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Sensual Immediacy and Narrative Distance in M. R. James's Ghost Stories

Abstract: By referring to "Count Magnus," one of M. R. James's ghost stories, Jacek Mydla discusses ghost-seeing and narrative distance. The theoretical context of this analysis consists of ancient (Plato) and contemporary (Booth, Genette) theories of narrative and Mydla examines how "showing" (mimesis) is related to "telling" (diegesis). Despite Plato's critique of mimesis in the *Republic*, Genette, with his concept of focalization, theorizes the manner in which literary narratives, including ghost stories, prioritize showing and thus seeing, as evidenced by recent studies of Victorian ghost-seeing (Smajić). Mydla discusses how M. R. James diminishes distance to enable vicarious ghost-seeing while also, through the use of narrative framing, warning readers about pitfalls of artistically delivered perceptual immediacy.

Keywords: ghost story, mimesis, focalization, narrative, distance, immediacy

In one of the most accomplished ghost stories, "Count Magnus" (1901–1902) by Montague Rhodes James (1862–1936),[1] the protagonist, a Mr. Wraxall, makes a voyeuristic wish. Wraxall is a typically enthusiastic researcher drawn to mysteries of the past and his intense fascination makes him desire to "see" Count Magnus, to come into some immediate contact with the object of his "antiquarian" research, the eponymous wicked aristocrat. At a moment fraught with dramatic irony heightened by eerie suspense, Wraxall approaches the count's mausoleum and addresses the absent object of his fascination in this quaint manner: "You may have been a bit of a rascal in your time, Magnus," he was saying, "but for all that I should like to see you, or, rather –."[2] This is a turning point in the story, for

1. In this article, I draw on my research into the narrative *techne* of the English ghost story, the results of which were published in: Jacek Mydla, *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023). Half of the book is devoted to M. R. James's theory of the ghost story and the stories themselves. Context information on M. R. James can be found in introductions to the fine scholarly editions of the stories by S. T. Joshi (for Penguin), Michael Cox and Darryl Jones (two separate collections for Oxford World's Classics).

2. M. R. James, "Count Magnus," in M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, edited with and Introduction and Notes by Darryl Jones (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 73.

Wraxall's wish almost immediately comes true and turns him into a "patient," that is to say, a ghost-afflicted sufferer. He is going to be hunted down and killed by the resurrected count and his demonic companion.

Long regarded as masterpieces of the genre, M. R. James's ghost stories may be considered emblematic of narrative fiction's investments in mimesis and phenomenology: the way in which authors strive to show things, to allow readers to have sensory experience of fictive objects, no matter how vicarious that experience and how otherworldly those objects may be. Critics like to quote two expressions of this desire. In his 1921 book, *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock wrote that "[t]he 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."[3] Another memorable statement was made a few years earlier by Joseph Conrad, who addressed his reader thus: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything."[4] While placing emphasis differently, both Conrad and Lubbock stress features of narrative that enable immediacy, or an immersive experience of fictive reality.[5] While Lubbock focuses on the author's choice of the subject matter, which ought to allow itself to be put on display, as it were, Conrad wants to convey to the reader the immediacy of actual experience. Though mediated by "the written word," this experience is to be compelling and sensual (or "sensory," but hereafter I will use the former term). It is worth noting that Conrad does not narrow down that experience to seeing, thus eschewing the Western prioritization of vision over the other senses. In studies of the ghost story and the historical and cultural context in which it arose and developed, the term

3. 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.

4. "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), in Joseph Conrad, *"The Secret Sharer" and Other Stories* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 141. Conrad's rhetoric of the visual in the preface would unquestionably merit a study in its own right. The opening sentences alone are superbly suggestive: "A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the *visible* universe, by *bringing to light* the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect" (139; my emphasis).

