Bewilderments of vision: hallucination and literature, 1880-1914

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Abstract

Hallucination was always the ghost story’s elephant in the room. Even before the vogue for psychical research and spiritualism began to influence writers at the end of the nineteenth century, tales of horror and the supernatural, of ghosts and demons, had been haunted by the possibility of some grand deception by the senses. Edgar Allan Poe’s stories were full of mad narrators, conscience-stricken criminals and sinners, and protagonists who doubted their very eyes and ears. Writers such as Dickens and Le Fanu continued this idea of the cheat of the senses.

But what is certainly true is that, towards the end of the century, hallucination took on a new force and significance in ghostly and horror fiction. Now, its presence was not the dominion of a handful of experimental thinkers but the province of popular authors writing very different kinds of stories. The approaches had become many and diverse, from Arthur Machen’s ambivalent interest in occultism to Vernon Lee’s passion for art and antiquity. Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is the most famous text to pose a question that was, in fact, being asked by many writers of the time: reality or delusion? Other writers, too, were forcing their readers to assess whether the ghostly had its origins in some supernatural phenomenon from beyond the grave, or from some deception within our own minds.

This thesis explores the many factors which contributed to this rise in the interest in hallucination and visionary experience, during the period 1880-1914. From the time when psychical research became hugely popular, up until the First World War—often considered a watershed in the history of the ghost story and literature in general—something happened to the ghost story and related fiction. Through a close analysis of stories and novels written by Robert Louis Stevenson, Vernon Lee, Henry James, Arthur Machen, and Oliver Onions, I attempt to find out what happened, and—even more importantly—why it happened at all.

Keywords: hallucination, ghost story, psychical research, fin de siécle, Machen, Henry James, Stevenson
Contents

1. Introduction: Fields of Vision 1
   Phantasms 1
   The Fantastic 12
   ‘...true ghost story...’ 22
   Apparitions 38

2. ‘The clear writing of conscience’: Stevenson’s ‘Markheim’ 49
   Handconscience 49
   Strange Cases 61
   Namings 75

3. The Voices of Vernon Lee 80
   ‘...genuine ghosts...’ 80
   ‘...strangest of maladies...’ 88
   ‘...languishing phrases...’ 97

   Psychical Cases 108
   Impulses 115
   The Third Person 127

5. Arthur Machen’s Phantasmagoria 135
   Phantasmagorias 135
   ‘...wild domed hills...’ 148
   ‘...rare drugs...’ 157
   Vast Questions 169

6. Oliver Onions, Beckoning 180
   Ghostly Credos 180
   A Haunted House 189
   Aural Sex 201

Afterword 212

Bibliography 219
Introduction:
Fields of Vision

There came to me thus a bewilderment of vision of which, after these years, there is no living view that I can hope to give.

(Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, 1898)

Phantasms

In his 1895 poem ‘Hallucination’, Arthur Symons describes a dream which itself contains the remembrance of an earlier dream:

One petal of a blood-red tulip pressed
Between the pages of a Baudelaire:
No more; and I was suddenly aware
Of the white fragrant apple of a breast
On which my lips were pastured; and I knew
That dreaming I remembered an old dream,
Sweeter than any fruit that fruit did seem,
Which, as my hungry teeth devoured it, grew
Ever again, and tantalised my taste.

Not every reader may be able to relate to the experience of biting into breasts and mistaking them for apples; but the wider message of the poem, that of the disappointment of recollected sensations when compared with their originals, is a fruit we have all tasted. The poem effects this experience of deluded sensation through a number of sleights-of-hand: ‘hungry teeth’? Are teeth themselves capable of feeling hunger? Can one really have one’s taste ‘tantalised’ when it is simultaneously being fed, and what would poor Tantalus have made of that? (‘Taste’ looks forward to ‘waste’ three lines later but also half-nods back to ‘breast’.) But perhaps the most telling detail is the playing off of ‘dream’ with ‘seem’. Throughout the poem, Symons uses these words together, rhyming them, suggesting the fallibility

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of memory and memory’s importance in connection with hallucination. ‘For the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams’: Matthew Arnold’s loaded ‘lie’ exposed the difficult truth behind all ‘dreams’, especially when coming hot on the heels of ‘seems’: namely, that they are apt to deceive us, and are only possible once a deception of some sort has taken place.

Dreams, seeming, and memory are all connected in Symons’ poetry. In a later poem, ‘The Last Memory’ (1899), he addresses his love: ‘O unforgotten! you will come to seem, / As pictures do, remembered, some old dream.’ But in ‘Hallucination’ we see the wider picture. For hallucinations are even more dependent on deception or delusion than dreams. For us to hallucinate, we must either fool ourselves or else be fooled by someone or something else. Here’s what the OED has to offer for ‘hallucination’, sense 1: ‘The mental condition of being deceived or mistaken, or of entertaining unfounded notions; with a and pl., an idea or belief to which nothing real corresponds; an illusion.’ This thesis is concerned with this colouring of hallucination, though it is more interested in the second sense offered by the OED, which springs from the first:

Path. and Psychol. The apparent perception (usually by sight or hearing) of an external object when no such object is actually present. (Distinguished from illusion in the strict sense, as not necessarily involving a false belief.)

While fulfilling the two chief ambitions of any dictionary definition, clarity and concision, this description nevertheless throws up several important questions which suggest the dictionary does not tell us the full story. For one, what would it mean to apparently perceive something? What distinguishes a perception from a mere ‘apparent perception’, if we take ‘perception’ to include experiences sensed by the mind as well as through the other sense organs? (The OED certainly does: ‘perceive: to take in or apprehend with the mind or senses.’) How can one hallucinate without this hallucination ‘necessarily involving a false belief’? These questions were of profound importance in the nineteenth century, when people working in various disciplines started to take a genuine and sustained interest in the phenomenon.

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4 Symons, Poetry and Prose, p. 58.
Hallucinations, as Symons knew well, are intrinsically and inextricably bound up with memory. But poets were not the only ones exploring hallucinations at the end of the nineteenth century. Those with a scientific rather than poetical bent were also keenly interested in hallucinations. The first recorded use of the second sense of ‘hallucination’ as defined by the OED was from the great-grandfather of neologisms, Sir Thomas Browne, in 1646. One of the other two citations (in fact, the last or most recent citation offered by the dictionary) is from Edmund Gurney’s 1886 work *Phantasms of the Living*: ‘The definition of a sensory hallucination would thus be a percept which lacks, but which can only by distinct reflection be recognised as lacking, the objective basis which it suggests.’5 This is interesting, since Gurney’s book, while published well over a hundred years ago, seems to remain the last word on the subject, the last truly instructive instance of hallucination in action, defining it by example.

*Phantasms of the Living*, published in two volumes in 1886 and containing some material by fellow SPR members Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore, was a landmark study—in fact, the landmark study—of apparitions of all kinds, and it drew this connection between hallucination and memory in some detail. ‘This two-volume work catalogued and analyzed some 702 cases that had been collected by the Society for Psychical Research,’ writes Alex Owen, ‘and presented reasoned causal hypotheses that invoked the concept of telepathy and proposed the possibility of hallucination among the sane.’6 In fact, Gurney was not the first to propose that hallucinations could be experienced by the sane, and as early as 1845, A. Brierre de Boismont had suggested that hallucinatory experience need not always be pathological, and that sane people in so-called ‘normal life’ may experience hallucinations.7 But the fact remains that *Phantasms* was a seminal text because of its thorough analysis of real cases of hallucinations or ‘ghost’ experiences. The quotation

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culled from *Phantasms* by the *OED* (to illustrate its definition of ‘hallucination’) deserves to be given here in context, and in full:

The most comprehensive view is that all our instinctive judgments of visual, auditory and tactile phenomena are hallucinations, inasmuch as what is really nothing more than an affection of ourselves is instantly interpreted by us as an external object. In immediate perception, what we thus objectify is present sensation; in mental pictures, what we objectify is remembered or represented sensation. This […] view [however …] is better adapted to a general theory of sensation than to a theory of hallucinations as such. To adopt it here would drive us to describe the diseased Nicolai—when he saw phantoms in the room, but had his mind specially directed to the fact that they were internally caused—as less hallucinated than a healthy person in the unreflective exercise of normal vision.8

Gurney is right to reject the broad philosophical theory that everything we perceive is a form of hallucination; if we proceeded from that belief, there would be no way of clearly distinguishing the sorts of hallucinations discussed here from any phenomenological experience. If everything that is seen and heard is a form of hallucination, then it becomes troublesome to tell a clear difference between seeing a person we know to be physically there and seeing a person who, it was later shown, could not possibly have been there. If both are forms of ‘hallucination’, then how to differentiate? Gurney here is largely distancing his own theory of hallucinations from that of Hippolyte Taine, perhaps his most notable predecessor in the field who in 1870 published *De l’Intelligence*, translated into English two years later. Taine was of the belief that everyday perception is awash with images that might be termed hallucinations of some kind or other: one of his most common arguments in this book is that ‘external perception is a true hallucination.’9 Indeed, ‘solitude, silence, obscurity, the want of attention, all circumstances, in short, which suppress or diminish the corrective sensation, facilitate or provoke the hallucination; and reciprocally, company, light, conversation, aroused attention, all circumstances giving light to, or augmenting, the corrective sensation, destroy or weaken the

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hallucination.\textsuperscript{10} This is a good summary of possible explanations for various fictional hallucinations, such as those experienced by Paul Oleron in Oliver Onions’s 1911 ghost story, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’; but for Gurney, this did not sufficiently draw the line between so-called ordinary perception and abnormal perception, or hallucination; and while Gurney would acknowledge that the line was often blurred, he recognised the scientific need for it to be drawn.

