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Realism and the Supernatural in Ghost Stories of the *Fin de Siècle*

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Abstract This article examines the uses of realism in *fin-de-siècle* ghost stories by Vernon Lee, Ella D'Arcy, Rudyard Kipling, and Gertrude Atherton, It argues that forms of realist practice were central to the sophistication of these stories, and draws connections between their use in supernatural fiction and the work of modernists such as Joseph Conrad. Examining works from the late 1880s to 1905, it maintains that the dismissal of realism by modernists such as Woolf underestimated its importance and its versatility, and that the ghost story's importance as a vehicle for literary experiment is insufficiently acknowledged.

Keywords Ghost Story. Realism. Supernatural. Henry James. Virginia Woolf. Ruyard Kipling. Joseph Conrad.

Summary 1 Realism's Shadowy Realms. – 2 Vernon Lee, 'Amour Dure'. – 3 Ella D'Arcy, 'The Villa Lucienne'. – 4 Rudyard Kipling, "They". – 5 Gertrude Atherton, "The Bell in the Fog". – 6 Some Conclusions.

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1 Realism's Shadowy Realms

When Virginia Woolf caricatured the realist practices of Georgian novelists in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, she focused on what she saw as their overriding concern with external detail and insisted that their outdated 'tools' were 'useless' for the generation which followed them (Woolf 1924, 17). For Woolf and other modernists, fiction needed to engage with the processes of thought rather than merely summarising its content, a view which encouraged the development of techniques for representing interiority, most strikingly the stream-of-consciousness seen in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and her own *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Those such as Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells (whom Woolf was treating as the author of novels such as *Ann Veronica*, 1909, rather than scientific romances) were pursuing an outdated concern with exactitude that left their pages as cluttered as the columns of a Victorian newspaper. This reliance on an exteriority that constantly demonstrated its undermining imprecision was a dead end. To embellish Woolf's charges against Bennett, why tell the reader that a woman is wearing a blue hat when it is what she is thinking that really matters? In addition, the adjectival colour can only be an approximation, a rough gesture towards the subjective perception of chromatic subtleties rather than an accurate representation of them. Sherlock Holmes and his many rivals would have appreciated the significance and meaning of the hat's colour, but Woolf was not much interested in realism's causal plotting or in the ways in which the close analysis of apparently insignificant information could impact upon narrative development. 'Moments of being' were more important than pages of ratiocination, for, as she famously insisted in "Modern Fiction" (1925), life was elusive and impressionistic, not "a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arrayed" but "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf 2008, 9). Woolf admitted that her essay contained "some very sweeping and some very vague assertions" (Woolf 1924, 4), but her contemporary Mary Butts went further still. "Like the best of us, I am sick of realism", she wrote in her journal in December 1919. "I can do it down to the 'curl of the eyelash'" (Butts 2002, 124).

Ironically, Woolf's desire for new approaches and Butts' dismissal of Victorian (and post-Victorian) realist aesthetics only reasserted the fundamental importance of accurate representations of daily reality and lived experience. The search for these had fascinated English novelists since Crusoe set foot on his island in 1719 and led Woolf to much admire George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872). The debate about the 'new' realism also confined itself to 'advanced' or, at very least, self-consciously 'literary' fiction rather than acknowledging Woolf's own interests in the ghost story. In the highly accomplished

supernatural tales of Henry James in particular, Woolf had already seen a form of writing which was 'realist' in its depiction of setting and protagonists, yet experimental in its treatment of narrative viewpoint and psychology. It also balanced the relationship between plot and character, a topic which had of course obsessed James throughout his career. A story such as "The Friends of the Friends" (1896, which James retitled "The Way It Came" in 1909) offered a challenge to realist empiricism in its engagement with the world of the unseen and fantastical and its willingness to imply the existence of the supernatural, or, at very least, to consider events for which science had yet to provide a rational explanation.

In his many 'tales', James found ways to move fluidly between different types of subject matter. "The Jolly Corner" (1908), for example, utilises certain tropes of popular fiction such as mysterious houses, doppelgangers, and haunting but combines them with sophisticated meditations on ageing, choice, the formation of personality and, slyly, the life James himself might have led had he remained in the eastern United States instead of moving to England. The narration is alert to the slightest nuances of character and perception, immersing the reader in the sensibility and psychology of Spencer Brydon, while yet balancing the delineation of his inner life with the wider concerns of the narrative. In his private notebooks and the ruminative prefaces to the New York Edition of his collected works (1907-09), James dwelled endlessly on the complex relationship between what happens, how it happens, and how it affects those involved in events. In doing so, he evolved a form of psychological realism which would prove highly influential for a certain type of supernatural fiction, one written by authors who also produced work which ranged from social comedy to fantasy and horror. As with him, it was often the latter styles which encouraged notable innovation and risk-taking, in part because of the challenge of presenting encounters with supernatural forces in a believable and convincing manner.