5. Added to these is the interpersonal and existential dimension described by Wayne Booth in a section of his *Rhetoric of Fiction* devoted to showing and telling: "In life we never know anyone but ourselves by thoroughly reliable internal signs, and most of us achieve an all too partial view even of ourselves. It is in a way strange, then, that in literature from the very beginning we have been told motives directly and authoritatively without being forced to rely on those shaky inferences about other men which we cannot avoid in our own lives." Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

"ghost-seeing" has persisted,[6] even though the stories themselves have explored supernatural experiences through sources of experience other than vision.[7]

Typical of this mimetic approach to fiction[8] is the stress on its, fiction's, dramatic properties, on the fact that storytellers must and typically do prioritize showing ("exhibiting") over "simple" telling, or imitation and spectacle over mere narration, precisely those qualities of poetry that Plato at once defined and condemned in his critique of mimesis in the *Republic*.[9] Were we to judge fictions in general and ghost stories in particular from the perspective of Plato's critique, few, if any, would escape unscathed.[10] Indeed, all the passages quoted above testify to the fact that Plato's critique did not settle the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry,"[11] and that modern authors and theorists of fiction and narrative have become keenly aware that in the domain of the visible the conflict – if it still makes sense to continue speaking of one – is very much afoot. Little wonder that M. R. James's stories, as well shall see later in this article, engage the reader's mimetic expectations and do so methodically, at once exploiting those expectations and frustrating the reader's voyeuristic attitudes and habits.

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6. I am referring here chiefly to Srdjan Smajić's publications, chiefly his book *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists. Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7. See Mydla, *Narrating the Ghost*, 116 ff.

8. For a discussion, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), Chapter 4 "Mood," 162 ff. (esp. section "Distance").

9. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 2007), Book III, 86 (392d). This definition of mimesis (imitative impersonation, or the poet's assuming the voice of a fictional character) is one of the meanings of mimesis that Plato discusses in the *Republic*. The other definition of mimesis is that of making by an artist of a picture-like copy (a mirror reflection, a semblance) of a real thing. See footnote 11 below.

For an in-depth examination of Plato's critique from several relevant angles, see Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002). See also Stephen Halliwell, "Diegesis – Mimesis," in *the living handbook of narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University), https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/36.html (accessed 11.03.2024).

10. For Plato's discussion of fictional terrors (i.e., poetic visions of afterlife), see *The Republic*, Book III, 76 ff. (286–287). For an overview of Plato's references to afterlife (and its poetic representations) in the *Republic*, see Stephen Halliwell, "The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul. Interpreting the Myth of Er," in *The Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 459–460.

11. Plato, *The Republic*, Book X,351 (607b). Among the numerous denunciations of poetry's ill-founded claims to truth the one that is relevant for our considerations here occurs in the context of Plato's discussion of painting (as emblematic also of poetry's claims to truthful representation): "The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of mere phenomenal appearance" (339–340; 598b).

Indeed, Plato's philosophy is permeated by and preoccupied with vision(s), despite his denigration of seeing in its pedestrian form (sensual vision, eyesight). This preoccupation is evident in the famous simile or allegory of the cave, a passage in Book VII of the *Republic* (514–521b), devised to *illustrate* the essential *insight* of Platonic philosophy, the theory of pure forms.[12] The passage that elucidates the allegory is replete with vocabulary that underscores the significance of seeing while also shifting back and forth between various meanings of "sight" or "vision" as well as the corresponding meanings of perception (all italicised in the passage below). Says Socrates to his interlocutor:

> "Now, my dear Glaucon," I went on, "this simile must be connected throughout with what preceded it. The realm revealed by *sight* corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the *sight* of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region. […] in my opinion, for what it is worth, the final thing to be *perceived* in the intelligible region, and *perceived* only with difficulty, is the form of the good; once *seen*, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the *visible region* light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself controlling source of truth and intelligence. And anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private life must *have sight* of it."[13]