But in fact others even before Taine had already begun to question the nature of apparitions. Hallucination was not a new phenomenon for the nineteenth century, as the first recorded appearance of the word, from Browne in the mid-seventeenth century, attests. Even before Browne, writers had been interested in the deceptions the human senses can play. In 1572, the Swiss divine Ludwig Lavater had written that ‘many men doo falsly persuade themselves that they see or heare ghostes: for that which they imagin they see or heare, proceedeth eyther of melancholic, madnesse, weaknesse of the senses, fear or of some other perturbation.’\textsuperscript{11} Some two hundred years later, in 1799, Christoph Friedrich Nicolai, to whom Gurney also refers and for whom he feels more kinship, read a paper to the Royal Society of Berlin which he called ‘A Memoir on the Appearance of Spectres or Phantoms Occasioned by Disease’. This paper, translated into English in 1803, was an account by Nicolai—a Prussian bookseller and sceptic—of a number of apparitions he had witnessed.\textsuperscript{12} This work had a considerable influence on studies of hallucination that appeared in the nineteenth century, including John Ferriar’s \textit{An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions} (1813) and Samuel Hibbert’s \textit{Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions} (1825).\textsuperscript{13} Gurney’s work, then, might be seen at the natural culmination of the nineteenth-century work on hallucination, though Gurney had his own theories concerning the causes of apparitions.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 51.
\textsuperscript{12} ‘A Memoir on the Appearance of Spectres or Phantoms occasioned by Disease, with Psychological Remarks. Read by Nicolai to the Royal Society of Berlin, on the 28th of February, 1799’, \textit{A Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts}, 6 (November 1803), 161-179.
\textsuperscript{13} John Ferriar, \textit{An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions} (London: Cadell and Davies, 1813); Samuel Hibbert, \textit{Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions: Or, An Attempt to Trace Such Illusions to Their Physical Causes} (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1825).
In *Phantasms*, the question of time is important, since what is noteworthy for Gurney is how an apparition is remembered or interpreted after the event. As he remarks, gently dismissing such theories of hallucination as those propounded by Taine:

I prefer to keep to the ordinary language which would describe Nicolai’s phantoms as the real specific case of hallucination. And I should consider their distinctive characteristic to be something quite apart from the question whether or not they were actually mistaken for real figures—namely, their marked resemblance to real figures, and the consequent necessity for the exercise of memory and reflection to prevent so mistaking them. The definition of a sensory hallucination would thus be *a percep* [that is, a thing perceived] *which lacks, but which can only by distinct reflection be recognised as lacking, the objective basis which it suggests.*

For Gurney, then, hallucination is essentially related to memory, and the use of memory to distinguish hallucinations from the experience of reality. In other words, seeing a close friend or family member in the same room is simply seeing what is really there, unless, upon reflection, we realise that the friend or relation cannot possibly have been in the room with us. Therefore ‘to hallucinate’ is, we might say, not quite the correct phrase; ‘to have hallucinated’ gets closer to the truth of things. This is of particular importance for a number of the texts studied here, which seem to work on Gurney’s principle of hallucination as an act of memory; as I will explore in relation to the Henry James story, ‘The Friends of the Friends’ (1896), what is significant is how the characters interpret the apparition *after the event.* As Alex Owen has remarked, glossing Gurney’s point: ‘The notion of hallucination brings into play the idea that the percipient, or person who is perceiving the phantasm, is actively involved in the production of the apparition. This is an important and, given the Victorian context, a brave and innovative point.’ But the percipient is also integral to the post-apparitional realisation that the hallucination was just that, a hallucination. Gurney goes on to offer a more comprehensive definition of such phenomena:

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Something is presented to the percipient as apparently an independent object (or as due to an independent object) in his material environment; but no such object is really there, and what is presented is a phantasm. Whatever peculiarities such an experience may present, there can be no mistake as to its generic characteristics: it is a *hallucination*.16

‘It may be objected,’ Gurney writes, anticipating readerly opposition, ‘that this definition would include illusions.’17 However, ‘illusions are merely the sprinkling of fragments of genuine hallucination on a background of true perception.’18 Because ‘while it clearly separates hallucinations from *true perceptions*, it equally clearly separates them from the phenomena with which they have been frequently identified—the remembered images or *mental pictures* which are not perceptions at all.’19 So, to recall an image while in a reverie is not hallucination; but, to see an image that has the appearance of reality, even if the ‘percipient’ knows that it is not in fact real, is hallucination. In both cases, the lacking of an ‘objective basis’ is essential in the production of a hallucination.

Here, however, Gurney also distinguishes between hallucinations and daydreams:

It serves […] to distinguish, on the lines of common sense and common language, between the images of ‘day-dreams’ and those of night-dreams. In both cases vivid images arise, to which no objective reality corresponds; and in neither case is any distinct process of reflection applied to the discovery of this fact. But the self-evoked waking-vision is excluded from the class of hallucinations, as above defined, by the point that its lack of objective basis can be and is recognised *without* any such process of reflection. We have not, like Nicolai, to consider and remember, before we can decide that the friends whose faces we picture are not really in the room. We *feel* that our mind is active and not merely receptive—that it is the mind’s eye and not the bodily sense which is at work, and that the mind can evoke, transfigure, and banish its own creatures; without attending to this fact, we have it as part of our whole conscious state. Dreams of the sensory sort on the other hand are pure cases of hallucination, forcing themselves on us whether we will or no, and with an impression of objective reality which is

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17 Ibid., p. 460.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
uncontradicted by any knowledge, reflective or instinctive, that they are the creatures of our brain.20

We can control and indeed, if we so choose, ‘banish’ the images of day-dreams, but we have no such control over a hallucination, much like the dreams that come to us in our sleep. Therefore, dreams are a form of hallucination because we cannot control them, and cannot remind ourselves that they are not real, that we are merely dreaming. It is fitting that Gurney is credited (albeit mistakenly) with introducing the term ‘hypnagogic’ into the English language; there is no imagining of the phenomenon of hallucination without dreams, and no dream-theory without hallucination.21

Before Phantasms of the Living, with its quasi-scientific approach to the subject of apparitions, there was The Night-Side of Nature, Catherine Crowe’s 1853 work which sought to explore those ‘vague and misty perceptions, and the similar obscure and uncertain glimpses we get of that veiled department of nature, of which, while comprising as it does, the solution of questions concerning us more nearly than any other, we are yet in a state of entire and wilful ignorance.’ 22 Crowe was aware that her conclusions were necessarily tentative and unproven:

But it must be remembered that when physiologists pretend to settle the whole nature of apparitions by the theory of spectral illusions, they are exactly in the same predicament. They can supply examples of similar phenomena; but how a person, perfectly in his senses, should receive the spectral visits of, not only friends, but strangers, when he is thinking of no such matter—or by what process, mental or optical, the figures are conjured up—remains as much a mystery as before a line was written on the subject.23

20 Ibid.
21 The word ‘hypnagogic’ was actually first used by Taine in his 1870 work De l’Intelligence: see Taine, On Intelligence, p. 246. Freud writes in The Interpretation of Dreams that hypnagogic hallucinations ‘are images, often very vivid and rapidly changing, which are apt to appear—quite habitually in some people—during the period of falling asleep; and they may also persist for a time after the eyes have been opened.’ See Standard Edition, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953; repr. 1973), IV, p. 31.
23 Ibid., pp. 25-6.
Nearly forty years later, the questions remained without definite answers, but they were still being asked, and were being subjected to a more rigorous scientific scrutiny than Crowe’s study had offered.

The issue of optical illusion remained an important one. In his influential 1890 work *The Principles of Psychology*, Henry James’s brother William defined hallucination and, in doing so, sought to quibble with Gurney over the issue of an absence of external stimulus in an instance of hallucination:

> In ordinary parlance hallucination is held to differ from illusion in that, whilst there is an object really there in illusion, *in hallucination there is no objective stimulus at all*. We shall presently see that this supposed absence of objective stimulus in hallucination is a mistake, and that hallucinations are often only *extremes* of the perception process, in which the secondary cerebral reaction is out of all normal proportion to the peripheral stimulus which occasions the activity. Hallucinations usually appear abruptly and have the character of being forced upon the subject. But they possess various degrees of apparent *objectivity*. One mistake in *limine* must be guarded against. They are often talked of as mental *images* projected outwards by mistake. But where an hallucination is complete, it is much more than a mental image. *An hallucination is a strictly sensational form of consciousness, as good and true a sensation as if there were a real object there.* The object happens not to be there, that is all.24

As Srdjan Smajić has recently observed, ‘Ghosts […] were regularly treated by nineteenth-century physiologists as illustrations of everything that can go wrong with or in the eye.’25 But James was open-minded, and was the first to concede that much could not be known for sure. In a lecture delivered to the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1896, he was happy to suggest some form of compromise between extraordinary sensitiveness and supernatural ‘demons’: ‘Whether supernormal powers of cognition in certain persons may occur, is a matter to be decided by evidence. If they can occur, it may be that there might be a chink … if there were real demons they might possess only hysterics. Thus each side may see a portion of the truth.’26 Dostoevsky’s Svidrigaylov had put it slightly differently in *Crime and Punishment* (1866): ‘I agree

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that ghosts appear only to the sick, but that proves only that they cannot appear to anyone else, not that they have no real existence.\textsuperscript{27}

This idea of meeting in the middle, with each side of the debate glimpsing a half-truth, was also explored by Andrew Lang in his 1894 essay, ‘Ghosts up to Date’. Lang stresses just how many people were not happy to fence-sit like James, and must come down on only one side of the argument:

\begin{quote}
The human race […] at present, may be divided into certain categories of sceptics and believers. The sceptics, probably the large majority in civilised countries, say, ‘Mere stuff and nonsense!’ According to them, all who report a phantasm as in their own experience, are liars, drunkards, or maniacs; or they mistook a dream for waking reality, or they are ‘excitable’ and ‘imaginative’, or they were placed under an illusion, and placed a false interpretation on some actual perception.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Those who were inclined to view apparitions as more psychologically based often conflicted, too. Theories concerning the causes of hallucination were many and varied; opinion was somewhat divided, even among the founders of the SPR. While Gurney favoured telepathy or ‘thought-transference’ as the reason for hallucination, co-founder Frederic Myers was more interested in developing his theory of the subliminal self. ‘According to Myers’s theories,’ writes Pamela Thurschwell, ‘automatic writing, table-rapping, hallucinations, clairvoyance and dreams are all attempts by the subliminal self to deliver information to the supraliminal self.’\textsuperscript{29}

Roger Luckhurst has written that telepathy—and other areas of psychical research, such as hallucination, we might add—were ‘theorized at vanishing points—just where confident demarcations between truth and error, science and pseudo-science, could not at the time be determined.’\textsuperscript{30} Vanishing points: a key phrase. Jacqueline Rose writes that ‘hallucination and telepathy could be described as the vanishing

\textsuperscript{28} Andrew Lang, ‘Ghosts up to Date’ (1894), in \textit{The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c. 1880-1900}, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 287-8.
points of what was to become the psychoanalytic account of hysteria’. Certainties at such vanishing points are, of course, impossible. This is one reason why there were a number of conflicting theories concerning the causes of hallucination, and why fiction-writers had such a wealth of possibilities available to them.

Outside of the SPR, people had different opinions again. In his collection of essays *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), W. B. Yeats outlined his own view on ‘the nature of apparitions’, contending that ‘I believe when I am in the mood that all nature is full of people whom we cannot see, and that some of these are ugly or grotesque, and some wicked or foolish, but very many beautiful beyond any one we could have seen, and that these are not far away when we are walking in pleasant and quiet places.’ Briggs mentions the strong belief, entertained by ghost-story writer and priest R. H. Benson, that ‘spiritual preparations would finally result in some sort of vision or hallucination.’ With the help of the Catholic writer known as Baron Corvo, Benson saw a White Knight with his visor down—‘presumably an archetypal warrior in the great struggle against the powers of evil,’ Briggs notes, ‘rather than the character from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.’