The four stories discussed here are by writers who knew James well. Vernon Lee, author of "Amour Dure" (1890), was initially an admirer of his fiction, though their relations cooled after she caricatured him as 'Jervase Marion' in "Lady Tal", a satirical novella from the perhaps ironically titled *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (1892). Ella D'Arcy, best known for her editorial assistance on the magazine, *The Yellow Book* (1894-97), worked closely with its literary editor, Henry Harland, whose admiration for James verged on idolatry. D'Arcy was less effusive, but there is a strong Jamesian presence in her *Monochromes* (1895) and *Modern Instances* (1898) – Wells felt she was "remarkably promising", and even at times, James's superior, possessing "imagination and insight" and "valu[ing] restraint" (Wells 1895, 731). Her brief but chilling story "The Villa Lucienne" (1896) shows her flair for descriptive language as well as icy detachment. James was a witness

at the marriage of Rudyard and Carrie Kipling in January 1892, and though he did not share the younger man's imperialist sympathies, they pursued a common interest in the mechanics of fiction and storytelling. Kipling's "They" (1904) is as sophisticated and original as any ghost story in English, making use of a characterisation tendency James had used in tales such as "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" (1884) and "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896). Finally, the American novelist, Gertrude Atherton, dedicated the title story of her collection, *The Bell in the Fog* to 'The Master, Henry James' in 1905. Offered as an act of homage and friendship, it is shot through with more troubling undertones, presenting a version of James which, to modern readers, may not look quite as flattering as she intended.

In 'mainstream' or 'literary' fiction of the *fin de siècle*, writers use versions of realism to present their readers with a believable version of the world they evoked. Some, George Gissing for example, itemised effects and domestic details to present the all-too-recognisable interiors also seen in the stage directions of Ibsen or Shaw. Others used it as Conrad did in the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), "to make you *see*" (Conrad 1977, 13) and hence accept experiences far outside their usual orbit. British readers of *Heart of Darkness* (1902) may, like Marlow, have had an awkward conversation beside the drawing-room piano but few would have seen a jungle stockade surrounded by severed heads. Realism was flexible enough to accommodate the apparently insignificant details of a Sherlock Holmes investigation and the complex psychology of Isabel Archer in James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In the world of fantasy and what might now be termed 'genre fiction' however, realism's authenticating strategies fulfilled another role by encouraging readers to believe in events and situations which were either wildly implausible (the effects of a Martian invasion on the citizens of South-East England) or inexplicable by the laws of contemporary science. It was in the shadowy realm between the possible and the believable that the ghost story sought to operate.

One obvious strategy of authentication in ghostly tales was the use of a narrator who immediately confessed the implausibility of their story and/or emphasised their humdrum life and lack of imagination. The argument of such fictions was that because the narrator never had curious experiences and was incapable of inventing them, what they related must therefore have occurred. This tactic allowed the narrator to emerge as an eyewitness to the extraordinary, and when paired with convincing characterisation, invested even the unlikeliest tales with a patina of authenticity. Nevertheless, it remained a blunt instrument that relied more on narratorial assertions than the evocation of something the reader might judge for themselves. The widespread use of this technique was also, in part, a consequence of magazine publication, in that a periodical's preferred limits (of-

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ten less than 4000 words) did not encourage the depth of "The Jolly Corner" or Oliver Onions' "The Beckoning Fair One" (1911). Only the more prestigious periodicals – *The Yellow Book*, *Scribner's*, *Blackwood's* – allowed lengthier stories which could provide the psychological richness of novels. In essence therefore, the 'unimaginative narrator' was a useful convention rather than anything more ambitious, a device which allowed a story to be told simply and directly. There were those who were able to use the formula to impressive effect, with Edith Nesbit's "Man-Size in Marble" (1887) employing a horrific denouement to undercut the narrator's initial claim that his tale will not be believed, and Wells using a clever dialogue between the 'ordinary' narrator and his friend, a man of 'vision and the imagination' in the richly ambiguous "The Door in the Wall" (1906) (Wells 2004, 298), but it was all too often no more than a convenience.

