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TERROR MADE RELEVANT: JAMES'S GHOST STORIES

HENRY JAMES EXPERIMENTED with what he called the "ghost-story", though with the apology of quotation marks, early in his career; and then after a hiatus of a decade and a half returned to active contribution to the genre through the 1890s and into the new century. This later phase or period divides also, with a number of stories of lesser merit like those of his earlier career dating from 1891-92 and followed now by a briefer pause; then "The Altar of the Dead" in 1895 initiated a list which includes besides itself such accomplishments as "The Turn of the Screw", "The Beast in the Jungle", and "The Jolly Corner".

In what may seem coincidence, the first half of the decade of the 1890s marks James's all-out effort to conquer the theatre, ending with the *Guy Domville* disaster of 1895. But the lessons learned from the conditions of dramatic presentation stayed with him to show their influence in his fiction, in the emphasis on scene and also in the control of viewpoint and degree of awareness in his characters. In the early "The Art of Fiction", the concept of point of view as chiefly a means of selection and interpretation of the material of one's experience is considerably transcended, along with the relatively facile separation between subject and technique assumed in that essay. Of course, had it not been for his conservative views in regard to all kinds of art except his own, James might have seen that what he was doing had its parallel in painting from the Impressionists onward. But he was required to pay part of the price of his individual genius by the necessity of discovering many things very largely by himself, so that the habit sometimes persisted without the need. There might also be noted the increasing isolation that he felt from the rejection of his work by the general public, the loss of his sister and old friends, the awareness of aging; and the nature of the concern itself in the kind of ghost stories that interested him now, with their emphasis upon obsessions and upon internal rather than external terrors.

The ghost story as a type lends itself especially to exercises in the metering of comprehension, in the adjustment of shutters to let in exactly the desired

amount of light. The genuine ghost must be made believably existent, yet not so familiar that he becomes accepted as simply part of the scheme of things. The terror that takes place in the mind must be treated in such fashion that it seems not wholly enclosed within this precinct and therefore the concern merely of abnormal psychology, but capable of objectifying itself, actually doing so under the force of the reader's apprehension. Given the predilection that always remained with him, it is hardly to be accounted for by mere chance that James's most significant period in the writing of ghost stories should have coincided with the great advance in his development of the dramatic method as applied to fiction. More clearly now, he saw the possibilities of the mind as a principal source of terror. The suggestion had of course always been present in an incident in the family history, the "vastation" experienced by his father when James was still a child. Also available in "Father's ideas" was the notion of selfhood, with its imputation of guilt deriving from the individual's separation and isolation. Reading of Hawthorne provided additional source and support for this—but in fact James could hardly have escaped it, growing up as he did in the intellectual and moral climate of an America of Calvinist background and contemporary commitment to the democratic ideal.

With some qualification to permit inclusion of "The Turn of the Screw", James's greatest ghost stories are those concerned with the isolating effects of obsession. James fully exploits the relation between guilt and terror to achieve the greater terror of the depths of the consciousness—a terror greater than any deriving from the offered external example, the specifically cited act. His attitude toward obsession is the opposite of that of Emerson, who with inadequate sanction from any realistic standpoint still approved of it as the guide for one's life. James, as has frequently been pointed out, takes his place on the side of those writers of darker vision who could create an Ethan Brand or an Ahab.

"The Turn of the Screw" is something of a special case among these stories, its terror meaningful in a different way, except in so far as all terror breaks through our defences to give insight into our nakedest selves. "The Altar of the Dead" shares with "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Jolly Corner" in having a central character under the control of an intense obsession. It is a powerful story. No one at all susceptible to James can deny the force of the brooding image of George Stransom at his altar. Yet a limitation exists because of the nature of his concerns, with the dead and with a perverse revenge; intermingled with the incense from the

candles is the atmosphere of morbidity. By contrast the concerns of John Marcher and Spencer Brydon seem our own, however magnified in these stories by obsession. "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Jolly Corner," among the ghost stories, perhaps reach us most nearly in the way the great novels do.