Spiritual and occult experiments, then, could induce hallucinatory experiences; and this is worth bearing in mind with the works of a writer such as Arthur Machen, who was an enthusiast of both occult and scientific pursuits. There is no clear divide between the two very different approaches here. But then this is the case with many writers and thinkers of the time, and is embodied by the SPR itself, and Gurney’s quasi-scientific approach to apparitions. Although he approaches apparitions with a scientific mind, many of the apparitions are necessarily bound up with questions of the spiritual, if only because so little could be determined beyond any doubt. Gurney was an important figure in late nineteenth-century psychology, who has been largely and unjustly forgotten. He has even been suggested as the inspiration for the title character of Eliot’s 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*. Indeed, Eliot had a considerable interest in psychical phenomena and was one of the first to

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34 Ibid., pp. 96-7.
35 Luckhurst, *Invention of Telepathy*, p. 43.
explore telepathy (before the word had even been coined) in a work of fiction in any sustained and specific sense. Indeed, had she lived longer, she may well have joined the SPR, which was founded just two years after her death in 1880. This thesis begins at the year 1880 not least because the death of George Eliot, like the death of Dickens ten years before, marked a kind of watershed: for one thing, it signalled how realist fiction would be giving way to the hugely popular romance narratives of writers such as Stevenson and Rider Haggard over the next few years, as well as the increasing interest in spiritualism and psychical research. But Eliot did not exclusively write realist novels. Her 1859 novella *The Lifted Veil* is an important precursor-text to several of the works discussed in this thesis: the phrase used by her for her protagonist’s telepathic abilities, what she calls his ‘abnormal sensibility’, is echoed in Gurney’s *Phantasms of the Living* and also resurfaces in both Machen’s and Onions’s work.36 The crossovers between literature and science, or pseudoscience, which explored the nature of illusions, apparitions, and hallucinations at the end of the nineteenth century are varied, and indicative of a broader social interest in the causes of apparitions. The ghost stories and related fiction of the time sought to reflect this conflict of opinion concerning these unknown causes.

The Fantastic

Terry Eagleton has little time for what he sees as the anti-realism of fantasy literature:

> Fantasy, which sounds alluring enough, is at root a wayward individualism which insists on carving up the world as it pleases. It refuses to acknowledge what realism insists upon most: the recalcitrance of reality to our desires, the sheer stubborn inertia with which it baffles our designs upon it. Anti-realists are those who cannot get outside their own heads. It is a sort of moral astigmatism.37

36 The first volume of *Phantasms* refers to the ‘telepathic faculty’ as being a form of ‘abnormal sensitiveness’ (p. 30); later, reference is made to ‘perceivers of less abnormal sensibility’ (p. 71). I discuss the respective echoes of Eliot’s phrase in Machen’s and Onions’s writing in chapters five and six of this thesis.

As this thesis is out to demonstrate, the setting up of any easy opposition between ‘fantasy’ and ‘realism’ is problematic, to say the least. Eagleton’s insistence that fantasy is intent on ‘carving up the world as it pleases’ is a dangerous one, since that seems to imply that fantasy need not have rules and consequences, which of course it does, if it is worthy of the name. Such a vastly overarching argument necessarily implies that fantastical texts are works of literature that do not reflect any aspect of the real world from which they sprung, and that events are allowed to happen without plausible, often lasting, repercussions. The *OED* (sense 4) is more semantically sensitive, defining fantasy (in the sense of ‘a genre of literary compositions’) as ‘imagination’ and ‘the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present’—a definition simultaneously more and less helpful than Eagleton’s, since any literature, including so-called ‘realist’ fiction, could conceivably be defined using such terms.

This lack of heterogeneity between fantasy and realist fiction is evident in a novel like Arthur Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams*, which is not only deeply rooted in the fantasy of a mystical Roman past but also firmly entrenched in the world of literary London with all of its disappointments and depression, and the way reality constantly falls short of one’s own desires, one’s own fantasies. Lucian Taylor is not so different from other victims of London’s harsh world of failure, struggle, and want. ‘In many ways,’ as Nicholas Freeman puts it, ‘Lucian could be a character from *New Grub Street*, a struggling provincial writer drawn into the metropolis of literary ambition, only to be destroyed by material want and his inability to live up to his exacting creative standards.’ The realism of Gissing and the fantasy of Machen meet; here it is not the world that is carved up, but Lucian Taylor himself.

It is clear that fantasy must necessarily deal with certain unrealistic elements, but that the laws of the real world, with all the disappointments and frustrations that the real world entails, must remain in place; thus it is only ‘anti-real’ in a very superficial sense. Or, as Smajić observes, ‘realism’s self-appointed task to speak the truth and avoid falsehood, or as [George] Eliot phrases it, “to draw a

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real unexaggerated lion” and resist the temptation of “drawing a griffin,” continues widely to be regarded as literature’s strongest claim to socially responsible and politically consequential modes of artistic expression.\textsuperscript{39} Yet surely it is possible to draw a griffin that, while requesting that we suspend disbelief, nevertheless strikes us as credible and authentic. As for the attendant issues of political and social responsibility, one of the greatest polemical fictions of the twentieth century, \textit{Animal Farm} (1945), was also a fantasy; similarly, many ghost stories often carry social commentaries on the age out of which they came. ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is, among other things, a commentary on the relations between the sexes during the Edwardian period, when women had started to become more independent; similarly, Stevenson’s fiction, such as ‘Markheim’ (1885) and \textit{Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde} (1886), frequently contains important observations on attitudes to class, sex, and crime in the late nineteenth century. The fact that these observations appear in stories which might be labelled ‘fantasies’ does not detract from their importance.

This current project is important not least, I would suggest, because the very thing that critics like Eagleton have insisted renders fantasy largely small-minded and irrelevant is precisely the thing that makes it worth studying: namely, that unlike so-called ‘realist’ literature embodied by writers like Gissing or George Eliot, fantastical literature shows us the real world but, to borrow Sheridan Le Fanu’s clever scriptural twisting, it is shown to us ‘in a glass darkly’. The ghost story is perhaps chief among the many types of ‘fantastic’ literature in throwing the world back to us, and fusing the real with the strange, the natural with the supernatural, the known with the unknown. Ghost stories frequently show the so-called ‘real’ world disturbed by some mysterious force against which one cannot defend oneself. But the texts studied here do not necessarily involve some supernatural disruption or intrusion; often it is strongly hinted that the disturbances come from within the mind. Thus, strictly speaking, these stories do not even breach Eagleton’s realist stipulations. Previous book-length studies of the ghost story such as Julia Briggs’ \textit{Night Visitors} (1977) and Jack Sullivan’s \textit{Elegant Nightmares} (1978)—landmark studies which are, in a very real sense, the most important precursors to this thesis—have focused on the

\textsuperscript{39} Smajić, \textit{Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists}, p. 12.
development and varying forms of the genre of the ghost story. But the present project seeks to focus on one specific aspect of the ghost story—and related fiction not so easily bracketed under that term—in order to highlight the extent to which ‘fantasy’ literature such as ghost stories is indebted to a form of realism that is certainly not ‘anti’ the real world, but merely uses different approaches from hard-and-fast realist fiction to bring out certain real-world issues. Hallucination is therefore the ghost story’s ‘realist’ elephant in the room, present in many ghost stories from the late nineteenth century onwards, and troubling Eagleton’s easy notions of ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ fiction. Paul Oleron, protagonist of Onions’s ghost story ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, may be unable ultimately to get outside his own head, much like the narrator; but, like fellow failed writer Lucian Taylor in Arthur Machen’s fantasy-realist novel *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), Oleron is all-too-aware of what Eagleton calls ‘the recalcitrance of reality upon our desires’ and ‘the sheer stubborn inertia with which it baffles our designs upon it.’

Tzvetan Todorov has devised the most famous and influential theory of the fantastic. Todorov provides one solution to the problem of theorising that which cannot easily be theorised:

The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations.40

Todorov’s model is useful for gesturing towards an understanding of how these kinds of stories work. It is important to understand that when Todorov describes how the reader must ‘adopt a certain attitude’ that this attitude need not be ‘certain’ in the

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sense of ‘sure’ or ‘determined’; Todorov’s ‘certain’ is less certain than we might at first think. Thus a reader may decide that the events were natural, or that they were supernatural; but he may also continue this ‘hesitation’ until, and beyond, the end of the story. The ‘ambiguous horror tale’ or ‘psychological ghost story’—with which this thesis is principally concerned—often invites such tentative, or inconclusive, conclusions.

Other writers on the weird and fantastic have also tried to categorise this sub-genre. During his discussion of the various hybrid forms of the weird tale, S. T. Joshi writes: ‘The ambiguous horror tale, where doubt is maintained to the end whether events are supernatural or not, seems to me another hybrid form. Although it has some notable examples—Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw among them—I do not find it broadly typical of the field as a whole.’ Here, ‘to the end’ means ‘to the end and beyond’, rather than merely ‘until the final denouement’: the tales which Joshi is discussing here are those which contain no final resolution about the source of the apparitions or phantoms, but which retain an ambiguity right up to the last word. It is inappropriate but perhaps inadvertent, then, that he himself employs such a highly ambiguous phrase in ‘to the end’ in order to point out this ambiguity. Todorov puts it better: there are, he asserts, ‘certain texts which sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself. The book closed, the ambiguity persists.’ Or, as Terry Castle has remarked of Poe’s stories: ‘I do not wish to gloss over the unsettling ambiguity of Poe’s endings. Is Madeline Usher dead or alive? Is she present in the flesh or merely a figment of the narrator’s imagination? Of course, we cannot finally decide.’ But readers have their own agendas, and some may choose to decide even in the face of Poe’s careful ambiguity; as the varied and conflicting critical opinion surrounding the ‘ghosts’ of The Turn of the Screw illustrates, we should be hesitant about accepting such hesitation, and about applying it to all readers. Here Julian Thompson offers a warning to the not-so-curious: ‘Persist

42 Todorov, The Fantastic, p. 43.
in reducing James’s novella to a study of tortuous sexual malaise, and his story has a way of getting its own back.”

Todorov’s theory of hesitation, then, is one way in which we might approach the matter of ambiguous fiction, and if ‘the fantastic’ depends upon a readerly hesitation, then some readers must be capable of reading texts like *The Turn of the Screw* without experiencing a ‘fantastic’ impression. After all, a theory that presupposes there can be such a thing as a general or universal ‘reader’ itself invents the almost ghostly notion of a collective reading experience. It may be true that some readers come away from a story with a particular idea about what happened: a believer in the supernatural may be of the opinion, having read James’s novella, that the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel really did possess Miles and Flora. Or, a rationalist and believer in psychology may decide that the governess was merely the victim of a horrible series of hallucinations. But even this presumes that most readers read fiction using the same belief systems they use to interpret life; in other words, that readers cannot adopt Coleridge’s ‘suspension of disbelief’ and decide that, while they may not believe in ghosts *per se*, they are of the opinion that ghosts were present in a work of fiction such as *The Turn of the Screw*. This is, of course, not true: fiction needs to be judged by a separate set of principles from those employed with regard to the so-called ‘real world’. Having said that, it is possible that a sceptic regarding matters of the supernatural may also be a sceptical reader, and decide that the matter is, after all, irresolvable in *The Turn of the Screw*—that, like Terry Castle reading Poe, s/he cannot finally decide. But the ‘s/he’ is important here, rather than Castle’s collective ‘we’: we cannot, *pace* Todorov, judge other readers’ experiences by the same criteria as we use for ourselves.