In brief, the student of philosophy – Glaucon here – must be taught to abandon the realm of the sensual (the "prison" governed by sight) and ascend to the higher realm of intelligible entities. This, in sum, is Plato's own interpretation of the allegory. Yet as a piece of literature, the passage itself seems to be governed by or founded on sight in that Socrates uses and exploits Glaucon's – as Plato the *writer* does the reader's – sensual imagination as a vehicle for the philosophical message conveyed by the allegory, a "trick" that is essential to allegory's movement from the sensual towards the spiritual.[14] At the outset of the allegory, Socrates makes

12. In thus highlighting these two words, I want to point out Plato's reliance in his elucidations on devices that are poetic, imaginative, and also profoundly *optic*; that is, they make appeal to and use of the essentially visual (sensible) cognitive apparatus of the human mind.

13. Plato, *The Republic*, 244 (517a-b).

14. See the discussion on changing role of allegories is in Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*. 40th Anniversary Ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1966]), 117. The critics insist that allegories such as Plato's are "the work of philosophers rather than poets" and that "the allegories are a poetizing element in philosophical discourse" (121), yet they do not address Plato's inconsistency in using, indeed, in relying on poetic devices while conveying the essential, well, *idea* or *insight* of a system that has a strongly antipoetic aspect to it. See note 17 below.

an explicit appeal to Glaucon's sensual imagination, a device for which centuries later Gérard Genette coined the term "focalization."[15] Says Socrates to Glaucon:

> "I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave […]."
> "I see."
> "Imagine further […]."
> "An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner."
> "They are drawn from life." […] "For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?"[16]

Perhaps we do not need to insist that Plato is compromising his own principles by allowing poetry – a piece of fiction with ample visualisation – to do the job of justifying the main insight of his system.[17] After all, he, Plato, might retort that he uses poetry here as a ladder which the student of philosophy will kick off once he has ascended to the supreme realm of true being. It is, however, abundantly clear that the allegory skilfully relies on focalization, as confirmed by Glaucon's "I see," aimed at and evidently succeeding in imaginatively immersing the reader

15. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 180ff. For a recent reappraisal, see also Christian Huck, "Coming to Our Senses: Narratology and the Visual," in *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization*: *Modeling Mediation in Narrative*, ed. Peter Hühn, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 201–218.

16. Plato, *The Republic*, 241 (514a-515a). In Book VIII, Socrates returns to the allegory, once more to elucidate its meaning, now in the context of the dialectic: "So when one tries to get at what each thing is in itself by the exercise of dialectic, relying on reason without any aid of the senses […] one is at the summit of the intellectual realm […]. […] The prisoners in our cave […] were released and turned round from the shadows to the images which cast them and to the fire, and then climbed up into the sunlight; there they were still unable to look at animals and plants and at the light of the sun, but could see reflections in water and shadows of things (real things, that is, and not mere images throwing shadows in the light of a fire itself derivative compared with the sun). Well, the whole study of the sciences we have described has the effect of leading the best element in the mind up towards the vision of the best among realities, just as the body's clearest organ was led to the sight of the brightest of all things in the material and visible world" (263; 532a-d).

17. Among those who have observed and commented on this inconsistency, Iris Murdoch – a "poet" in Plato's sense as well as a philosopher – must be granted pride of place. As she states the problem in *The Fire and the Sun* (1976–1977), "[t]he most obvious paradox in the problem under consideration is that Plato is a great artist. It is not perhaps to be imagined that the paradox troubled him too much. […] He fought a long battle against sophistry and magic, yet produced some of the most memorable images in European philosophy: the cave, the charioteer, the cunning homeless Eros […]. He kept emphasizing the imageless remoteness of the Good, yet kept returning in his exposition to the most elaborate uses of art." Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York and London: Penguin, 1999), 462.

in the fictive world, or the "vision," of the cave. We may say that the goal of making Glaucon "see" the cave is, ultimately, to make him turn away from the world of shadows, to make him stop looking, or at least to make him stop being immersed in or engrossed by the "shadows" of the visible, sensible realm. At the same time, a consistent empiricist would denounce the insincerity of Plato's reliance on the sensory resources of the human mind.