It is John Marcher's lot to be possessed by an idea of selfhood too strong to serve beneficially as it otherwise might. The experience which seems available to him seems also inadequate, and he will not settle for less, in his evaluation of his worth, than he deserves. He is an idealist, living for and in service to an abstract ideal of himself, his life, and his fate. The terms in which the ideal might be achieved are expressed no further, until the end of the story, than in the metaphor of the title. The lack of a definition eliminates any relatively easy solution, comparable, say, to that achieved in the assimilation of the culture of Europe by the American protagonists of the international stories. The result is the refusal by Marcher to settle for, in his estimate, a half-loaf; and not until too late does he realize that the specific instance of May Bartram's love has proved his estimate wrong, and that he has been wondrous only to himself. The development is that of the initiation into knowledge without the undergoing of experience; Marcher comes at last to a full knowledge of life without having in this sense lived it. It is an instance of consciousness grasping, not experience—because this has been excluded by his obsession—but only the void. The effect is to increase and sharpen but never to satisfy that consciousness.

The story presents, of course, one of the most notable examples in fiction of the missed life. The external fact is simply that Marcher failed to marry the woman who was in love with him. Quite frequently this is treated both in actual life and in fiction as nothing more than comic. In other respects, Marcher seems in possession of all those perquisites which make for the comfortable existence. Numerous characters out of Zola, or Dickens, would of a certainty regard him with envy. Therefore it is not what happens, or does not happen, to him which is the basic concern of the story. The concern is rather Marcher's own turning away from outward experience and inward toward the mind. The horror which develops for him is self-created. And for the reader it exists in part from being taken along in Marcher's realization, but in another and perhaps greater part in a growing awareness of the capabilities James established for the human consciousness. It is the limitlessness of these capabilities that causes one to shrink back from what he seems about to discover of possibility within himself.

The absence of any concrete specification of what Marcher feels is to happen to him is necessary and appropriate; it does not owe to the Jamesian reluctance, irritating at times, as in the question of the object manufactured at Woollett, Massachusetts; nor does it owe to the intentional obscuring of what could be visible and concrete and clear, if artistic purpose allowed, as the evil in "The Turn of the Screw". In "The Beast in the Jungle" the reader is not under the urge to try to see a little more specifically than the author permits—the non-specification exists for itself, is in no sense merely a concealment. The concreteness of the image evoked by the title of course arouses fear by itself; but also, by deriving from the area of the actively and physically violent, it emphasizes further the quality of the undefinable that awaits Marcher, to increase the effect of terror.

In "The Jolly Corner" the house is for Spencer Brydon the symbol of his consciousness; the action in the house is an adumbration of his explorations during a third of a century into that consciousness. Here James, like Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown", externalizes, establishes in concrete form the product of the mind's workings, and consequently a tight relationship between the two. In *The American Henry James* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1957), Quentin Anderson makes the point that it is a mistake to read the story as being about a man "who discovers what he *would have been*". What Spencer Brydon discovers is what he *has been*" (pp. 177-8). For the horror must remain superficial if "The Jolly Corner" is read as presenting alternate lives, one that Brydon did live and another that he did not. Thus the life that he did not live should become now merely an object of Brydon's curiosity, to be satisfied by the co-operation of the apparitional world, as in *Macbeth*, which is willing to answer questions put to it if the proper formulae are employed, as Brydon might be credited with having done by his psychological preparations and physical probing of the house. Such inadequate reading of the story takes no account of the intensity of Brydon's consciousness, of his great hunger for experience. This force proves that the life he actually lived in the external sense, in Europe, which for another person might have been sufficient, was not sufficient—the consequence being that he had engaged himself through all his years there in the construction of another life, in the mind, in the subconscious mind if you will. The Spencer Brydon of this existence is as real, indeed more real—for the reason that it is his inner and profounder self—than the one of his visible external career.

The autobiographical relevance of the story has frequently been noted; the point might be emphasized that "The Jolly Corner" owes to James's return

to America in 1904-05 chiefly as the prepared and waiting fire owes to the match. It is testimony to the importance that James placed upon the life contained within the consciousness, especially in his later years, and which he manifests in so many ways in his writing. Specifically one might note the choice of themes and subjects, the movement towards the language of concepts rather than of images except in the creation of figures, and perhaps most important the greatly increased use of dramatization of point of view as a basic means of fictional development. Brydon discovers in the apparition in the house what can be called his "other" self only by reason of James's choice of point of view from which to tell the story. In a way the formula of presentation is the reverse of that of "The Beast in the Jungle", while Marcher and Brydon are alike in that each is obsessively aware of his life as a sort of double existence, with the external and visible being by such virtue by no means the more real.

