk* a world divided ontologically and ideologically into a reality ruled by "superstitions" and an area "already" in the Age of Enlightenment. In this book, I propose to approach the history of literary Gothic in England as a history of repeated attempts to transfer ghosts and ghost-seeing to the native ground, that is, to England, as was the case in many stories of M. R. James. In Part I, I examine two Victorian ghost stories, "The Old Nurse's Story" by Elizabeth Gaskell and "Mad Monkton" by Wilkie Collins. Despite the native English scenery, in both we find a number of distancing measures that indirectly justify the overarching goal, which is to provide the reader with the chilling scenes of haunting and ghost-seeing. In Gaskell, the ghost-seer is English and the ghost is real. In this respect, the story is more unequivocally English in its treatment of the element in the supernatural than the story by Collins, who used a "fantastic" narrative device (in Tzvetan Todorov's understanding of the term), which makes the reader unsure whether the ghost is real or merely imagined. In both Gaskell and Collins, there are characters who see ghosts, confirming the general assumption that a ghost story must contain some form of sensory contact with the supernatural. M. R. James's ghost stories, discussed in Part II of the book, provide numerous examples of similar narrative strategies.

Without getting into speculations about the fascination with the supernatural in an era of "sterile" scientism and aggressive mercantilism, it is difficult to ignore the ideological forces that animate modern and contemporary narratives of the weird kind. Here we will speak of historical and cultural distances, which seem to lie outside the literary works themselves, while deeply permeating their tissue. The analyses presented in the book aim to show that effects of distance — their use and overcoming — lie at the basis of early Gothic stories and later transformations of Gothic conventions. Historically, the tensions between "ancient" times and the present, between the forces of superstition and the prerogatives of reason, between oppression and liberation, have fueled the energetic development of "fantastic" literature in the nineteenth century, making it irresistible even for the great realists of the Victorian era mentioned above. Approximately one third of the book

has been devoted to the analysis of this rich cultural context, and these themes and motifs are an important element of the otherwise technically oriented analysis of individual stories.

In its methodological layer, this study is based on publications of seminal importance for the development of narrative theory, including Gérard Genette's *Discours du récit* (1972) and Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), as well as those discussing selected phenomena (e.g., suspense in Hilary Dannenberg's study *Coincidence and Counterfactuality. Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*). The analyses use key tools and categories, both the more traditional ones (the planes of the *fabula* and the *sjužet*) and the newer ones: anachrony, focalization, and typology of distances. A great deal of attention is paid to the devices and features of mystery and suspense, which build the defining elements of the ghost story genre. Especially significant is their cooperation in creating what I call the suspense potential of mystery. I develop a theory of suspense based on the insights of Manfred Pfister and Noël Carroll (*The Philosophy of Horror*). A ghost is a haunting from the past, but at the same time (as a demon or a monster) it can pose a real threat to the living, especially those whose curiosity leads to the discovery of dark secrets. This is M. R. James's formula of the ghost story.

As mentioned, the book is divided into two parts, which in turn are divided into relatively independent chapters or sections. Part I emphasizes ideological issues, and the starting point is the philosophical condemnation of Catholic doctrine in *Leviathan* (1651) by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), which is discussed in order to contextualize Horace Walpole's justification strategies in his project of the "Gothic story." The idea here is to present Hobbes's philosophy as a radical precursor of enlightened Protestantism and as a significant component of the ideological environment in which — and to some extent *against* which — the Gothic genre emerged. Using the *Leviathan* metaphor, we can say that supernatural fictions animate the "fairytale" (unreal) world of superstition, a world that modern man should consider dead and buried. Part II defines the genre of the ghost story and, through the use of the aforementioned narratological tools, relates the selected literary material to the ideological tensions underlying the Gothic, especially those related to the radical juxtaposition of two worlds: the pre-modern and the modern. This opposition is most often formulated in religious terms, which is a reflection of the breakthrough brought about by the Reformation. Seen in this context, the ghosts that "come to life" in M. R. James's stories — and which, as he claims, demand "gentle treatment" — call for an allegorical interpretation. Typically of M. R. James, the plot consists of an antiquarian curiosity leading a researcher (a "patient") to interfere with the past, which often takes the form of the appropriation of an artifact ("treasure"). Such an object, as it turns out, has its own "ghostly" or "demonic" guardian. Ghosts here acquire the meaning of a "spectrally" surviving past, which refuses to be reduced to the status of a dead and silent exhibit in a modern museum.