In what follows, I will argue that in his ghost stories M. R. James engages the reader's sensible imagination in a way that is similar to Plato's. For even though the former did not attach great importance to the genre as such or to his own stories in particular,[18] yet no attentive reader will be blind or indifferent to their didactic undercurrent, which becomes apparent once we consider the distance between the frame narrator and the ghost-seeing protagonist. I would like to show that, woven into the narrative structure of these stories, is a motif of caution against indiscriminate pursuit of sensual plenitude, as expressed in the above quoted passage from "Count Magnus," in a moment fraught with dramatic as well as philosophical irony.

In the course of writing my book on the ghost stories in the English literary tradition, the "Gothic" tradition, which culminated in the "antiquarian" stories by M. R. James, I realised the centrality of the concept of distance in narrative practice and therefore also in narrative studies. The passages quoted at the outset as well as Plato's allegory emphasize as the essential feature of narrative the desire of making immediately present – with the aid of linguistic devices that activate the reader's sensual imagination – something that is absent, distant, or alien. Thus, the common past mode of narration expresses a storyteller's desire to capture and preserve what is slipping into oblivion, what is in danger of being forgotten. In this sense one might be inclined to agree with Julian Wolfreys's insistence that there is something ghostly in every traditional narrative's (effort/desire of?) fetching the past into the present.[19] However, before we proceed further in our pursuit of this line of thought, we need to make two observations of

18. "The stories themselves do not make any very exalted claim. If any of them succeed in causing their reader to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours, my purpose in writing them will have been attained." Preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), Appendix. "Mr. R. James on Ghost Stories," in M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, 406. The basic means of achieving that goal, that is, of making the reader "feel pleasantly uncomfortable," is immersion through internal focalization.

19. Julian Wolfreys takes a cautiously universal view when he states in the introduction to his 2002 book that "[…] all forms of narrative are spectral to some extent"; and that "all stories are, more or less, ghost stories"; Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 2–3.

general nature, a substantive and a historical one, on the concept and importance of distance for the study of narrative.

To begin with, it seems to make little sense to speak of "distance," singular, rather than "distances," plural. In a section of his *Rhetoric of Fiction* called "Variations of Distance," Wayne Booth names several types of distances between the various participants in the narrative situation.[20] Thus, the two main protagonists of *Frankenstein*, Victor and the Creature are separated from one another psychologically and morally while participating in the narrative situation that brings them together and in which they take turns in their role of narrator and narratee. Walton, the novel's frame narrator, may have a great deal in common with Victor, but has little if anything in common with the Creature, whose alienness may separate him radically from the shared humanity of the other protagonists. The addressee of the frame narrative and the novel's extradiegetic narratee, Walton's sister, is at a safe remove from all three main protagonists (all of whom are male): physical, mental, and moral. And yet, simply by virtue of making her the addressee of his letters, Walton as it were brings his sister into the circle and makes her vicariously experience the story's events, that is to say, makes her share in his experience of the experiences communicated to him in the respective narratives of Victor and the Creature, both intensely immersive and thus highly mimetic.[21] If this is already complex, then a comprehensive narrative study must consider the broader context, which involves the author and the target audience (or the "implied reader" of narrative theory). Any in-depth understanding of *Frankenstein* must not leave unexplored the facts of female authorship and the femininity of the framing narratee, Walton's sister, two entities who, arguably, remain at a great distance from the story, a story of hubris and retribution coded as masculine.

Second, it is germane for the context of the ghost story that this genre came into existence in peculiar cultural circumstances, its birth accompanied by a deployment of several ideological distances: historical, geopolitical, and cultural. Assuming by common consent that Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was the first modern ghost story, it is telling that the author thought it prudent, first, to conceal his identity and present the story to the public as a translation from an Italian original and, second, to put in place a gap between the enlightened reader and the setting of his medieval fantasy, memorably described as "the darkest ages of

20. See Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 155 ff. A comprehensive, if not exhaustive, list of distances includes the following ones: physical, temporal, psychological, social (cultural), cognitive (intellectual), aesthetic, and moral.