Todorov returns to the issue of this readerly ‘hesitation’, but seems himself to hesitate:

> the fantastic is based essentially on a hesitation of the reader—a reader who identifies with the chief character—as to the nature of an uncanny event. This hesitation may be resolved so that the event is acknowledged as reality,

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or so that the event is identified as the fruit of imagination or the result of an illusion; in other words, we may decide that the event is or is not. Further, the fantastic requires a certain type of reading—otherwise, we risk finding ourselves in either allegory or poetry.45

Todorov here seems to desire to show up the potential for hesitation to be something that enriches the reading experience by being direct and transitive, rather than the usually intransitivity that we associate with the concept of hesitation.46 Indeed, such hesitation seems to be essential to a ‘fantastic’ reading experience, for once we decide that an ambiguous vision ‘is’ (that is, a ghost or physical trick) or ‘is not’ (that is, a hallucination or delusion), we depart from the fantastic for, respectively, the marvellous or the uncanny. Indeed, Todorov himself distinguishes the fantastic from the uncanny (where it turns out there is a rational explanation for supposedly supernatural events) and the marvellous (where the events turn out to have been supernatural). He writes:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.47

This is a feature of numerous writers of the time, such as Arthur Machen, whose fiction often explores the idea that there is another world beyond the one we know, which we can access by somehow lifting the veil. For Todorov, ‘The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of

46 The OED cites Alexander Pope for the earliest use of ‘hesitate’ as a transitive verb (1735).
47 Todorov, The Fantastic, p. 25.
nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.48 Or, put succinctly, ‘There is
an uncanny phenomenon which we can explain in two fashions, by types of natural
causes and supernatural causes. The possibility of a hesitation between the two
creates the fantastic effect.’49 One of the things uniting all five of the principal texts
discussed in the subsequent chapters of this thesis is that none of them determines to
resolve definitely the events described, and thus—at least according to Todorov—the
stories and novels discussed in this thesis are predominantly in the realm of the
fantastic rather than the uncanny or marvellous. Indeed, much of the best fiction that
contains such ‘hesitation’ does not seek to resolve or dissolve such hesitation at the
end of the narrative.

Here it is important to stress that, while the texts studied here undoubtedly
contain gothic or uncanny traces, for the most part I am not out to highlight this,
unless it is particularly pertinent to the descriptions of hallucination a text presents.
But there is a clear link between the hallucinatory quality of the texts discussed in
subsequent chapters and the idea of the gothic, as Fred Botting has observed:

The new concern inflected in Gothic forms emerged as the darker side to
Romantic ideals of individuality, imaginative consciousness and creation. Gothic became part of an internalised world of guilt, anxiety, despair, a
world of individual transgression interrogating the uncertain bounds of
imaginative freedom and human knowledge. Romantic ideals were
shadowed by Gothic passions and extravagance. External forms were signs
of psychological disturbance, of increasingly uncertain subjective states
dominated by fantasy, hallucination and madness. […] Terror became
secondary to horror, the sublime ceded to the uncanny, the latter an effect of
uncertainty, of the irruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and emotional
and sexual conflicts.50

So, this Todorovian hesitation represents a departure from previous modes of thought
in both literature and other disciplines. Romanticism and Gothic literature, which in
many ways both had origins in forgeries produced in the 1760s,51 encouraged readers

48 Ibid.
51 I refer to Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, which was originally published in 1764 and
purported to be the translation of a medieval manuscript detailing events that actually happened; and
to indulge in uncertainties, as embodied by the visions and ‘ghosts’ that litter Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century and Keats’s notion of ‘Negative Capability’, where ‘man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’. But in the case of the former, many of the ‘ghosts’ that featured in Gothic fiction turned out to have a rational explanation, and Keats’s philosophy was somewhat dismissive of science, as witnessed, for instance, by his lines in ‘Lamia’ about philosophy and science ‘Conquer[ing] all mysteries by rule and line’. So while Gothic and Romantic writing sought to explore the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, the distinctions ultimately remained firmly in place. What happened towards the end of the nineteenth century was that the affective experience of the world encouraged by Romanticism had merged with features of the Gothic novel, to create a truly unsettling mixture of the noumenal and phenomenological. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the rise in spiritualism, psychical research, and a general sense of religious doubt, that hallucination would come to the fore in literature and become, in many cases, more important than the question of ‘ghosts’. Ghosts were an old phenomenon; hallucination, relatively new.

In short, then, writers of ghost stories and tales of the supernatural have essentially three choices when it comes to concluding their narrative. They can assign the strange events of the narrative a rational explanation, as many of the original Gothic novels did; they can conclude with a revelation that events were supernatural in their origins; or they can hover or suspend judgment somewhere between those first two alternatives. Essentially, these options represent, respectively, Todorov’s Uncanny, Marvellous, and Fantastic states. It is with the last of these that this thesis is

Thomas Chatterton’s poems of ‘Thomas Rowley’, a fictional medieval poet used by Chatterton as a pseudonym. Chatterton sent his Rowley forgeries to Walpole in 1769, and Walpole was deceived, at least briefly. James Macpherson’s translations (possibly forgeries) of the poems of Ossian also date from this decade. This is not to deny the influence of Rousseau on the development of Romanticism, but merely to point out the significance of forgeries—and attendant ideas of spurious authenticity, and a longing to return to a mythical medieval past—to the formation of both proto-Gothic and proto-Romantic ideas of literature.

principally concerned, because at the end of the nineteenth century this was the choice which writers frequently opted for; this is also the most hermeneutically challenging of the three, since no definitive answers are provided by the author. This need not be viewed as surprising, given the time during which these stories were produced, and the manifold interests of writers and thinkers, fusing scientific enquiry with more spiritualist concerns. As Julia Briggs notes, ‘the golden age of the ghost story’ was ‘an age of increasingly rational or sceptical views, of scientific explanations and technical achievement.’ But old habits, and beliefs, die hard; and it was not so easy to banish the ghosts, either those haunting old abbeys and castles or the most potent ghosts of all, the ghosts of previous writers.

Why the ghost story became so popular when it did—during the second half of the nineteenth century—is a question that throws out numerous answers, none of them definitive. The popularity of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) set the trend for the Christmas Eve ghost story that would become a national tradition. Another factor is the rise of spiritualism and psychical research, which was partly influenced by the well-documented ‘crisis of faith’ where, during the nineteenth century, many people found themselves beginning to doubt the previous established truths of the Bible, and turned to spiritualism as an alternative way of searching for answers in an increasingly secular age. This is not the whole truth: people were having religious doubts long before Darwinism, the literal truth of the Bible had long been a bone of contention among Christians, and the rise in Victorian spiritualism owes much to the American spiritualism boom of the 1840s; indeed, the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, was initially designed as an attempt to reform American spiritualism. On some level, nevertheless, there was a link, as exemplified by Alfred Russel Wallace, the man who discovered the theory of natural selection in the 1850s and, in doing so, forced Darwin to reveal his own work to the scientific world. As Alex Owen points out, Wallace ‘embraced spiritualism and upheld a theory of the inseparability of spiritual and material evolution that complemented Theosophical ideas. Indeed, it is possible that he was a member of the Theosophical Society.’

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54 Briggs, *Night Visitors*, p. 11.
Even T. H. Huxley, another advocate of Darwinism, was persuaded to attend a séance in January 1874; his companion was none other than Charles Darwin’s son, George.⁵⁶

This interest in spiritualism made the topic of ghosts and the afterlife a popular one, and séances were familiar enough occasions for George and Weedon Grossmith to lampoon them in their celebrated 1892 work of comic fiction, *The Diary of a Nobody*. A similar but markedly distinct factor was the rise of occultism, exemplified by groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose members included A. E. Waite and Arthur Machen. ‘In spite of the many differences between spiritualism and fin-de-siècle occultism,’ Alex Owen writes, ‘a shared belief in the realities and relevance of the spirit world remained a constant.’⁵⁷ The general fact remains that the Victorians lived, as Walter Houghton has it, ‘between two worlds, one dead or dying, one struggling but powerless to be born, in an age of doubt.’⁵⁸ The nod to Matthew Arnold serves as a reminder of just how deeply entrenched religious doubt was for the Victorians, and how far writers were prepared to go in exploring this doubt.

The end of the story frequently asks more questions than it answers. Peter Garrett stresses that ‘in narratives like [Henry] James’s that hesitate between these alternatives, something more than the reality of the preternatural is at stake.’⁵⁹ Indeed, Gothic and horror fiction ‘deploys mysteries and their possible explanations as plotting devices that allow it to explore relations between extremity and the ordinary […] engaging readers as well as characters in a drama of knowledge whose resolution is seldom complete.’⁶⁰

‘…true ghost story…’

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⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 20.
⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 6-7.
This is one reason (though by no means the only reason) why *The Turn of the Screw* continues to be such a seminal text for readers and critics of supernatural fiction, while William Hope Hodgson’s tales of Carnacki the Ghost-Finder, for instance, receive a much smaller readership and virtually no critical attention. *The Turn of the Screw* is discussed by both Joshi and Todorov as being the example of the ambiguous ghost story *par excellence*. While I have not devoted an entire chapter to James’s text—I focus instead, in chapter four, on a lesser-known precursor-text to it—some remarks about this novella and its reputation as a great ambiguous story might here be useful, especially in light of its popularity and influence.

For T. J. Lustig, *The Turn of the Screw* ‘raises far more disturbing questions about the consequences of constructing and enforcing rigid interpretations than the [sic] “The Way it Came”, and these questions extend beyond the governess to her critics.’61 This is true, although ‘The Friends of the Friends’ (‘The Way it Came’ retitled), as I show in chapter four, raises subtly different but nevertheless important interpretive problems and anxieties. But it is through *The Turn of the Screw* that these interpretive anxieties have become familiar to us. Andrew Smith sums these up well: ‘The problem is that the governess is necessarily unable to see that the ghosts are (or at least can be read as) projections of herself. *The Turn of the Screw* thus dramatises the interior (emotional, psychological) origins of the types of horror that an earlier, less secular, Gothic tradition located externally.’62 It is this internalisation of these earlier Gothic modes of fear and terror that creates the ambiguity and thus the interpretive differences of opinion. Lustig goes on: ‘For the governess and the critics it seems that “The Turn of the Screw” is an epistemological whirlpool where escape can only be achieved through interpretative violence: an aggressive single-mindedness, a hostility to uncertainty and a willingness to impose rigid and polarized schemata.’63 Lustig suggests that Douglas’s remark in the introductory chapter to the novella that ‘the story won’t tell […] not in any literal, vulgar way’ appears to ‘discourage interpretations which seek to explain the text either on the basis of

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63 Op cit, Lustig, p. 112.
apparitions or of hallucinations’ because the governess does not appear to have been ‘motivated either by fear or desire’. This might also be seen as a deprecatory nod to the work of the SPR carried out by Gurney and James’s own brother William, which sought to resolve the nature of apparitions once and for all within the pages of the Society’s two journals. Fiction at least, James is gently suggesting, must necessarily diverge from such scientific enquiry. But, as with any divergences, the starting-point is the same.