2 Vernon Lee, "Amour Dure"

More ambitious writers, or those with an eye for the development of the short story's aesthetic rather than commercial possibilities, acknowledged the usefulness of such conventions but sought other ways of extending the realist compass. Vernon Lee's "Amour Dure", from *Hauntings* (1890) is unafraid to tell its story through diary entries, a tactic which links it with much older examples of Gothic writing. However, Lee's use of the diary is not the relatively simple detailing of events through selective chronology used in the more crudely plot-driven examples of the genre. She instead uses the freedom of the journal format to explore her diarist's developing (or degenerating) character and to break away from neatly demarcated chapters or sub-sections. By subtitling the story, "Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka", Lee frees herself from straightforward linearity, presenting the young man's life as a series of moments, tableaux, and meditations shaped by an unknown editor. Entries are of varying lengths, some being relatively focused, others being more akin to letters sent to the self, intimate confessions which reveal the growing division between the diarist's public and private personae. An ambitious young historian, a man trained to observe and analyse and to persuade his readers that his interpretations are the correct ones, Trepka is a fusion of the 'unimaginative' narrator and the repressed sensualist who is more open to visionary experience than he realises, something Lee exploits brilliantly as we see the young man moving from an academic interest in a Lucrezia Borgia-like *femme fatale* to an increasingly obsessive vulnerability to her continued charms. Diaries and journals typically allow for a single viewpoint (other viewpoints recorded by the diarist being reshaped in their own image), but Lee complicates this position by giving us Trepka's engagement

with the historical record, an 'official' or nominally objective voice from which his own becomes progressively divergent, not simply because he is engaged in a professional argument (as he first believes) but because the spirit of Medea da Carpi seems to be possessing him. At one point he even asks himself, "Am I turning novelist instead of historian?" (Lee 2006a, 55). Sondeep Kandola notes how the story "links the purported supernatural encounter to the protagonist's disturbed sense of his own national and cultural dislocation" (Kandola 2010, 43), seeing Trepka (who is Polish) as struggling against a German historiographic tradition, but one should also observe how, like other visitors from the austere north in *fin-de-siècle* literature from Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) to Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), his asceticism makes him at once suspicious towards and desirous of Latinate sensuality, idealising Lucrezia Borgia, Vittoria Accoramboni, and Medea da Carpi but scorning "Italian womankind, its shrill voice, its gaudy toilettes" (54). Christa Zorn has read "Amour Dure" as Lee's response to Walter Pater's study of the *Mona Lisa* (2003), while Patricia Pulham adopts a psychoanalytical position in examining Medea as "a variation of the phallic mother" (Pulham 2008, 124). Martha Vicinus's brilliant essay "Vernon Lee and the Art of Nostalgia" (2004) "explores the desire for and fear of merging with the beloved" in analysing how Trepka becomes "dominated by his fantasy" of the past (Vicinus 2004, 611-12). None of these critics however treat the story as evidence of Lee's skilful use of psychological realism, something which is the basis of its irresolvable ambiguity. Is 'Amour Dure' an account of Trepka's gradual breakdown through overwork and sexual frustration, or is it a ghost story in which a genuine and thoroughly malign supernatural force leads its protagonist to first vandalise a historic monument and then be murdered by person or persons unknown?

As early as 1880, Lee was speculating at some length on the relationship between "our creative power and our imaginative faculty" (Lee 2006b, 294). In "Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art", she argued that "the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague" whereas "art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist" (295). When artists and writers "narrate the supernatural", she maintained, they turn "phantoms into mere creatures of flesh and blood" (296). For her, the supernatural was "nothing but ever-renewed impressions, ever shifting fancies" (304). Art, by contrast, defined, embodied, analysed and synthesised its materials, and artistic embodiment banished the supernatural by transforming it into mere pictorial or verbal arrangements. In the face of this, she concluded, the "stories which affect us most" are "those in which the ghost is heard but not seen" (310). Rather than seeking a definitive representation, a writer or painter should offer their interpreter a series of cues which prompt the im-

agination to conjure that which cannot be embodied and, as Maxwell and Pulham observe, respond to "associations that trigger imaginative recreation" (Maxwell, Pulham 2006, 13). Lee returned to this idea in her preface to *Hauntings*, though she distinguished between accounts of 'true' ghosts and the behaviour of ghosts in fiction, and pointed out that the dogged investigations of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and literary invention were diametrically opposed to one another. 'Real' ghosts were rarely the basis of compelling narratives, as could be seen from the SPR's monumental *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), and in essence, showed a writer exactly how *not* to tell a ghostly tale. To invest a story with the "strange perfume of witch-garden flowers" (Lee in Maxwell, Pulham 2006, 39) required invention and a highly evolved handling of the nuances of atmosphere and language.

By contrast, the SPR's investigators sought to measure, document, and authenticate like ghost-hunting Gradgrinds. The difficulty for a writer was to create an environment or setting in which the supernatural could manifest itself while leaving the reader space for the exercise of their own imagination. "Amour Dure" responded to this by offering a seductively believable account of Trepka's moods, fascinations, and desires which made full use of the expansive word limits offered by the opening number of *Murray's Magazine* in 1887. Whether the ghost of Medea da Carpi appears to him is less important than the fact that he is haunted by her, fantasising about her appearance, savouring her erotic allure, and unwittingly allowing these considerations to shape both his behaviour and his academic investigations. Long before Julian Wolfreys was insisting that in such stories, haunting is 'irreducible to the apparition' (Wolfreys 2002, 6) and far more than merely seeing a ghost, Lee was explaining that "by *ghost* we do not mean the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in told or written tales" but "the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies" (Lee 2006b, 309-10; emphasis in original). This deep embedding of the ghost within the innermost thoughts of the haunted is what makes Trepka's journal so compelling.