21. A comparison with a similar situation in *Heart of Darkness* is illuminating; Conrad's principal narrator, Marlow, decides to tell Kurtz's fiancée a lie instead of sharing with her the story he is "now" telling his male audience gathered on board the cruising yawl Nellie.

christianity."[22] Regardless of Walpole's ploy of concealed authorship (confessed in the preface to the 1765 edition), his mimetic investments are obvious to the reader. Not only is the 5-chapter novel's mode of narration dramatic and driven by dialogic episodes; the "principal incidents" are strikingly graphic, consisting of a string of "prodigies" and "visions," and, in the culminating moment, a spectacle that features the "shade" or "form" of Alfonso, "dilated to an immense magnitude" ascending heavenward. In other words, Walpole gave his enlightened readers ample opportunity vicariously to experience supernatural thrills, analogously to those which audiences came to enjoy in Shakespeare's supernatural plays, chiefly of course *Hamlet*, performed in the London playhouses.

M. R. James found Walpole's story pitifully *un*scary, chiefly due to the remoteness of the setting, which – he opined – must prevent the reader from identifying herself with the ghost-seer and becoming a vicarious "patient." Perhaps the most significant among M. R. James's "theoretical" statements concerning the ghost story – ideas, as he modestly called them, the inverted commas here reflecting his reluctance towards theory – is this passage in the 1911 Preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*:

> To be sure, I have my ideas as to how a ghost story ought to be laid out if it is to be effective. I think that, as a rule, the setting should be fairly familiar and the majority of the characters and their talk such as you may meet or hear any day. 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 careful, something of this kind may happen to me!"[23]

The allusion to *The Castle of Otranto* is thinly veiled. Elsewhere M. R. James explicitly states that Walpole's medieval setting cannot succeed in evoking terror in the reader; in fact, the effect may be the opposite: "*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."[24] This criticism does not suggest that distance is irrelevant; on the contrary, distance needs to be properly calibrated. A well-wrought ghost story, despite the familiar setting, must narrate past incidents,

22. "Preface to the First Edition" (1764), in Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5. The opening sentences are these: "The following work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of christianity [sic]; […]." Only the last statement can be considered factual.

23. Appendix. "M. R. James on Ghost Stories," in M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, 406.

24. "Some Remarks on Ghost Stories" (1929); "Appendix," 411.

but that past must not be very remote. To express this idea, M. R. James uses the phrase "a slight haze of distance":

> For the 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; […]. On the whole (though not a few instances might be quoted against me) I think that a setting so modern that the ordinary reader can judge of its naturalness for himself is preferable to anything antique.[25]

Without assuming that M. R. James is purposefully trying to mislead his readers, those who know his fiction cannot help but be surprised by his unwillingness to address the complex tangle of distances that almost every one of the stories deploys. It simply may have been awkward for M. R. James to discuss in detail any single one of them or talk at length about his narrative methods. This is precisely why tools of narrative theory come in handy, especially so because all of them are related, in one way or another, to the concept of distance once we agree to define it in conveniently broad terms, ones that, alongside setting, take into account embedding and point of view.

To begin with the former, let us first observe that for stories such as "Count Magnus" – a fine specimen among M. R. James's fictions, as already observed[26] – the role of narrative frame is of great importance. Ghost seeing occurs in the inset narrative, which for that reason must be regarded as the principal narrative layer while also being held, as it were, at a safe distance from the frame narrator. The latter, typically, is a person who has discovered some documents and is now trying to make sense of their content by putting facts into a coherent narrative. This makes the ghost seeing itself both vicarious as well as tantalizingly palpable.