The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is, to borrow the phrase she uses of Miles, ‘extraordinarily sensitive’. As she wakes to her first morning at Bly, she listens, ‘while in the fading dusk the first birds began to twitter, for the possible recurrence of a sound or two, less natural and not without but within, that I had fancied I heard.’ Julia Briggs points out the ‘deliberate ambiguity’ of that phrase, ‘not without but within’, which suggests that the sounds are internalised not just within the house but, more narrowly, within the governess’ own mind: in short, Briggs concludes, ‘either the children are possessed, or the governess is insane, and the demons exist only in her imagination.’ *The Turn of the Screw* has become an exemplary text because of the ultimate irresolvability of this question. The novella thus lends itself to multiple interpretations. But there are other texts which throw out related but subtly different questions: as Briggs notes, Oliver Onions’ ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, for instance, ‘relies far more on recognizable traditional elements’ than other stories of the time, ‘as The Turn of the Screw had done’ before it; yet ‘its disjointed narrative, relaying the thoughts of the middle-aged writer, Oleron, is distinctively modern.’ Authors other than James were writing similarly ambiguous ghost stories which also relied on established devices, such as the meta-text of Gothic fiction and the haunted house. But whereas *The Turn of the Screw* has received sustained critical attention since its publication, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ has received very little. This thesis is an attempt, in its small way, to redress this. I have borrowed James’s phrase, ‘bewilderment of vision’, for my title, and although a

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64 *Turn of the Screw*, p. 24; Lustig, *Henry James and the Ghostly*, p. 112.
65 *Turn of the Screw*, p. 42.
66 Ibid., p. 29.
68 Ibid., p. 161.
‘bewilderment of vision’ may not be quite the same thing as a hallucination, the two are both etymologically bound up with issues of wandering or straying. For while ‘bewilderment’ stems from ‘wilder’, an earlier verb meaning ‘to lead one astray’ or to ‘stray’ or ‘wander’, ‘hallucination’ is ultimately from the Latin alucinari meaning ‘to wander in mind, talk idly, prate’. To ‘bewilder’ is defined by the OED in its common figurative sense as ‘to confuse in mental perception, to perplex, confound; to cause mental aberration.’ Thus a bewilderment of vision—and all visual, auditory, and mental perception that ‘vision’ in its extended sense can be said to encapsulate—is closely connected to hallucination. But such a subject has not yet received sustained critical attention; in the past, the focus has always remained primarily on the supernatural rather than the psychological.

In a recent article, George Johnson has drawn attention to the failure of literary criticism, in the main, to grasp in any meaningful sense the relationship between psychical research and supernatural fiction. As he puts it, ‘the psychical case study has always been a fleeting apparition in literary criticism.’ And yet, as he goes on to argue, ‘At their most sophisticated, fictional psychical case studies enabled writers like James, Kipling, Sinclair, and Woolf to interrogate the boundaries of identity and convey their conviction of the non-material nature of reality—themes that permeate major modernist novels.’ Johnson’s point is a good one, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the relationship between emerging psychological disciplines such as psychical research, psychoanalysis, and William James’s pragmatism all enjoyed a far more close-knit engagement with literary texts than most criticism is prepared to acknowledge. Some of the works discussed in this thesis, particularly Machen’s The Hill of Dreams and Onions’s ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, display a loose style of dreamlike narration which at times approaches the famous ‘stream of consciousness’ found in so much modernist writing. It would perhaps be wise at this point to recall that it was a psychologist, William James, who popularised the term ‘stream of consciousness’, and that it was a writer celebrated for

70 Ibid., 15.
her supernatural fiction, May Sinclair, who first applied it to literary works.\(^{71}\) Thus the relationship between these two forms of inquiry—if such a term can be applied to fictional ghost stories—is also bound up with the emergence of modernism, as testified by Woolf’s repeated literary and critical engagements with the ghost stories of Henry James.

Contrast *The Turn of the Screw* with fiction that clearly resolves the ‘hesitation’ at the end of the text. William Hope Hodgson’s stories of the ‘ghost-finder’, Thomas Carnacki, published between 1910 and 1912 in the *Idler* magazine, usually, though not always, tend to conclude by having the supernatural element in the narrative affirmed. ‘Hesitation’, then, is perhaps the wrong word to use; these stories contain some suggestion of ambiguity, but generally come down on the side of the supernatural, thus lessening the reader’s sense of uncertainty, and consequently the possibility of this readerly hesitation, the more familiar we become with the stories. (This is perhaps one reason why only a small number of Carnacki tales were ever published.) Sometimes, but only rarely, the explanation comes down on the side of rationalism and reality: in the Carnacki story ‘The Thing Invisible’, an ancient dagger that has apparently murdered someone of its own accord turns out not to have acted with the help of a supernatural agency, but by dint of a mechanical trap, which was activated by the altar-gate of the chapel being opened. ‘Though the excitement in the reading of such tales matches the others,’ Adrian Eckersley notes, ‘they are less satisfying.’\(^{72}\) The most successful of the tales are those which confirm the suggestion of the supernatural they contain; but these, too, are marred by the very nature of their structure and by, in H. P. Lovecraft’s words, their ‘atmosphere of professional “occultism.”’\(^{73}\) The detective mystery genre to which these stories clearly belong necessitates an undesirable narrative habit: that is, Carnacki dogmatically proving

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such supernatural phenomena to have been a matter of fact, like a psychologist concluding a lecture. The conclusion to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) could work as a satisfying denouement because Holmes's rationalistic means of ‘deduction’ primed the reader for a clever scientific conclusion (the phosphorus that provides the blue glow to the dog), but Hodgson cannot so easily draw his mysteries to a satisfying conclusion, because the supernatural relies not on clever scientific sleights-of-hand but on the unexplained and ultimately inexplicable. Therefore the most successful of the stories are those which resist any commonplace rational explanation, such as ‘The Horse of the Invisible’. The most powerful element of the stories is the descriptive power of the supernatural encounters; structurally, the tales are flawed because of this intrinsic narrative incompatibility.

Hodgson was almost certainly inspired to write his Carnacki stories by the success of Algernon Blackwood’s 1908 volume, *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary*. Blackwood was cannier than Hodgson, using the term ‘psychic doctor’ rather than ‘psychic detective’ and so lessening the readerly expectation of a clever denouement; but again the marrying of scientific and supernatural elements is ultimately treated in too black-and-white a fashion, and, as Joshi puts it, ‘a prosy explanation of the phenomena […] introduces a fatal element of rationalism into something that should not be rationalized.’74 The general reading public tended to agree, and, as Derek Jarrett remarks, for all the stories’ ‘vivid accounts of spiritual possession laced with impressive jargon culled from the proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research’, their ‘popularity was short-lived and Blackwood soon found that traditional tales of terror sold better.’75 However, these and other stories did lead to a vogue for a sub-genre of detective fiction featuring ‘psychic detectives’ or similar figures. This character type predated Carnacki, though, having its origins back in the late 1860s, when Sheridan Le Fanu introduced his character Dr Hesselius in the story ‘Green Tea’, published in *All the Year Round* in 1869; Hesselius would feature in several other stories collected in the 1872 volume *In a Glass Darkly*. The creation of the ‘psychic doctor’ figure in ghost stories and supernatural literature is also linked to

the rise in the number of stories which treat the subject of hallucination. As Julia Briggs remarks, ‘perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the psychic doctor is the way in which he came to be consulted in cases of what had once been termed possession, was then called “spiritual illusion”, and is now referred to simply as hallucination.’

But for all their interest in psychical phenomena such as apparitions, Hodgson and Blackwood were more concerned with the occult. As Roger Luckhurst puts it, ‘Carnacki’s protective pentacle, his conjuring of malicious forces, and his references to the authority of medieval manuscripts owe more to the rites associated with the Order of the Golden Dawn than psychical research.’ In his Carnacki stories, Hodgson calls his Dr Watson character Dodgson—partly to suggest that he himself is merely another witness to Carnacki’s adventures (Hodgson/Dodgson), but also to summon the ghost of one of the SPR’s most famous members, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll. Yet hallucination and related psychological phenomena are not the principal focus of these tales. More significant are the indications of occult devices and symbols, which suggest to us from the start that any visions which do appear will be clearly explained as supernatural in origin, with hallucination being only the faintest of traces in the stories. In ‘The Horse of the Invisible’, a fake haunting is followed by a genuine supernatural experience—‘a variation on the tale’, Briggs notes, ‘of a man disguised as a ghost whose intended victim shrieked, “It’s not you, you fool—look behind you!”’ Hodgson even occasionally gives clues in the dialogue. In ‘The Whistling Room’, for instance, he has Carnacki explain to his audience that ‘I was going to be sure of the fact. I was going to run no risk of being deceived by ghostly hallucination, or mesmeric influence.’ Ghosts, not hallucinations, are the norm.

A far more interesting, though less well-known, example of the ‘psychical mystery’ story of the early twentieth century is to be found in the Aylmer Vance tales, written by husband-and-wife team Alice and Claude Askew and first published in 1914. Like M. P. Shiel’s Prince Zaleski (who had appeared in 1895), and Carnacki

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76 Briggs, Night Visitors, p. 60.
77 Luckhurst, Invention of Telepathy, p. 189.
78 Briggs, Night Visitors, p. 64.
and Silence, Vance has his own ‘Watson’ in Dexter, to whom Vance relates his adventures and encounters as a ‘ghost-seer’; as his very name implies, Dexter is Vance’s right-hand man, his chronicler and companion. Like Holmes, Vance is ‘tall and lean in build, with a pale but distinctly interesting face’, blue eyes which are ‘very sharp and keen’, with ‘long thin hands’ and ‘a chill austerity’ and ‘arresting personality.’ The stories themselves remain largely unresolved, at least in any definite sense, at their conclusions; there is a sense in which every story remains ultimately ‘unexplainable’ in any scientifically satisfactory sense. In ‘The Intruder’, for instance, a young woman seemingly becomes possessed by the ghost of another woman when her husband repeatedly places her into trancelike states; the tale ends with the husband murdering his ‘possessed’ wife, before turning a gun upon himself. But Vance sounds several notes of caution against Dexter’s—and our—narrowly reading the story as a supernatural narrative:

I don’t ask you to believe it—to credit it. George Sinclair and I may both have been the victims of a terrible delusion. The constant sitting at séances may have effected a deterioration in Annie’s character, which we wrongly attributed to demoniacal possession, or of course overwrought nerves would account for the hysterical rages into which she threw herself at times. It is quite on the cards that the Sinclair affair was no case of demoniacal possession. But it was a tragedy for all that, wasn’t it—a ghastly tragedy?