Lee's interest in the supernatural was not confined to ghost stories. Elsewhere, she depicted the return of pagan deities in "Dionea" (1890) and "Marsyas in Flanders" (1900), a Lamia-like figure imprisoned in a tapestry in "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896) and an item of terrifying *bric-à-brac*, "The Doll" (1900). These tales have attracted considerable scholarly attention since the revival of interest in Lee began in the early 2000s and the publication of an excellent critical edition of *Hauntings*, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham in 2006. Welcome as this renewed scholarly attention has been, it has to some extent overshadowed a number of equally interesting texts by Lee's contemporaries. One of the

most intriguing of these is a story which immediately preceded Lee's "Prince Alberic" in the *Yellow Book*'s July 1896 volume, Ella D'Arcy's "The Villa Lucienne".

3 Ella D'Arcy, "The Villa Lucienne"

"The Villa Lucienne" was the second of a pair of D'Arcy's tales in Volume X, billed on the contents page as "Two Stories" and subsequently collected in *Modern Instances*. The first of these, "The Death Mask", was a decadent parable about the beauty or otherwise of macabre subject matter, but the second was rather different and undoubtedly a very chilly tale to offer the magazine's readers on a summer afternoon. Set in a sunny but frigid December in Mediterranean France, it is a richly evocative vignette, sparsely plotted and reluctant to explain itself.

The dramatic situation is a simple one. A group of women visit a neglected house one of them is considering renting, but the building's sinister atmosphere makes them uneasy and forces them to flee. Typically, a story of this kind has a 'buried' narrative beneath the surface events, but D'Arcy's characters never discover what gives the villa its menacing aspect, or who the young daughter of one of them sees rising from a dilapidated armchair. She is, apparently, "an old lady like Grandma" who "got up and began to – to come – ", but at this point the 'nervous and excitable child' starts to cry and the woman's identity and fate remain unknown, the reason why she haunts the summerhouse a mystery. "We made enquiries", says the narrator, "but we learned very little, and that little was so vague, so remote, so irrelevant, that it does not seem worth while repeating" (D'Arcy 1896, 285).

D'Arcy's story is a striking mixture of the innovative and the traditional. The mechanics of the narrator's reminiscence are fairly familiar, with the opening sentence the apparently artless admission, "Madame Coetlegon told the story" (274). Ingredients such as the menacing peasant and the heightened susceptibility of children and animals to the supernatural are almost hackneyed, but D'Arcy's willingness to withhold information and refer to 'off stage' events which the story never explains (such as the fate of 'poor Guy', the husband of one of the women) allies the story with the work of James, Kipling, Harland, and *Yellow Book* contributors such as Hubert Crackanthorpe and George Egerton. D'Arcy's storyteller does not tell her listeners what they know already simply to pass this information to the reader. As such, she breaks all manner of Victorian fiction's informal conventions, notably the generally understood promise that if the reader continues with a narrative their patience and forbearance will eventually be rewarded through revelation and closure. This may have been essential in winning a reader's loyalty towards a three-decker

novel from a circulating library or purchasing instalments of a serial, but the *Yellow Book* played by very different rules. In a waspish editorial in the same issue as "The Villa Lucienne", Harland donned the garb of his alter ego, 'The Yellow Dwarf', and divided contemporary writers into two species: dogs and cats. The dogs, generally the more commercially successful, by and large conformed to Victorian expectations, but the cats, led by Henry James, anticipated Kipling's "The Cat That Walked by Himself" (1902) in disdaining any cosiness and predictability. Rather than giving an audience what it wanted and compromise their artistic integrity, Harland's cats wrote according to their own tastes, instinctively apprehending the impossibility of a mass readership for their subtle and personal effusions. If one may borrow the choice presented to Kipling's cat, they scorned the comforts of the cave, that is, commercial success, in favour of the "wild wet woods" (Kipling 1902, 197) of artistic freedom. Harland regarded himself as feline, referring to his short story collection, *Grey Roses* (1895) as "very pretty Grey Kittens" (Harland 1896, 17). Unsurprisingly, he saw D'Arcy, his editorial assistant, in similar terms.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of "The Villa Lucienne" is its vivid descriptive language. Like James, D'Arcy could craft a long and sinuous sentence clotted with polysyllables and far removed from the journalistic briskness of a weird tale by Wells or E.F. Benson. Madame Coetlegon tells the story "so well that her audience seemed to know the sombre alley, the neglected garden, the shuttered house, as intimately as though they had visited it themselves" (D'Arcy 1896, 274). Such are her powers of evocation that the listeners feel "a faint reverberation of the incommunicable thrill" (275) – a notably Jamesian phrase – experienced by those who were there in person as they made their way through:

> A tangled matting of greenery, that suffered no drop of sunlight to trickle through. The ground was covered with lichens, deathstools, and a spongy moss exuding water beneath the root, and one had the consciousness that the whole place, floor, walls, and roof, must creep with all the repulsive, slimy, running life, which pullulates in dark and slimy places. (277)

The verbal luxuriance here is 'decadent' in the sense that it has become over-ripe, rotten, just as the house and its gardens have decayed into tenebrous deliquescence and 'pullulation'. The same textual density might be found in Poe (in, say, the opening sentence of "The Fall of the House of Usher", 1839), Pater, or Arthur Machen – it is beautifully controlled throughout the story and creates an immersive atmosphere of louring evil, the more so for its source being unrevealed. D'Arcy's descriptions exploit the resources of adjectives and adverbs to the full, creating a story which, though perhaps at

odds with later tastes for more direct and active writing, is powerfully evocative. In its brief compass, "The Villa Lucienne" manages an ingenious blend of familiar Gothic ingredients with newer ideas of narrative form, its refusal to allow closure and explanation recalling the records of ghostly encounters collated by the SPR, yet its language echoing the stylised, unapologetically literary manner of Lee's foreword to *Hauntings*. "And yet, as you will see," the narrator begins, "there is in reality no story at all". It is "merely an account" of a visit to the old Villa, nothing more (275).

He may not have numbered Kipling among his "dogs", but 'The Yellow Dwarf' nonetheless disliked his jingoistic politics, his fondness for vernacular speech and, very probably, his widespread popularity and its accompanying financial rewards. Yet, while decadent writers such as Harland often professed to abhor Kipling (and he was equally forthright in his dislike of "long-haired things | In velvet collar rolls" and those "who muddled with books and pictures" (Kipling 2013, 1319; Kipling 1940, 132), the two camps had more in common than they liked to admit where narrative experimentation was concerned. Kipling's fondness for elliptical presentation of events, displayed in stories such as the perennially puzzling "Mrs Bathurst" (1904), was predicated upon what he called "the Higher Editing" which was rigorous to the point of obsession (Kipling 1937, 208). "[A] tale from which pieces have been raked out is like a fire which has been poked", he wrote in *Something of Myself* (207). We know little of D'Arcy's compositional practice, but one might surmise that her slow rate of production (and the fact that she published little) was due not to her laziness, as gossips muttered during the 1890s, but to a determination to polish her work to perfection. "The Villa Lucienne" follows Kipling in its concision and reluctance to explain itself, its emphasis being on the fear the women felt rather than any underlying cause. Unlike many Victorian ghost stories, it does not have an epilogue whereby someone returns to the Villa and discovers its past, and even its framing device leaves a great deal unsaid. What became of Guy, why he excelled in "the crystallisation of those subtle, unformulated emotions" (D'Arcy 1896, 285), how the little girl coped with her traumatic experience and what has become of the Villa since the women visited it are questions D'Arcy refuses to answer.

4 Rudyard Kipling, "They"

Reticence was something *The Yellow Book* had explored in its first two issues, with Crackanthorpe responding to the opening number's "Reticence in Literature" by Arthur Waugh with a similarly titled piece three months later. Crackanthorpe argued that artists should not restrict their choice of subject matter for nothing was aestheti-

cally irredeemable. What mattered was the ability to transform the sordid, the distressing, or the macabre into something artistically satisfying. Moral considerations and didacticism were less important than the writer's own aesthetic sophistication; in short, it was the judgement of the individual, rather than the shibboleths of Victorian society, which were the ultimate means of measuring a work's worth and success. Kipling certainly did not ally himself with decadents such as Crackanthorpe, yet his own approach was not unlike what the younger writer advocated. Kipling regularly shocked his readers with the violent, the uncouth, and the morally troubling, especially in stories such as "The Mark of the Beast" or "Georgie-Porgie" (1891) which revealed the underlying horrors of the imperial project, but he was secure in his belief that such stories needed to be told (he had, of course, begun his career as a journalist) and that his methods were the most appropriate for his message.