There is a bond of sorts that ties the frame narrator and the protagonist (the ghost seer of the inset narrative), for both are researchers and both answer to the ambiguous (deliberately so, we presume) genitive of the title of the first two collections of the stories: "Ghost Stories of an Antiquary." The word "antiquary" refers at once to the frame narrator and the ghost-seeing and ghost-afflicted protagonist; more than that, it also refers to the author, M. R. James, whose academic career consisted in cataloguing and examining books and documents, especially rare

25. "Introduction" to *Ghosts and Marvels* (1924); "Appendix," 407–408.

26. H. P. Lovecraft appreciated the supreme eeriness of this story, describing it as "assuredly one of the best, forming as it does a veritable Golconda of suspense and suggestion." H. P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, edited, with introduction and commentary by S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012), 93.

and curious ones, which gratified his keen lifelong interest in all things quaint and ancient. The simple point to be made here is that this type of research must arise from and be motived by the conviction that – figuratively speaking – the past is not entirely dead, which in turn corresponds to the general understanding of the past that underpins the ghost story as a literary genre. In other words, ghost stories seem to insist that there is something literal in that conviction.

The literary ghost is commonly defined as some unruly past disturbing the present. Introducing a collection of Victorian ghost stories, Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert write: "In personal terms, ghosts were, though still potent, images of the lost past – past sins, past promises, past attachments, past regrets – and could be used to confront, and exorcise, the demons of guilt and fear." Another statement in that introduction, referring specifically to the Victorian milieu, describes the ghost story as a genre that responded with images of horror to the overwhelming changes brought on by modern times, something that – given the unceasing popularity of the genre – readers continue to find relevant. The scholars use the common metaphor of the past as a book: "With the shadow of change falling across virtually every area of life and thought, ghost story offered a way of anchoring the past to an unsettled present by operating in a continuum of life and death. In the ghost story, obligations do not cease with death, and the past is never a closed book."[27] Many of the stories of M. R. James make literal the past-as-book metaphor. Notwithstanding the fact that M. R. James regarded himself as a "Victorian," that is to say, a person who was not comfortable around modernity and its manifestations in various forms of progress (including social and political reforms),[28] he repeatedly depicts the past as a closed book and also as one that ought not to be pried open. Effective haunting and ghostly persecution in his stories are based on the belief of his protagonists that the past, to return to the previous metaphor, *is* dead and buried. Indeed, some of M. R. James's patients would like to think of the past in terms of a desiccated museum exhibit, an object of research that cannot possibly have any vital connection with the present, regardless of their otherwise passionate interest in the past as, well, something that has passed. If these statements toy with contradiction, then the fault lies, not with us or the author, but rather with the attitude that we are exploring, following in the footsteps of the author and his "antiquaries."

In contrast to M. R. James's somewhat reluctant and self-deprecating "theoretical" opinions, the stories present the reader with numerous and ample

27. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert, eds., *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix.

28. Patrick J. Murphy has discussed this at length in *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

illustrations of his literary creed. They are persistent explorations of the rich and complex cultural context which they bring into play as their setting, while also engaging the legacy of the literary Gothic. Thus, M. R. James's avid antiquary takes possession of an object (say, a found or purchased artefact) which turns out to be attached to a past that seems to have lain in wait and soon becomes spectrally reanimated. A story emblematic of this format, "Canon Alberick's Scrap-book," depicts how an Englishman travelling in France purchases the book of ancient curiosities named in the title, thus also becoming the new unfortunate "owner" of the demon attached to that book. Another little masterpiece, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," (1903; hereafter referred to as "Oh, Whistle") is a variation on this format, as we see another researcher, described as Professor of Ontography,[29] discover and appropriate a cylindrical tube, resembling a whistle, with some enigmatic Latin inscription on it. He cleans it but is unable to make sense of the warning engraved on it. When he blows in it, he summons a ghost. An unforeseen encounter ensues that reduces the rational and no-nonsense scholar to a state of pitiful wretchedness; his orderly life of an enlightened and hubristic agnostic has been shattered.