Of course, many readers would be happy to suspend disbelief and subscribe to an occult explanation; but the sounding of a rationalist viewpoint helps to ground the narrative in our own familiar world, while hinting at something that goes beyond the natural or scientific. In another tale, ‘The Stranger’, an orphan girl develops a close friendship with, and love for, a young man whom she repeatedly meets in the woods, and we remain unsure throughout the story whether she has been experiencing a ghostly encounter or whether she has been the victim of ‘ridiculous hallucinations.’

The note on which the story ends leaves us in no doubt about the doubt we are supposed to feel: asking Vance if he believes ‘that the old gods are dead’, Dexter

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81 See ibid., p. 35.
82 Ibid., p. 18.
receives, by way of answer, ‘a strange inscrutable smile’ and the reply, or rather non-reply, ‘They are dead to some […] but they are alive to others.’

While Vance’s discovery of Dexter’s clairvoyant abilities in the later tales draws out the psychical elements of the Aylmer Vance stories, the predominant tone is one of open-mindedness and unresolvability. About one thing there can remain no doubt, however: the adventures of Aylmer Vance deserve more critical attention. Briggs and Sullivan in their landmark studies of the ghost story do not mention them, nor do any of the other major works on the ghost story that have appeared since. These stories are part of a greater network of fiction from this time, fiction that denies any straightforward solutions to that question, ‘real or imaginary?’ And it is this fiction which is the most interesting—and most fruitful—in terms of the descriptions of hallucinatory experience. Onions’s story, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, invites the reader’s more thorough psychological and emotional engagement through posing both natural and supernatural ‘explanations’ for the ‘ghostly’ occurrences in his tale. It is a similar case with Lucian Taylor’s visions in The Hill of Dreams. Neither is held up as fact and neither is explained away. Both remain possibilities, right up until the end of the story and beyond.

Other commentators on the ghost story have been impatient with those critics endeavouring to determine the extent to which ghostly tales explore natural or supernatural phenomena. Jack Sullivan, for instance, remarks of the monkey-like creature that haunts Jennings in Le Fanu’s celebrated ‘Green Tea’: ‘It scarcely matters whether the thing is “real” or hallucinated; in a good horror tale this distinction is effaced. Supernatural horror in fiction has little to do with the materiality or immateriality of spooks.’ True, in some of the most sophisticated ghost stories the distinction is effaced, but this does not automatically render the matter irrelevant. The Turn of the Screw would not have the same tentative, intense psychological atmosphere if there were not the ambiguity about whether the governess is actually seeing ghosts or merely hallucinating. Therefore the distinction

84 Ibid., p. 33.
86 Ibid., p. 15.
between their relative materiality and immateriality is relevant, even if that distinction is only made in the reader’s mind. It is the resolving of these distinctions through some one-sided conclusion that damages these stories. Sullivan is right that definitive answers to the supernatural/psychological question are generally pointless and counter-productive to the effects the author is trying to create, but in fact few authors of the period—good authors, anyway—ever resolve the matter with any finality. It is, as Sullivan understands so well, the effect that is produced which is important. Le Fanu himself wrote to his publisher, George Bentley, that one of his stories was an attempt to create ‘the equilibrium between the natural and the super-natural, the super-natural phenomena being explained on natural theories—and people left to choose which solution they please.’\textsuperscript{87} As Briggs remarks, ‘The use of dreams in ghost stories certainly achieves such an equilibrium.’\textsuperscript{88}

Hallucinations, then, create this equilibrium to an even more pronounced degree, and were certainly less hackneyed a device by the end of the nineteenth century than dreams. This effect of uncertainty or equilibrium is located within the reader of the story or novel but also in the narrator, sometimes even in third-person so-called ‘omniscience’ narrators. The ‘ghosts’ of these ghost stories have become largely internalised. Christa Zorn summons the period but is reluctant to summon too many ghosts:

Unlike the external horror of the early gothic, the subject matter of the decadent gothic was no longer some unknown outside force but the reaction of the human psyche to something fearful. Henry James’s \textit{The Turn of the Screw} is a paramount example of the psychological ghost story in which the horrible itself remains vague while the text unfolds a representation of the human psyche in a dialogue between self and self \textit{as other}. The writers of the psychological fantastic, such as James, [Edith] Wharton, and [Vernon] Lee, were no longer interested in unambiguous resolutions; instead, they fabricated intricate identities under the imminent threat of disintegration, which was to become a major issue in modernism.\textsuperscript{89}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{87} Cited in Briggs, \textit{Night Visitors}, p. 49.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
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In a few sentences Zorn captures the central importance—and important centrality—of the ghost stories of the late nineteenth century: developing from the earlier Gothic fictions of Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis, they sought to examine the complex psychology of their characters, and in doing so paved the way for the modernist interest in fragmentary identities and highly subjective experiences. But in between The Castle of Otranto and The Turn of the Screw there had been a number of writers who had successfully begun to examine the human psyche through the medium (as it were) of the ghost story: Dickens’s Christmas Books (1843-8), and the ghost stories of Sheridan Le Fanu which appeared in the 1860s and 1870s, had been among the more influential precursors to the ‘psychological fantastic’.

The term ‘ghost’ is evidently being made to do a lot of work when used in relation to the ‘ghost story’. The OED offers this, among much else, for ‘ghost’: ‘The soul or spirit, as the principle of life’; ‘An apparition; a spectre’; and ‘The soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence, to the living.’ (In parentheses, appended to this last definition, are the words, ‘Now the prevailing sense.’) For ‘ghost story’, the OED offers two textual examples. One is taken from the Westminster Gazette from July 1897 and reads, ‘The visitor awoke with the true ghost story “feeling of chilliness” and an impression that there was “something” in the room.’ There is something singularly amusing about the OED’s choice of example: on the one hand, it is a highly apt choice, as it shows how ghost stories are referenced in so-called everyday conversation (the Westminster Gazette account is of a real event that the unnamed visitor likened to that of something one might find in a ghost story). But there is something also rather inappropriate about the words ‘true ghost story’, perhaps because most modern readers take even real-life accounts of ghostly encounters with a grain of salt (to borrow the phrase used by Dickens for the title of his 1865 ghost story), and because ghost stories are so frequently not true, precisely because, like Dickens’s or M. R. James’s or Elizabeth Bowen’s, they are works of fiction, devised to be read as such.

Ghost stories both are and are not true stories. The supernatural element of such stories is true if you are a spiritualist, but pure fiction if you are a rationalist; but ‘ghost story’ as a term can be applied to both real-life accounts of believed
supernatural experiences and fictional narratives invented by writers. Frequently, writers of fiction played on this division or double-meaning. ‘This is a true story’, Rhoda Broughton tells us at the end of her fictional tale ‘The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth’ (1868). These closing words tell the truth, but it is not quite the whole truth; the events of the tale were based on real-life events, but with the author’s artistic licence being brought into play. Writers of ghost stories liked to blur the boundaries between the supernatural and psychological, as Mrs Henry Wood did in her story pointedly titled ‘Reality or Delusion?’, which was also published in 1868: ‘This is a ghost story. Every word of it is true.’ But the story, and the story’s title, are out (literally) to question such a confident claim, as Amelia B. Edwards’ 1881 story, ‘Was it an Illusion?’, later would.

What happened in the intervening years between the publication of these stories and the appearance of, say, Rudyard Kipling’s ‘My Own True Ghost Story’ (1885) is that the ghost story began to find new forms of expression—forms of expression which would even succeed in dissolving the distinction between reality and fiction, at least to an extent. There were numerous reasons for this, but one of them is undoubtedly the rise of the pseudoscience known as psychical research. In the wake of the founding of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882, two journals, the *Proceedings* and the *Journal*, begun in 1882 and 1884 respectively, would appear. In the pages of these journals the germ of what would become *Phantasms of the Living* appeared. These publications, especially *Phantasms*, presented real-life cases of ghostly occurrences which were then analysed, quasi-scientifically, by Gurney and the SPR. The success of this book gave writers of ghost stories a new challenge, but also new ideas for how to rejuvenate the old form: the tales of Le Fanu, Mrs Henry Wood, and others could be given a fresh twist by drawing on the kinds of real stories that were being submitted to the SPR during this period, stories which were scientifically analysed and treated as case studies. One of the first writers to do this was Grant Allen, whose *Strange Stories* (1884) contains nods to the newly

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established SPR and the practices of psychical research; but he was by no means the last, nor the most significant, writer to draw on the newly burgeoning pseudoscience for literary inspiration.

Kipling’s ‘My Own True Ghost Story’ also satirises this sea-change, though the story itself can easily be read alongside the other stories that Kipling wrote around this time, such as ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’ and ‘The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes’. The title of the story may appear to be a nod back to Broughton and Mrs Henry Wood, but in the 1880s it is charged with a new sense of irony. The narrator of the tale is desperate to experience a genuinely ghostly encounter so that he can write it up as a story and achieve fame among those interested in psychical research. He tells of how, one night, he stayed in a dâk-bungalow in India where he heard the noise of a game of billiards being played next door; in the morning he learns that a billiard-room had once been there, and that one of the Sahibs who had built the nearby railway had fallen dead over the billiard table one night. However, the narrator later discovers, upon hearing the sound again, that it was nothing more than ‘a restless little rat [...] running to and fro inside the dingy ceiling-cloth’ and ‘a piece of loose window-sash [...] making fifty breaks off the window-bolt as it shook in the breeze’. His imagination had supplied the rest. As George Johnson puts it, the narrator ‘constructs the supernatural event through conjecture, only to have it collapse when a natural explanation is uncovered.’ The story’s title, therefore, is a gentle reminder of the issue of authenticity when it comes to ghost stories: the narrator considered the tale his ‘own true ghost story’, but now knows that it was nothing more than his imagination, ‘and I felt that I had ruined my one genuine, hall-marked ghost story.’ He deliberately constructed a story in order to send ‘a first-hand authenticated article’ to ‘the Society for Psychical Research’, but his story turns into a fiction rather than a real-life account because he is too keen to find a story at any cost. The story concludes with the narrator remarking, ‘Had I only stopped at the

94 Kipling, ‘My Own True Ghost Story’, p. 284.
95 Ibid., p. 283.
proper time, I could have made anything out of it.’ Indeed, ‘That was the bitterest thought of all!’

The rat in the ceiling-cloth is not without symbolism. Rodents scampering in wainscots and under moth-eaten carpets were an old theme suggesting the agedness and decay of old buildings, an almost Gothic device that also ushered in the threatening silence and death surrounding such places. But in the 1880s they, too, were charged with a new significance. They had become a common trope symbolising the perfectly natural explanation that is frequently offered for events described in the pages of SPR publications. The ‘Committee’ in charge of examining suspected cases of ‘haunted houses’ had remarked in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research in 1884, for instance: ‘Noises are more abundant than visual experiences, but they are far less easily verified. If a phantom is seen it can be clearly described, and must generally be explained as a hallucination, or as a dream, or as something abnormal. But noises may be all these, and, as well, may be rats, or wind, or wood starting, or a dozen other things.’ Similarly, one contributor to the Journal of the SPR in July 1886 wrote, upon ‘hearing strange sounds’, that ‘I was told to put [them] down to rats’. The 1880s—and after—was a time when a noise could turn out to be a ghost, or it could be an auditory hallucination; it could also, of course, be just a noise. The commonplace sits alongside the ghastly and sensational.