Kipling's stories were not always openly controversial. "They", first published in *Scribner's Magazine* in August 1904 and collected in *Traffics and Discoveries* later that year, is a work of great emotional power, not least because the subtlety of its denouement delays its impact. A wealthy man drives his new motor car aimlessly around the Sussex countryside until it breaks down in the grounds of a beautiful old manor house. Here a blind woman leads a mysterious existence, seemingly surrounded by children who play in the grounds but stay away from the narrator as he watches them flitting among the trees and topiary. When, on his third and final visit to the house, an unseen child takes and kisses his hand, the woman's secret is revealed. The children are ghosts, and only those who are themselves bereaved parents may witness them. The narrator has lost his daughter – and maybe his wife too. His daughter's touch is one of consolation but also of parting, for after it, the narrator knows that he cannot return to the house and must drive away alone.

The story's evocative power comes in part from its use of locations with which Kipling was intimately familiar. The description of the old woman's house recalls Bateman's, Kipling's own residence, while the woman herself has elements of Kipling's sister Alice, a psychic known professionally as "Mrs Holland". Kipling spent many hours driving around Sussex in his Lanchester, though his poor eyesight meant that he had a chauffeur, unlike the intrepid motorist of the story. Most tragically, the narrator's loss of his daughter was shared by his creator, Kipling's beloved Josephine, to whom he told the original "Just So Stories", having died aged only six in 1899. To these ingredients however, Kipling adds folkloric motifs (the dead children's euphemistic "walking in the wood"), deploys the 'rule of three' as a structuring principle, and makes the woman a recognisable archetype, the blind seer whose lack of literal sight only intensifies her visionary powers. References to the narrator having come from "the other side of the county" (Kipling 1904,

329) suggest symbolic as well as literal meaning, the phrase echoing the contemporary language of spiritualism and *Hamlet*'s notion of the 'undiscovered country', while the overlaying of the events as they happen (a child's illness, the blind woman's tussle with a swindling tenant) with the underlying relationship between the narrator and the inhabitants of the mysterious house give us a sense of them occurring on two planes simultaneously. Also notable (and less remarked upon by earlier critics), is the way in which the narrator reveals so little about himself. His refusal to admit or acknowledge his loss and grief leave him susceptible to the supernatural presences which haunt the house and surrounding woodland. Only slowly do we realise that his aimless driving along lonely roads is his conscious removal of himself from the site of domestic tragedy: he does not want to be at home.

This sense of a narrator who talks about everything other than his powerful emotions is not simply an example of a repressed Englishman exercising the power of his stiff upper lip, but an awareness of the ways in which people cannot articulate or even consciously realise their innermost cravings. To give two examples, the narrator of "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" is apparently unaware of the powerful erotic feelings he holds for Mark Ambient, even though his choice of words (as well as his behaviour) betrays them at every turn, while the obsessive critic of "The Figure in the Carpet" applies his hermeneutic lens to the smallest details of Hugh Vereker's fiction without ever turning it upon his own character.

Of course, James did not have a monopoly on such figures. Similar patterns of displacement occur in works by his friends Wells and Conrad, such as the moment when Lionel Wallace finds himself resisting the lure of the portal by itemising "a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes" and other detritus outside a plumber and decorator's shop in "The Door in the Wall" (Wells 2004, 286), or, more notably, the moment in *Heart of Darkness*, when, reeling from the existential horrors of his encounter with the dying Kurtz, Marlow immerses himself in the familiar practicalities of mechanical itemisation, tending "the little forge" on the steamship and "helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting rod". This "toil[ing] wearily in a wretched scrap-heap" (Conrad 1995, 111) reveals a determination to control what can be controlled as a bulwark against ungovernable emotional forces, and it is shown in Kipling's story when the narrator's car breaks down. The mechanical fault could be rectified quite simply, but the narrator insists on laying out his various tools on the grass around the car as the "glittering shop of my repair kit […] a trap to catch all childhood" (Kipling 1904, 313). His underlying need for the children's presence conveys, obliquely, the absence of them from his own life, but rather than admitting that, he concentrates on repairing the vehicle, just as later in the story he places his driving skills at the service of the strick-

en child rather than considering her likely fate or the parallels with his daughter. These incidents provide convincing illustrations of the ways by which people win themselves 'breathing space' in moments of stress and anxiety.

As elsewhere in his work, Kipling's treatment of the supernatural in "They" embeds the ghostly in everyday detail and imbues apparently insignificant occurrences with psychological depth. There is a sense of an encounter with the supernatural being a shared experience like it was in "The Villa Lucienne"; the narrator, the blind woman, and her servant all observe the children at different points of the story. The out-of-the-way rural setting, the folkloric touches, and the many uses of authenticating physical and psychological information produce a tale which is at once tragic and curiously consoling, with "They" belonging to a select group of ghost stories, E.F. Benson's "How Fear Departed from the Long Gallery" (1912) for instance, which use the supernatural less to frighten than to offer solace.