In these and similar stories, the coming into possession of an artefact has dire consequences for the protagonist in that it brings him (M. R. James's "patients" are with no exception male) into sensual contact, ocular or otherwise, with the supernatural, the reality of which they initially dismiss as mere superstition. This allows us to speak of these stories as narratives that depict the overcoming or violation of distance – our choice of words here depending on the point of view we adopt. It is crucial to note that the protagonists are driven in their research by curiosity combined with a desire to appropriate – both directed to the past. In "Oh, Whistle," the unidentified frame narrator brings to the reader's attention the fact that in his exploration of some medieval ruins, where he soon finds the "whistle" (first described in general terms as a "cylindrical object" and "a metal

29. This fictitious scholastic discipline, mentioned in the opening sentence of the story, has raised speculations among critics. Clearly a joke on the part of M. R. James (and fine evidence of the humorous side of the stories), perhaps aimed at fellow scholar at Cambridge, its name is made of two Greek words, meaning "being" and "description." In other words, Parkins is a scholar who studies "what is," as opposed to superstition, which corresponds to Parkins's initial uncompromising disbelief in ghosts. As he expresses it in the opening scene with a degree of irritation, "A man in my position […] cannot, I find, be too careful about appearing to sanction the current beliefs on such subjects [ghosts]. […] I hold that any semblance, any appearance of concession to the view that such things might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred" ("Oh, Whistle," 78). This passionate dedication to "truthfulness" (he is described as "Scrupulously polite and strictly truthful"; "Oh, Whistle," 77) is – upon reflection – Platonic; see *The Republic*, 199–201 (477–478; "knowledge is related to what *is*, and ignorance, necessarily, to what *is not*"; italics in the original).

tube about four inches long, and evidently of some considerable age"; "Oh, Whistle," 80), Parkins is trespassing onto a territory which lies outside his proper field of research. The narrator comments thus: "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 successfully they would have been had they only taken it up seriously" ("Oh, Whistle," 80).[30] Driven by the thus described scientific hubris of an enlightened man for whom the past is mere superstition, its artefacts reduced to the status of museum exhibits, Parkins has to be taught a lesson.

In yet another story, "A Warning to the Curious" (1925), whose title has made something like a career in its one right,[31] digging into the past and appropriation are worryingly literal and the ghostly persecution is also appropriately gruesome. Here the protagonist and patient is a drifter, a prospector whose single-minded or possibly gain-oriented research leads him to the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon crown. He manages to locate it and digs it up from a mound, ignoring the local legend about a guardian ghost attached to that artefact. This sacrilegious action turns the unfortunate digger into the victim of that spectral guardian, whose eerie presence the man feels ever since he has laid his hands on the crown.

Stories of this type set in motion several types of distance, while the main thrust of the narrative is oriented – ironically, to be sure – towards some eerie sensual fulfilment. We have a good sense that what drives forward the frame narrative is a desire to experience vicariously what the patient experienced in person. While the frame narrator distances himself from the protagonist, he also seems to be driven in his narrative pursuits – that is to say, in the task of constructing a coherent narrative out of the documents he has discovered and is trying to make sense of – by a powerful desire to attain and deliver closure. And indeed there is closure, even though it is also tantalising and even anticlimactic in terms of the visual content. Apparently, after trying in vain to elude two cloaked and hooded pursuers, Mr. Wraxall was found dead in his house:

> People still remembered last year at Belchamp St. Paul how a strange gentleman came one evening in August years back; and how the next morning but one he was found dead, and there was an inquest and the jury that viewed the body fainted, seven of 'em did, and

30. In a similar context, in "Count Magnus" the frame narrator uses the word "over-inquisitiveness" to describe Mr. Wraxall. This time, however, the tone is more judgemental and ominous: "His besetting fault was pretty clearly that of over-inquisitiveness, possibly a good fault in a traveller, certainly a fault for which this traveller paid dearly enough in the end" ("Count Magnus," 64).