‘It is clear from our evidence that, in many cases,’ wrote one contributor to the SPR in 1885, ‘considerable trouble has been taken to find any physical cause for the mysterious noises without success—the inhabitants having often before them the sceptic’s favourite explanation of rats quite as clearly as we have.’ Similarly, in the issue of the Journal of the SPR that appeared in February the following year, a correspondent wrote: ‘Neither before nor since have I had any hallucination. If any trickery were practised it was far too clever for me to discover. If rats could do this they could do anything […] I never listened for or fearfully expected to hear

96 Ibid., p. 284.
noises.100 In April of the same year, one contributor wrote how in ‘the top story of the house there were several attics very much out of repair, and we thought there might be rats there’; they are, this correspondent tells us, ‘poking about in the attics trying to find something to account for the noises’.101

In a short note published in Essays in Criticism in 1981, Christopher Ricks posed an interesting question concerning Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim: ‘Why does the chief engineer of the Patna see pink toads in his delirium tremens?’102 Part of the answer, he concludes, could lie in the pink animals that emerged in the early twentieth century as slang for the hallucinations experienced by sufferers of delirium tremens (or else those under the influence of alcohol), of which ‘pink elephants’ is the most famous example. When Ricks was writing, the earliest instances of ‘pink rats’ was 1914, and the earliest known occurrence of ‘pink elephants’ was 1940; both have since been traced back as far as 1901, just a year after the final chapters of the novel were serialised in Blackwood’s Magazine. It is possible, then, that ‘Conrad’s pink toads anticipate or antedate the pink rats of 1914.’103 Indeed, even towards the end of the nineteenth century Andrew Lang had written that ‘apparitions, so named by the world, do appear […] just as […] visionary rats appear to drunkards in delirium tremens.’104 Thus the rat in the ceiling-cloth that features as the rational explanation in Kipling’s story has an extra twist, albeit only a post facto one, carrying a latent suggestion of hallucination as well.

Kipling’s title has its tongue firmly in its cheek. Although the narrator is presenting his ‘story’ as ‘true’ (that is, it actually happened), the ‘ghost’ within it is not true (that is, not a genuine supernatural presence, rather the sound of a rat suggesting things to the narrator’s imagination). So Kipling’s title cunningly negotiates between the idea of the ghost being true, and the story being true: that adjective in the story’s title could qualify either of the two nouns which follow it, so ‘true ghost’ or ‘true story’. The events are true, the narrator tells us; but, of course, he

100 Journal, II (1886), p. 199.
101 Ibid., p. 255.
103 Ibid., p. 144.
104 Lang, Cock Lane and Common Sense, p. 188.
is speaking in a fiction, a fiction written by the young Kipling; and fictions are not true. The story succeeds where the mysteries of Hodgson and Blackwood so often fall down precisely because it is intended to be taken with that Dickensian grain of salt; humour as well as horror is its desired aim. This humorous take on psychical research can also be seen in Kenneth Grahame’s 1895 story ‘The Blue Room’, where a tutor who has recently visited a family’s house submits his fabricated account of ‘apparitions, nightly visions, and the like’ experienced at the house to the fictional *Psyche: A Journal of the Unseen*. This difference between the real and the fictional is an important point, and the distinction, though ostensibly obvious, needs to be made, because there was a resurgence of interest among the public in real accounts of ghostly happenings.

This can be seen in the journals of the SPR, but also in a number of other, hugely popular, publications. Indeed, so popular had the Christmas tradition of the ghost story—true stories as well as untrue—become by the end of the nineteenth century that when journalist and psychical research enthusiast William Stead published his volume *Real Ghost Stories* in Christmas 1891, it was, as Roger Luckhurst notes, ‘one of the great publishing successes of the […] season.’ Luckhurst goes on to point out that Stead, spurred on by the success of the volume, ‘aimed to democratize psychical research by appropriating the sober SPR “Census of Hallucinations” project’. Stead was profoundly interested in telepathy and wrote in his introduction to *Real Ghost Stories*: ‘The photograph, the telegraph, the telephone, and the phonograph were all more or less latent in what seemed to our ancestors the kite-flying folly of Benjamin Franklin.’ He proceeds, somewhat hopefully, to speculate: ‘Who knows but that in Telepathy we may have the faint foreshadowing of another latent force, which may yet be destined to cast into the shade even the marvels of electrical science!’

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106 Luckhurst, *Invention of Telepathy*, p. 120.
107 Ibid., p. 121.
Similarly, Grant Allen prefaced his 1884 volume *Strange Stories* by stating that ‘I […] venture to plead in self-defence that though these stories do not profess to be anything more than mere short sensational tales, I have yet endeavoured to give to most of them some slight tinge of scientific or psychological import and meaning.’

A few years later, in his 1891 book titled *The Supernatural?*, Lionel A. Weatherly was sweepingly dismissive of any supernatural explanations for apparitions and sightings of ‘ghosts’:

To any common-sensed, thinking mind it must […] be self-evident that almost all the tales of demonology and witchcraft, of haunted houses, ghostly walkings and visitations, of apparitions, and of visions, both individual and epidemic, owe their origin, in part at least, to what we call Hallucinations and Illusions. […] Superstition has always reigned where ignorance has thrown her cloak over reason and judgment; and when to this we have added foolish credulity and love of all that is marvellous and extraordinary, can we not at once see the origin of many, if not all, the tales of apparitions?110

For all of its contempt for the ‘ignorance’ and ‘Superstition’ evinced by believers in the supernatural, this itself is not so certain as its tone suggests, and the backing-down of ‘almost all’, ‘in part at least’, and ‘many, if not all’ sounds less like scientific bet-hedging and more like a mind that has yet to be convinced of either possibility in any real sense.

**Apparitions**

‘In many ways,’ write David Punter and Glennis Byron, ‘we might say that the Gothic is grounded on the terrain of hallucination’: this is ‘another way of saying that it is a mode within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator’s perceptions, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are enjoined to participate

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in them or to retain a critical distance.\textsuperscript{111} As readers of Gothic or other types of fiction, one of the chief resources we have available, to help us to determine the reliability of a narrator, is language.

Neologisms in all types of writing on the subject, for instance, are often an important part of creating a hallucinatory effect. Carl Jung observed: ‘Affectation is naturally not the only source of neologisms. A large number of them come from dreams, and especially from hallucinations.’\textsuperscript{112} While it would be going too far to state that there is a definite and resounding link between the figure of hallucination and the use of neologisms in literature in general, the texts discussed here do often employ rare or wholly new words in order to convey a character’s sense of madness or unease. As Antonin Artaud’s writings from Rodez so poignantly demonstrate, there is a clear link between mental illness and neologisms.\textsuperscript{113} From the word Stevenson has Markheim use to describe the way he sees the mirror—the ‘handconscience’—to Stevenson’s own apparent coining of the word ‘figmentary’ in 1884, the texts discussed here enact what we might call, in a neologism of our own, the phantasmopoetics of language, laying bare the inherent relationship between visions and the fecundity of language.\textsuperscript{114}

This is, after all, only in keeping with the spirit of the late nineteenth-century, which saw a great number of new words coined about hallucination. An article in the \textit{Proceedings} of the SPR in 1884 gave ‘phantasm’ a new lease of life, as ‘a vision or perception of a person (living or dead) who is not physically present, esp. one involving telepathy’ (\textit{OED}). ‘Telepathy’ itself was a new word, having been coined by Myers two years before. The \textit{OED} offers Gurney and 1886 as the earliest instance of ‘hypnagogy’, meaning ‘inducing or leading to sleep’; but in fact the word had first been used fourteen years before, in an English translation of Hippolyte Taine’s \textit{De l’Intelligence}, as the clippers Gurney placed around the word suggested: ‘The “hypnagogic” hallucination was as truly the projection of the percipient’s own

\textsuperscript{114} I discuss these neologisms in more detail in the next chapter.
mind as the dream. However, *Phantasms*, and in particular a section of *Phantasms* written by Myers, did give us the word ‘phantasmogenetic’. ‘Phantasmology’ emerged in 1890. In total, the *OED* lists some twenty-nine offshoots of that single word, ‘phantasm’.

Numerous inflexions and variations of ‘hallucination’ also appeared around this period. The 1895 English translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* gave the English language the word ‘hallucinant’, meaning both ‘someone who experiences hallucinations’ and ‘a drug that induces hallucinations’ (*OED*). In 1873, John Forster had offered ‘hallucinative’ (meaning ‘productive of hallucination’), though the world appears to have been overwhelmingly reluctant to take it up. The word appears in his *Life of Dickens*: ‘The vividness of Dickens’ imagination [… he] finds […] to be simply hallucinative.’ A further glance at the *OED* also reveals that the one instance (at least on record) of ‘hallucinator’ dates from 1860; the loan word from French, ‘halluciné’, was first used in 1886; and the first use of the word ‘hallucinated’ as a participial adjective is also to be found in Gurney’s *Phantasms*. The *OED* also tells us that the word ‘veridical’ was first applied to the phenomenon of hallucination by Myers in 1884, in the pages of the *Proceedings*.

But this vogue for new words to describe and define such innovative analysis of these phenomena was not limited to writers of scientific papers and articles. As well as Stevenson, the fiction writers of the time often created new words, or used old, obsolete ones, to create a sense of weirdness in their stories. M. P. Shiel was a skilled practitioner of this: his short tale ‘Xélucha’ (1896) is a masterpiece merging esoteric language with ambiguous hallucinatory vision. We read, for instance, of the protagonist’s ‘wildered eyes’, copper hangings ‘parnlled with mirrors of iasperated crystal’, and ‘undermemories of the wasted Summer’. For Arthur Machen, language and hallucination are linked for the very simple reason that both, in their most extreme forms, rely on imagination, and on the vividness of the individual’s imagination; in *The Hill of Dreams*, Lucian’s visionary experiences are

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closely related to his continuing quest for ‘the great secret of language’.\textsuperscript{117} But for others, language and visionary experiences were also pointedly linked. W. B. Yeats, writer of some fifty-eight ghost stories as well as numerous ghost-poems, wrote in his notes to \textit{The Wind Among the Reeds} (1908):

\begin{quote}
I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very unlike dreaming, when these images took upon themselves what seemed an independent life and became part of a mystic language, which always seemed as if it would bring me some strange revelation.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

Yeats is the writer who famously asserted that ‘there is always a phantasmagoria’ in the mind of the poet.\textsuperscript{119} But it is fiction, and particularly ghost stories, which most frequently question the nature of the apparition.