Each of these stories showed how flexible an instrument realism could be when used by a skilful and original writer. Lee, D'Arcy and Kipling mixed establishing and authenticating detail with psychological depth, not least in leaving so much unsaid. Their protagonists are all unable to provide a definitive and 'closed' account of events. Trepka is murdered, perhaps by the reborn Medea da Carpi, while Kipling's motorist is last seen leaving the old manor house rather than subsequently reflecting on his experiences there. Even D'Arcy's narrator, who stands at a safer distance from the events she recounts, reveals little of herself or her companions, concentrating instead on telling the story with rich descriptive effects that promote the same fear in her listeners as she and her friends experienced. All of them use techniques associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with Henry James, but the final story considered here, Gertrude Atherton's "The Bell in the Fog" is slightly different in that it depicts a version of James himself, one wrapped in the familiar accoutrements of his later fiction – art, wealthy bachelors, Americans in Europe, an historic stately home – but with an underlying suggestion of reincarnation or generational repetition.

5 Gertrude Atherton, "The Bell in the Fog"

The story of Ralph Orth is a peculiar tribute to James, though unlike Forrest Reid's dedication of *The Garden God* to him the same year, it did not result in a sundering of friendship. It portrays him as a writer of remarkable subtlety who has, while unappreciated by the multitude, a core of devoted readers who recognise the sophistication and intelligence of his art. However, it also depicts "a rather lonely man" (Atherton 1905, 7) who, adrift in his aptly named mansion, Chilling-

shurst, becomes fascinated by the two-hundred-year-old portraits of "a gallant little lad in the green costume of Robin Hood" and the boy's beguiling sister, Lady Blanche Mortlake. She has dark-blue eyes which possess "a beauty of mind which must have been remarkable twenty years later" and "a mouth like a scarlet serpent" (8), a disquieting description of a little girl. "I believe these youngsters have obsessed me", thinks Orth (11) – he is fortunate that the portrait does not affect him in quite the way that Medea da Carpi's did Spiridion Trepka. Nevertheless, his interest in it makes him vulnerable, leading him to admit his longing that the children were his own and making him susceptible to imaginative suggestion. Wandering into the woods of his neighbour's estate, he suddenly encounters a beautiful girl:

> For the moment he was possessed by the most hideous sensation which can visit a man's being – abject terror. He believed that body and soul were disintegrating. The child before him was his child, the original of a portrait… (18)

After what seems about to be to an epiphanic moment of supernatural revelation, he is wholly unprepared for her bathetic opening remark.: "You look real sick. […] Shall I lead you home?"

The little American girl is another Blanche, Blanche Root, who has come to England with her mother to visit her father's relatives. Long ago, it transpires, one of his ancestors was involved in a relationship with the adulterous Lady Blanche and killed himself after she broke off the affair. It seems as though the modern Blanche might be a reincarnation of the seventeenth-century aristocrat, as she is quite unlike any of her family and feels remarkably at home at Chillingshurst, her surname indicating where her origins may lie. Orth becomes besotted with her, buying her expensive gifts, taking her to London to see a pantomime, and beginning "to monopolize her" at the expense of her mother (28). Orth, Atherton writes, "adored her as a child, irrespective of the psychological problem". "Of course, you've fallen in love with Blanche, sir", says a woman on the estate. "Everybody does" (21). At last, Orth proposes that he adopt Blanche but her mother refuses to allow this, ostensibly because it would remove her daughter from her loving family though perhaps also because she has no wish to hand over her child to an eccentric middle-aged bachelor in the grip of an obsession. Blanche returns to America and dies a year or so later, giving Orth the macabre pleasure of knowing that, because she never grew up, she never lost her youthful beauty and spirit or indeed, entered the adult world of sexual desire and betrayal. As one of Blanche Mortlake's descendants tells him, "little angels sometimes grow up into very naughty girls" (25).

Summarised in these terms, "The Bell in the Fog" might almost be a malicious parody of James on the lines of Lee's "Lady Tal", with

Orth's acquisitive desires toward Blanche deeply troubling. Yet Atherton intended it as a wholly affectionate tribute, not just to James's preoccupations with the aristocracy of the 'old country' but also with his interest in the supernatural. Blanche's similarity to Lady Mortlake might seem a matter of genetic inheritance rather than spiritual possession, but the older Blanche had no children, ruling out heredity as the basis of their resemblance. "The Bell in the Fog" becomes therefore a story of haunting without a ghost, in which Orth ponders the life he might have had as a father and Blanche Root (whose thoughts we are not privy to) is shadowed by a woman who died two centuries before she was born. Atherton mixes Jamesian motifs with the suggestion of reincarnation or soul transfer, ingredients more likely to be found in sensational writers such as Marie Corelli, though she may have drawn on a novel by another of James's friends, Robert Hichens, *Flames: A Phantasy*, which had enjoyed some success in 1902.