One of the notable qualities of James is that, especially considering the age and society in which he lived and the kinds of periodicals in which so much of his work appeared, he is so seldom softheaded or sentimental or even to the slightest degree merciful. Unlike Emerson, he matches the possibilities open to man in his inner life by an insistence upon a responsibility, so to speak, with teeth in it. Man is free to choose his experience—James sees to it that economic and other similar conditions do not impair this freedom—but all experience is hazardous, and the encounter with evil is always possible, even probable. James is virtually as rigid on this as the most legalistic seventeenth-century New England Calvinist. Yet he offers an alternative which can lead to salvation—in of course a secularized version—while by no whit mitigating the encounter. His "American" heroes and heroines are made possible to be what they are by their right choice of alternatives, by their immersing themselves to the fullest in the kind of experience which James, with his values set upon culture, tradition, social relationships on a high level of sophistication, saw as best, as most completely identifying and expressing the human. Isabel Archer is at the head of a distinguished roster. James, to repeat, is seldom merciful—yet to these, in a sense, he is. He permits them the acceptance of their fates, in various kinds of renunciation, bringing a measure of peace. To the incomprehension of Henrietta Stackpole and Caspar Goodwood, Isabel goes back to Gilbert Osmond; Newman burns the letter; Milly Theale in all good intent and forgiveness provides the means for Merton Densher and Kate Croy to have their future. That her act destroys the possibility is the

irony of their lives, not of hers. Implicit is a final achieved immunity as a consequence of having undergone all, given the terms of the story, that could have happened to them.

The basic circumstance is otherwise with the obsessed protagonists of the ghost stories. While a Christopher Newman may stand in a position of openness to the hazards of life, the obsessed protagonist of one of James's ghost stories presents the extreme among his characters whose reaction to life is to redefine it in their own terms. Illustration may again be drawn from American characters in his fiction in general—those Americans whose smallness of soul manifests itself in ways owing to the American experience rather than to that of Europe. In James's terminology they are "Unitarian"; or they are representative of the "New England conscience". In an early sense of the word, revived in our own time with chief credit due perhaps to John Crowe Ransom, they are "puritans", simplifying experience into preconceived, inadequate abstractions. They are invulnerable to life, having developed a hardened outer shell which saves them from knowing what is going on outside in any detail, remaining satisfied rather in their assurance that it is very probably immoral. Like them the obsessed figures of the ghost stories have set their lives in terms of abstraction and simplification; but unlike them they possess the greatest possible capacity for moral consciousness, for awareness of the opportunities and significance of the human situation.

Thus James achieves the paradox of capacity for experience being negated by the specific means—the obsession itself—by which the obsessed protagonist seeks to live a fuller, more significant life than he might otherwise. The obsessions are themselves powerful, and in further contrast to the abstractions of the New England conscience, active. The direction that they lead, however, is inward, with greater penetration into and control of the consciousness as the distractions of noise and light from the outer world lose their relevance to the life that the obsessed protagonist is creating for himself. Yet it is not simply that nothing happens to these figures, even John Marcher; rather, what happens is the action of the mind turning inward upon itself. To describe the product of this, one might perhaps use the term anti-experience, as the physicists are beginning to speak more confidently of something they call anti-matter. But if it is escape from experience, at least from external experience, it is by no means escape without penalty. For one thing, the intensity of the protagonist's awareness develops inevitably its dark and perverse aspects; and in several instances James corroborates Hawthorne's belief that this can lead to the guilt involved in the violation by one person of the life of an-

other. Chiefly, however, there is the guilt deriving from the knowledge that one has failed in the responsibility toward his own life, such responsibility being a secularized version of man's duty, and met in the Jamesian system of values by the full acceptance of experience and complete immersion in it. The strength of the feeling of guilt is in measure to the capacity for consciousness—thus it is no accident that James's most powerfully obsessed characters are also those most capable of the fullness of experience which their obsessions have deprived them of. If evil is linked with experience, equally guilt is linked with and measured by knowledge. Somehow Marcher's flinging himself in agony on May Bartram's grave at the end of "The Beast in the Jungle" is closer to us than the acceptant renunciations of Newman and Isabel Archer and Milly Theale; to us, in our time, as we reject the tragic solution no less than the sentimental, it strikes closer to the actualities of the human condition. For us the ultimate terror is that which is based on some distortion of the human, of which the sense of guilt is the indicator and proof. The terror invoked in these stories of James is, more truly than in Poe's, the terror not so much of the world of external circumstance as of that consciousness which may be called the soul.