Jacek Mydla

Duchy w opowieści: interpretacje narracji gotyckich i opowiadań M. R. Jamesa

Streszczenie

Moim głównym celem w książce *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* jest zbadanie wybranych opowieści „gotyckich" i opowiadań o duchach Montague'a Rhodes'a Jamesa (1862–1936) za pomocą narzędzi teorii narracji. Stosując te narzędzia, usiłuję rozpoznać i opisać technikę narracyjną klasycznej opowieści o duchach, gatunku literackiego, którego – w powszechnym uznaniu – M. R. James jest jednym z najznamienitszych przedstawicieli. Jako kategorii przewodniej używam dystansu, spaja ona analizy i uzasadnia podział książki na dwie części. W części I skupiam się na ideologicznym znaczeniu dystansu: tym, które ożywiało powstanie i przyszły rozwój gotyku literackiego w Anglii „oświeceniowej" (druga połowa XVII wieku) i wiktoriańskiej (druga połowa XIX wieku). W części II badam użycie przez M. R. Jamesa szerokiej gamy zabiegów dystansujących, których głównym celem jest przekształcenie czytelników w *ghost-seers* (polskie: „widzący ducha", kategoria w powszechnym użyciu we współczesnej literaturze przedmiotowej; na przykład w studium Srdjan Smajića *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists. Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* [*Widzący duchy, detektywi i spirytualiści. Teorie widzenia w literaturze i nauce wiktoriańskiej*], Cambridge, 2010).

To, co sprawia, że opowieści o duchach są problematyczne w oczach badacza literaturoznawcy to element nadprzyrodzony. Teoretycy mają tendencję do wzdrygania się na fikcyjnego ducha, w związku z czym wiele napisano o fikcyjności narracji realistycznych i historycznych, ale niewiele o utworach, które ze swą fikcyjnością niejako się obnoszą, na przykład przez przedstawianie zjawisk nadprzyrodzonych, choć zainteresowanie badaczy nierealistycznymi gatunkami opowieści stale rośnie. Historie o duchach to narracje, które niejako manifestują swoją fikcyjność. Jednakże istotnym założeniem jest, że sceptycyzm (przejawiany przez bohaterów oraz czytelnika, a być może także przez autora) jest warunkiem udanej opowieści o duchach. Zamiarem moim jest stworzenie platformy do spotkania między teorią narracji a opowieścią o duchach. Uważam i usiłuję pokazać, że takie spotkanie i dialog mogą być produktywne i w ten sposób usiłuję wypełnić lukę w badaniach, spowodowaną okolicznością, iż teoria narracji, przez znaczny okres swojego rozwoju, koncentrowała się na realistycznej fikcji literackiej. Motywacją, która przyświeca podjętym analizom jest pragnienie oszacowania, w jakim stopniu teoria narracji może znaleźć produktywne zastosowanie do gatunków takich jak opowieść tajemnicza (*mystery story*), opowieść grozy (*terror fiction*) i opowieść osobliwa (*weird fiction*) oraz, bardziej ogólnie, do gotyku literackiego. M. R. James z powodzeniem uczynił opowiadanie o duchach wybraną prowincją swojej działalności pisarskiej (która zajmowała go przez ponad dwadzieścia lat), co może być wskazówką, że opowieść o duchach jest gatunkiem posługującym się własną retoryką narracyjną.

Podjęte w książce badania nie ograniczają się do kwestii czysto „technicznych". Chodzi nie tylko o możliwość zastosowania kategorii oferowanych przez teorię narracji do opowieści o duchach, lecz także o bardziej wszechstronne spojrzenie, takie, które umieszcza technikę narracyjną w szerszym