Without descending to pastiche, Atherton gives an impression of James's style, albeit one closer to *Daisy Miller* (1878) than *The Ambassadors* (1903). She also strives to find a way to incorporate intimations of the supernatural without, in Lee's terms, making them "distinct". Unfortunately, her narrator's interventions are less polished than those seen in James's own ghost stories. "Possibly there are very few imaginative writers who have not a leaning, secret or avowed, to the occult", she writes. "The creative gift is in very close relationship with the Great Force behind the universe" (Atherton 1905, 24). Orth finds himself "in a subjective world, searching for all he had ever heard of occultism" (28). These asides foreground the story's possibly supernatural content rather than allowing the narrative to remain ambiguous, with Blanche's mother saying that her daughter is "an angel" who "came to us when we needed her" (and is yet to be a naughty girl) and Orth musing that her appearance at Chillingshurst is "Blanche Mortlake working out the last of her salvation" (41), a transgenerational expiation of her adultery and the suicide which it prompted. Lady Blanche was one of "the sinful dead" who linger in the "borderland" until sent back to earth to put right the wrongs they caused in life (28), a more overt, if idiosyncratic, Christian rationale for her activities than might have been proffered in James's own tales. The traditional third-person narration Atherton uses in "The Bell in the Fog" is insufficiently flexible for her purposes, only granting the reader a heavily mediated access to Orth's consciousness and, in its intrusiveness, disrupting the atmosphere which she is at pains to create. Had she employed free indirect style and exploited the ambiguity of the relationship between Blanche Root and the girl in the portrait instead of explaining it, she may have come closer to the Jamesian ideal she so admired.

6 Some Conclusions

As these stories attest, realism was a highly flexible instrument when used by skilled practitioners. Henry James had shown how sophisticated it could be in moving between interior and exterior worlds, conveying thought and sensation, documenting and itemising, and adjudicating between the related claims of characterisation and narrative purpose, but it would be wrong to see any of the writers here as simply following in his footsteps. "Amour Dure" started life as a richly detailed historical novel – Trepka's discovery of Medea da Carpi's murderous history is, in some respects, a summary of the longer work – and Lee's knowledge of history and art, plus her willingness to experiment with form and her sly fondness for digs at male academic authority take the story into terrain she made her own in her writings on landscape and aesthetics. D'Arcy made no secret of her admiration for James, and one could see "The Villa Lucienne" as a subtler tribute to him than "The Bell in the Fog", precisely because it avoids James himself. The willingness to withhold explanatory detail and deny revelation looks ahead to the stories of incident and momentariness in which Katherine Mansfield specialised and to later weird tales by the likes of Elizabeth Bowen and Walter de la Mare, which also relished the inconclusive and suggestive. Kipling's "They" is an acknowledged classic of its kind, but its affecting storyline can distract readers from the recognition of the skill by which its author encourages belief in the ghostly children and the sadness of their fate, "walking in the wood" implying a purgatorial existence despite apparently idyllic surroundings. The story's development appears as casual as the narrator's seemingly aimless drives through the Sussex countryside, but it is, of course, nothing of the kind. Atherton's story is openly Jamesian and in some respects suffers from comparison with its inspiration, but it shows too how uncanny effects could be created without the use of overt supernatural elements. Orth's first encounter with what he thinks is the girl from the painting offers a genuine *frisson* because it suggests something which simultaneously is and yet cannot be, and though the subsequent explanations for the likeness between the two Blanches takes the story into areas James himself may have preferred to skirt, the dramatic situation remains a potent one. The celibate Orth is briefly haunted by his own unlived life and wonders what fatherhood would have been like, a poignant moment that leaves one asking whether it drew upon Atherton's private conversations with her friend.

Darryl Jones suggests that Gothic's enduring popularity is partly because "there are whole areas of human existence about which realism has little or nothing to say: extreme psychological states and the limits of consciousness, metaphysical or spiritual questions; the paranormal and the supernatural" (Jones 2018, 9). His opposition of

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the Gothic and the Realist novel supports this in some respects, but it does not allow for the ways in which realist practice informs and underpins much supernatural fantasy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the ghost story had become an extremely sophisticated form of literary art. Its older, cruder manifestations had been mercilessly burlesqued in tales such as Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" (1887), and educated readers expected it to offer something more than a horrifying apparition, raw-head and bloody bones. Realism offered a means to do this, the challenge being to balance the detailed description of character and environment found in non-supernatural realist writing with the implication of something beyond material concerns. It was one which the writers discussed here addressed with considerable originality and ingenuity, creating in the process not only enduring specimens of supernatural fiction but also doing much to shape its course during the twentieth century.

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