31. Compare, for instance, the title of a collection of critical essays on M. R. James's stories: *Warnings to the Curious. A Sheaf of Criticism on M. R. James*, ed. S. T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007).

> none of 'em wouldn't speak to what they see, and the verdict was visitation of God; and how the people as kep' the 'ouse moved out that same week, and went away from that part. But they do not, I think, know that any glimmer of light has ever been thrown, or could be thrown, on the mystery. ("Count Magnus," 74)

Characteristically, the reader, now aligned with the frame narrator, is left "wandering in the regions of terror" (to borrow a phrase from Ann Radcliffe),[32] while eyes are averted from the horrors. We neither get to see what the jury saw and what made them faint, nor do we ever get to see what Mr. Wraxall saw in his last moments. Yet we have reasons to believe that his lot was a re-enactment of the inset story, a tale that Wraxall came across during his research and which involved Count Magnus, a "something or someone" he, the count, may have brought with him from the enigmatic Black Pilgrimage, and some poachers in the count's grounds, one of whom was found dead and gruesomely mutilated. This inset narrative (doubly inset, in point of fact), even though M. R. James on principle refused to be lurid, contains one of the more uncomfortable passages in the stories. For, as the dead man's body is being conveyed on a bier, an incident of uncanny revelation occurs:

> So, as they were singing the end of the first verse [of a psalm for the dead], one fell down, who was carrying the head of the bier, and the others looked back, and they saw that the cloth had fallen off, and the eyes of Anders Bjornsen were looking up, because there was nothing to close over them. And this they could not bear. Therefore the priest laid the cloth upon him, and sent for a spade, and they buried him in that place. ("Count Magnus," 70)

In terms of closure M. R. James's stories invariably end in such moments of aversion, of turning away from sight and immediacy. If we can speak of a lesson that they, the stories, deliver or preach – a somewhat dubious assumption for M. R. James had no aspirations of that nature – then it can be summed up in the phrase we have already encountered: "a warning to the curious." In the narrative current of the stories, this "warning" is translated into the irony that consists, not in frustration of the narrator's, protagonist's and reader's desire for sensual immediacy, but in a realisation that that is a cursed wish, a desire which leads towards transgression.

Since Plato, seeing has been the supreme representation of human desire for knowledge, a fulfilment of our desire for immediacy. In his critique of mimesis

32. "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. M. R. James seems to be indebted to Radcliffe's notion of terror (as opposed to horror), which is evident in his vehement rejection of luridness (a gross-out type of horror).

Plato, paradoxically, was at pains to warn his misguided fellow humans of the dangers of coming into direct contact with appearances, "shadows" of real objects which delude us, prisoners in the "cave" of illusions, into taking them for realties. In M. R. James we find a storyteller who is Platonic in his handling of the all-too-human preoccupation with vision, its allurements and its perils. If, as a storyteller, M. R. James assumes the position of one of those puppet masters in the cave who enact, for the "curious" viewers, a show of shadows, then he is also intent on teaching them a lesson against curiosity, even as he is giving them, those unwary "prisoners," a show with a promise of vicariously satisfying their yearning for sensual immediacy, for some unmediated insight into the mysteries of life and death.

One way of looking at M. R. James is to see in him a modern, "enlightened" scholar who feels nostalgic about the lost world of the past, especially the departed world of medieval splendour and childlike superstition. An analogy with Horace Walpole, another avid antiquarian, is difficult and indeed futile to resist. However, M. R. James is also, albeit inconspicuously and reluctantly, a storyteller with a message of warning to anyone who may be too eager in his or her pursuit of knowledge, especially the kind of knowledge what brings us into contact with things that are remote, absent, and alien. Again and again, the stories seem to *demonstrate* to us that stepping or digging into the past, if motivated by a desire to attain or recover lost immediacy, may lead the unwary researcher into horror and unreason.

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