kontekście kulturowym i ideologicznym. Pomocny jest tutaj model komunikacji narracyjnej zaproponowany przez Seymoura Chatmana (*Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*; Cornell University Press, 1980). W modelu tym, przedstawiającym literaturę w postaci pudełkowego diagramu, autor i czytelnik reprezentują kulturę, historię i ideologię. Podobnie jak nie ma „wolnych od kultury" autorów i czytelników (zarówno tych realnych, jak i implikowanych), tak też nie ma „pozbawionych kultury" narratorów ani odbiorców (*narratees*). Dla czytelnika opowiadań M. R. Jamesa jest oczywiste, że ignorowanie szerszego kontekstu historycznego i kulturowego oznacza ignorowanie „materiału", z którego opowieści te są „zrobione". Doniosłym elementem owego szerszego kontekstu jest pojawienie się literatury gotyckiej i wątek przejścia od świata, który Horace Walpole (1717–1797), w przedmowie do *Zamczyska w Otranto*, nazwał „dawnym" (*ancient*) do „nowoczesnego" (*modern*). Zgodnie z powszechnie uznaną narracją, opowieść o duchach pojawia się po raz pierwszy w tejże „gotyckiej opowieści" (*a Gothic story*) Walpole'a, opublikowanej w latach 1764/65, w momencie kulturowym, który pozwolił Walpole'owi przedstawić ów „dawny" i odległy świat przed-reformacyjny jako świat „pogrążonego w mrokach chrześcijaństwa". Przebudzone w tej sposób widma „starego świata" okazały się niemożliwe do odegnania i w następnym stuleciu nastąpił gwałtowny rozkwit opowieści o duchach, uprawianej przez wiktoriańskie znakomitości w osobach Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865), Charlesa Dickensa (1812–1870), Sheridana Le Fanu (1814–1873), Wilkiego Collinsa (1824–1889). Kulminacją tego rozkwitu — do którego wydatnie przyczyniła się ożywiona i podtrzymywana przez Dickensa tradycja bożonarodzeniowej opowieści o duchach — były „antykwaryczne" opowieści niesamowite M. R. Jamesa.

Widziana w naszkicowanej powyżej perspektywie historycznej opowieść „fantastyczna" lub „nadprzyrodzona" pojawia się zatem w określonym kontekście kulturowym, który nacechowany jest buntem przeciwko realizmowi. Walpole jest w tym sensie prekursorem opowieści legitymizującej treści, które – w epoce, w której napisał *Zamczysko* – były nie tylko kulturowo obce, lecz także politycznie podejrzane, co znalazło oddźwięk w gwałtowności „antygotyckich" krytyków, reprezentowanych w niniejszym studium przez Jane Austen (1775–1817) i jej satyryczną powieść *Northanger Abbey* (*Opactwo Northanger*). W powieściach wydanych za życia, Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), autorka, z której popularnością Austen zmuszona była konkurować, zjawiska nadprzyrodzone (*the supernatural*, *the marvellous*) zostają wyjaśnione racjonalnie, który to zabieg (tzw. *explained supernatural*) można uznać za oznakę uległości względem Oświecenia. Nawet Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818), *enfant terrible* gatunku, skonstruował w swojej skandalizującej powieści *The Monk* (*Mnich*) świat podzielony „ontologicznie" na rzeczywistość pozostającą we władaniu „zabobonów" i obszar znajdujący się „już" w erze Oświecenia. W niniejszej pracy proponuję ujęcie historii gotyku literackiego w Anglii jako dziejów powtarzających się prób przeniesienia duchów i „widzenia duchów" na grunt rodzimy, czyli do Anglii, jak to miało miejsce w wielu opowieściach M. R. Jamesa. W części I analizuję jako przykłady dwie wiktoriańskie opowieści o duchach: „The Old Nurse's Story" („Opowieść starej niańki") Elizabeth Gaskell i „Mad Monkton" („Szalony Monkton") Wilkiego Collinsa. Pomimo rodzimej, angielskiej, scenerii, w obu tych utworach odnajdujemy szereg zabiegów dystansujących, które pośrednio usprawiedliwiają nadrzędny cel, jakim jest dostarczenie czytelnikowi „dreszczy" związanych ze scenami nawiedzenia i widzenia duchów: u Gaskell taką „widzącą ducha" postacią jest Angielka, a duch jest prawdziwy. Pod tym względem, opowieść ta jest bardziej jednoznacznie angielska w potraktowaniu elementu nadprzyrodzonego niż opowiadanie Collinsa, który zastosował „fantastyczny" zabieg narracyjny (w ujęciu Tzvetana Todorova), który sprawia, że czytelnik nie jest pewien, czy duch jest prawdziwy, czy zaledwie wyobrażony. Zarówno u Gaskell, jak i u Collinsa są postacie, które widzą duchy, potwierdzając ogólne założenie, że historia

o duchach musi zawierać jakąś formę zmysłowego kontaktu (obcowania) z elementem nadprzyrodzonym. Omawiany w części II książki kanon opowieści o duchach M. R. Jamesa dostarcza licznych przykładów podobnych strategii narracyjnych.

Nie wdając się w spekulacje na temat fascynacji tym, co nadprzyrodzone w epoce „jałowego" scjentyzmu i dynamicznego merkantylizmu, trudno zignorować „ideologiczne" siły, które niejako ożywiają nowożytne i współczesne narracje z rodzaju osobliwych. Możemy tu mówić o dystansach: historycznym i kulturowym, jako leżących niejako poza samymi utworami literackimi, jednakże dogłębnie przenikających ich tkankę. Zaprezentowane w książce analizy mają na celu ukazanie, że efekty dystansu — ich użycie oraz i przezwyciężenie — leżą u podstaw wczesnych opowieści gotyckich i późniejszych przetworzeń gotyckich konwencji. Historycznie rzecz ujmując, napięcia między czasami dawnymi a współczesnością, między siłami przesądów i prerogatywami rozumu, między uciskiem (*oppression*) a wyzwoleniem (*liberation*) napędzały energiczny rozwój literatury „fantastycznej" w XIX wieku, czyniąc ją nieodpartą również dla wymienionych wyżej wielkich realistów ery wiktoriańskiej. Analizie tego bogatego kontekstu kulturowego poświęcona jest mniej więcej jedna trzecia książki i wątki te stanowią doniosły element skądinąd technicznie zorientowanych analiz poszczególnych opowieści.

W warstwie metodologicznej, książka opiera się na publikacjach o znaczeniu przełomowym dla rozwoju teorii narracji, w tym na *Discours du récit* (1972) Gerarda Genette i na *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) Wayne'a Bootha. Wykorzystywane są publikacje zarówno o charakterze podręcznikowym i przeglądowym (np. *Narratology* i *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*), jak i te omawiające wybrane zjawiska (np. suspens w studium Hilary Dannenberg *Coincidence and Counterfactuality. Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*). W analizach użyte zostały kluczowe dla narratologii narzędzia i kategorie, zarówno te bardziej tradycyjne (rozróżnienie warstw *fabula* i *sjuzhet*), jak i nowsze: anachronia, fokalizacja i typologia dystansów opowieściowych. Sporo uwagi poświęca się zabiegom budującym kluczowe dla omawianego gatunku elementy, jakimi są tajemnica i suspens, szczególnie w ich współdziałaniu, które nazywam suspensywnym potencjałem tajemnicy. Proponowaną teorię suspensu konstruuję na podstawie koncepcji Manfreda Pfistera i Noëla Carrolla (*The Philosophy of Horror*). Duch jest nawiedzeniem z przeszłości, ale jednocześnie (jako demon czy potwór) może stanowić realne zagrożenie dla żyjących, szczególnie tych, których ciekawość prowadzi do odkrywania mrocznych tajemnic. Taka jest koncepcja opowieści niesamowitej M. R. Jamesa.

Jak wspomniano, książka podzielona została na dwie części, które z kolei dzielą się na stosunkowo niezależne od siebie sekcje (podrozdziały). W części I nacisk położono na kwestie ideologiczne, a punktem wyjścia jest filozoficzne potępienie doktryny katolickiej w *Lewiatanie* (1651) Thomasa Hobbesa (1588–1679), które omówione zostaje w celu kontekstualizacji strategii Horacego Walpole'a mających na celu „usprawiedliwienie" projektu „opowieści gotyckiej". Zamysł polega na ukazaniu filozofii Hobbesa jako radykalnego prekursora oświeconego protestantyzmu, a jego teorii jako znaczącego składnika środowiska ideologicznego, w którym — i do pewnego stopnia *przeciwko* któremu — wyłonił się gatunek gotyku. Używając metafory z *Lewiatana*, możemy powiedzieć, że „nadnaturalne" fikcje ożywiają „bajkowy" (nierealny) świat przesądów, świat, który współczesny człowiek powinien uważać za martwy i pogrzebany. Część II definiuje gatunek opowieści o duchach oraz — poprzez zastosowanie wspomnianych narzędzi narratologicznych — odnosi wybrany materiał literacki do napięć ideologicznych leżących u podłoża gotyku, szczególnie tych związanych z radykalnym przeciwstawieniem dwóch światów: przednowoczesnego i nowoczesnego (*pre-modern* i *modern*). Opozycja ta formułowana jest najczęściej w kategoriach religijnych, co stanowi odzwierciedlenie przełomu, jaki przyniosła Reformacja. Widziane w tym kontekście

duchy, które „ożywają" w opowieściach M. R. Jamesa — a które, jak twierdzi pisarz, domagają się „łagodnego traktowania" — wręcz domagają się interpretacji alegorycznej. Typowy dla M. R. Jamesa nurt narracyjny polega na motywowanej antykwaryczną ciekawością ingerencji w przeszłość, która często ma formę przywłaszczenia artefaktu („skarbu"). Obiekt taki, jak się okazuje, ma swojego „duchowego" czy „demonicznego" opiekuna. Duchy nabierają tu naddanego znaczenia „spektralnie" żywej przeszłości, która nie zgadza się na sprowadzenie jej do statusu martwego i milczącego eksponatu w nowożytnym muzeum.

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Książka *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* poświęcona jest opowiadaniom o duchach Montague Rhodesa Jamesa (1862–1936) i literaturze „gotyckiej", które bada się za pomocą narzędzi teorii narracji. Stosując te narzędzia, Jacek Mydla opisuje technikę narracyjną klasycznej opowieści o duchach, gatunku literackiego, którego M. R. James jest jednym z najznamienitszych przedstawicieli. Za motyw przewodni uznana została kategoria dystansu, która spaja analizy i uzasadnia podział książki na dwie części. Część I koncentruje się na ideologicznym znaczeniu dystansu, które ożywiało powstanie i przyszły rozwój gotyku literackiego w Anglii „oświeceniowej" (druga połowa XVII wieku) i wiktoriańskiej (druga połowa XIX wieku). Część II analizuje użycie przez M. R. Jamesa szerokiej gamy zabiegów dystansujących, których głównym celem jest przekształcenie czytelników w *ghost-seers* (po polsku: „widzący ducha"), kategoria w powszechnym użyciu we współczesnej literaturze przedmiotowej.

Celem monografii jest stworzenie platformy do spotkania między teorią narracji a opowieścią o duchach. Mydla pokazuje, że takie spotkanie i dialog mogą być produktywne i w ten sposób usiłuje wypełnić lukę w badaniach spowodowaną okolicznością, iż teoria narracji przez znaczny okres swojego rozwoju koncentrowała się na realistycznej fikcji literackiej. Motywacją, która przyświeca podjętym analizom jest pragnienie oszacowania, w jakim stopniu teoria narracji może zostać produktywnie zastosowana do gatunków takich jak opowieść tajemnicza (*mystery story*), opowieść grozy (*terror fiction*) i opowieść osobliwa (*weird fiction*) oraz, bardziej ogólnie, do gotyku literackiego. M. R. James z powodzeniem uczynił opowiadanie o duchach wybraną prowincją swojej działalności pisarskiej (która zajmowała go przez ponad dwadzieścia lat), co może oznaczać, że opowieść o duchach jest gatunkiem posługującym się własną retoryką narracyjną.

❋

Jacek Mydla's main goal in *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* is to explore selected "Gothic" narratives and Montague Rhodes James's (1862–1936) ghost stories by means of the tools of narrative theory. Using these tools, Mydla identifies and describes the narrative technique of the classic ghost story, a literary genre of which, in popular recognition, M. R. James is one of the most prominent representatives. A guiding category is that of distance, which binds the analyses together and justifies the division of the book into two parts. In Part I, the author focuses on the ideological meaning of distance, which animated the rise and future development of the literary Gothic in England of the "Enlightenment" (second half of the seventeenth century) and the Victorian period (second half of the nineteenth century) England. In Part II, the author examines M. R. James's use of a wide range of distancing devices whose main purpose was to transform readers into ghost-seers, a category in common use in contemporary subject literature.

Mydla's goal is to create a platform for the encounter between narrative theory and the ghost story. He shows that such encounter and dialogue can be productive, and in this way fills the gap in research caused by the fact that narrative theory, for a considerable period of its development, focused on realistic fiction. The motivation behind the analyses undertaken in this study is the desire to estimate the extent to which narrative theory can be applied productively to genres such as the mystery story, terror fiction and weird fiction and, more generally, the literary Gothic. M. R. James successfully made ghostly storytelling the chosen province of his activity as fiction author (which occupied him for more than twenty years), which may be an indication that ghost stories are a genre using their own narrative rhetoric.

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