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‘There can be little doubt that the new sophistication of the ghost story owed a considerable debt to the SPR,’ Peter Keating has observed.\textsuperscript{120} But they were essentially re-workings of older devices, the ghosts that had been found in Shakespeare and the Gothic literature of the eighteenth century. As Keating puts it:

\begin{quote}
The ghosts, phantasms, and spirits of various kinds that feature so prominently in the fiction of the period were far older phenomena than even spies and undercover agents: they, however, also seemed new. As one commentator noted in 1900: ‘The old spectre of our childhood with his clanking chains has faded into nothingness in this age of inquiry. If he appears again it is in a new character and he must at least be civil to the Society for Psychical Research’.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{119} & Cited in Castle, ‘Phantasmagoria’, pp. 48-9. \\
\textsuperscript{121} & Ibid., p. 360.
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‘Seemed’ is the key word, and in fact the new ‘psychical’ ghosts were merely the old ghosts made over; and in fact the rise of spiritualism and psychical research was by no means the only reason for the growth in the popularity of the ghost story. The publication and huge success of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, published at Christmas 1843, essentially began a tradition that lasts until today: the tradition of the Christmas ghost story. Also, it is not strictly true that the emergence of hallucination and psychological phenomena into the genre of the ghost story was down to the rise in psychical research. Sheridan Le Fanu’s stories, such as ‘Green Tea’ and ‘The Familiar’ from his 1872 volume *In a Glass Darkly*, gestured towards hallucination as well as supernatural phenomena as the cause of the apparitions, especially in the former story. As Clive Bloom has recently framed it,

A mere 100 years after *Otranto* there was no room for rattling chains and cowled skeletons. Instead, ghosts started to become aetherial, or worse, the merest hallucinations of the psychologically scarred as they appear in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. In ‘Green Tea’ by Sheridan Le Fanu, the ‘ghost’ is a haunting by the alienated self, not a skeleton monk.122

While we may blanch at the heavy-handed certainties Bloom evinces in a phrase such as ‘merest hallucinations’ and that predicate (‘the “ghost” is’) which so boldly announces the nature of Le Fanu’s ‘ghost’ (the cautious clippers do little to soften the blow), he is right to point up the shifting nature of writers’ approaches to the matter of the ghostly. (Bloom’s claiming that Le Fanu wrote ‘Green Tea’ in 1872 when it was in fact written and first published a few years before does not help to inspire confidence.) As early as 1880, Richard Dowling had remarked that the monkey of ‘Green Tea’ was ‘the only probable ghost in fiction’.123 Before Le Fanu, Edgar Allan Poe had strongly hinted at hallucination as a possible source for the experiences of characters in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’, ‘William Wilson’, and ‘The Black Cat’, published in the 1830s and 1840s.124 Similarly, Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (1846) had

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124 Indeed, the figure of the black cat, with its long-established occult and superstitious connotations, would be reinvented in fiction of this time, first by Poe and then again in Algernon Blackwood’s John
portrayed the madness of the protagonist, who ends up seeing hallucinations of himself wherever he goes. These stories, along with Dickens’s delineation of hallucinations, precede the founding of the Society for Psychical Research by nearly forty years. Before them, there were the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann.

But it is probably Poe who most repeatedly and intensively explored hallucination in his fiction published in the 1830s and 1840s. ‘Poe’s stories are unquestionably fantastic in the general Todorovian sense’, Terry Castle has noted; moreover, ‘they focus specifically on the epistemological problem of apparitions.’

And indeed ‘problem’ is the word. Julian Wolfreys has written insightfully of the portrayal of hauntings in literature:

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\text{Yet—and we must insist on this—haunting is irreducible to the apparition. The spectral or uncanny effect is not simply a matter of seeing a ghost. The haunting process puts into play a disrupting structure or, to consider this another way, recalling the idea of the phantom or phantasm as ‘gap’, a disruption that is other to the familiarity of particular structures wherein the disruption is itself structural and irreducible to a simple, stabilized representation.}
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Reading the texts which are studied in the succeeding chapters, especially ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ or ‘The Friends of the Friends’, we see just how limited it would be to equate haunting with the moment of an apparition, whether it turns out to be a ghost or hallucination. Haunting and hauntedness is more pervasive than this, and Wolfreys’ point that the phantasm is itself operating not only in a structure but \textit{as} a structure is central to, say, Oleron’s experiences, or Lucian Taylor’s. Haunting, for these characters, takes on a life—or afterlife—of its own.

The problem of categorisation, of what to call these stories, has plagued critics and commentators of weird fiction and ghost stories for years. Peter Penzoldt claims that ‘the psychological ghost stories based chiefly on the findings of modern

\textit{Silence story, ‘A Psychical Invasion’ (1908). In both stories, psychology and the occult are merged to test our cultural assumptions that have led us to relate black cats to black magic.}

\textit{125} Castle, ‘Phantasmagoria’, p. 51 n.

\textit{126} Julian Wolfreys, \textit{Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, the Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature} (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 6.
psychiatry and psychoanalysis are really part of science fiction.¹²⁷ There are, however, three real problems with such a labelling. The first is raised by Joshi, who writes that while Penzoldt’s claim might appear ‘extraordinarily ingenious’, ‘science fiction cannot really be thought to be based on science as such but only science of the future.’¹²⁸ Therefore, no matter how informed by current scientific opinion the tales of Blackwood or Stevenson might appear, they can only ever be ‘current’ in their science—that is, science of the present rather than speculative science of the future. The second problem lies in Penzoldt’s assumption that psychiatry and psychoanalysis are bona fide sciences; the debate continues as to whether they can be considered such, when so much about the workings of the human mind remains unknowable and unable to be conclusively proved. But another problem with Penzoldt’s suggestion is, I think, the main one: it is often difficult to ascertain to what extent, and in what ways, a particular story or novel is ‘based chiefly on the findings of modern psychiatry and psychoanalysis’. Although critics have been doggedly researching James’s indebtedness to then-current scientific opinion when writing *The Turn of the Screw*—often cited as the chief text of the ‘psychological horror tale’ and one that was very much keyed into the theories and ideas of the time—the thing that continues to stand out about that novella is James’s remark, in his 1908 preface to the novella, that

I had […] simply to renounce all attempt to keep the kind and degree of impression I wished to produce on terms with the today so copious psychical record of cases of apparitions. […] I had to decide in fine between having my apparitions correct and having my story ‘good’—that is producing my impression of the dreadful, my designed horror. Good ghosts, speaking by book, make poor subjects, and it was clear that from the first my hovering prowling blighting presences, my pair of abnormal agents, would have to depart altogether from the rules.¹²⁹

For all his interest in psychical research and modern psychology, and for all his familial connections with these disciplines (his brother William James had published

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The Principles of Psychology in 1890), this is candidly and lucidly dismissive of the usefulness of such pursuits when writing a ghost story. This is not to deny the fact that some writers did successfully draw upon psychical research in order to reinvent the ghost story for a modern, turn-of-the-century audience. As well as Hodgson’s Carnacki, there was Algernon Blackwood’s John Silence, a character who was designed, as Roger Luckhurst points out, quoting from Blackwood’s stories, to go ‘beyond the “uninspired” and institutional “classification of results”—beyond, that is, the parochial Society for Psychical Research.’

Lewis Carroll, one of the most famous psychical research enthusiasts, hinted at the sea-change occurring in the nation’s attitude to the supernatural when, in Sylvie and Bruno (1889), he had the young Lady Muriel speak out disapprovingly against the ‘modern ghosts’ that had begun to appear in fiction:

‘It’s far more exciting than some of the modern ghosts, I assure you! Now there was a Ghost last month—I don’t mean a real Ghost in—in Supernature—but in a Magazine. It was a perfectly flavourless Ghost. It wouldn’t have frightened a mouse!’

Andrew Lang was similarly wary of the practicability of marrying contemporary psychical research with the modern ghost story. In ‘Ghosts up to Date’, he bemoaned the fact that ‘ghost stories, the delight of Christmas Eve, have been ravaged and annexed by psychology’. There is little doubt over how we are supposed to react to those forceful verbs: it is as if psychology is an invading army threatening the very existence of ‘romance’, a literary genre which Lang championed as, to borrow Roger Luckhurst’s words, ‘a virile, masculine riposte to Decadent and Naturalist fiction’. However, as Luckhurst also points out, Lang was not only a ‘fairy-tale and myth collector’ and ‘folklorist’ but also a ‘psychical researcher. Machen was similarly a writer with a foot in both camps.

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130 Luckhurst, Invention of Telepathy, p. 187.
132 Lang, ‘Ghosts up to Date’, p. 286.
133 Luckhurst, Invention of Telepathy, p. 160.
134 Ibid.
An interesting example of a ghost story which remains ultimately unclear as to whether it is presenting the experience of a madman or a ghostly encounter is J. Meade Falkner’s 1895 novella, *The Lost Stradivarius*. The novella tells the story of a young student who finds a Stradivarius violin in his college rooms, and, upon playing it, inadvertently summons the ghost of Adrian Temple, the previous owner of the violin. Over time he becomes obsessed by the piece of music used to call up the ghost, as well as by the figure of Temple himself. Tom Paulin has called the novella ‘a carefully and precisely written ghost story that aims to tap unconscious fears.’

The moment when Maltravers, the student, first sees the ‘ghost’ of Temple is representative of the ambiguous horror tale:

> He looked at it for a moment with a hope, which he felt to be vain, that it might vanish and prove a phantom of his excited imagination, but still it sat there. Then my brother put down his violin, and he used to assure me that a horror overwhelmed him of an intensity that he had previously believed impossible. Whether the image that he saw was subjective or objective, I cannot pretend to say: you will be in a position to judge for yourself when you have finished this narrative. Our limited experience would lead us to believe that it was a phantom conjured up by some unusual condition of his own brain; but we are fain to confess that there certainly do exist in nature phenomena such as baffle human reason; and it is possible that, for some hidden purposes of Providence, permission may occasionally be granted to those who have passed from this life to assume again for a time the form of their earthly tabernacle.

As with many of the narratives recounting the adventures of Aylmer Vance and Thomas Carnacki, the narrator of *The Lost Stradivarius* is keen to encourage the reader to choose either a supernatural or a psychological interpretation of events. This is Todorov *avant la lettre*. That ‘you will be in a position to judge for yourself when you have finished this narrative’ is a nice touch: when you have finished reading this narrative, not when I have finished telling it. The call for audience participation is an explicit example of what many other narratives of the time are doing, albeit less obviously: expressing a desire for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, and

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in doing so pointing up the multifaceted and ultimately undecidable nature of the events detailed in the narrative.

But for all its pretensions to ambiguity, *The Lost Stradivarius* does—with its detailed history of Temple and the violin, its heavy Gothic overtones, and its lengthy and supernaturally laden descriptions of the appearance of the ghost—end up feeling more like a traditional ghost story, the sort that M. R. James would become renowned for only a decade later, than a more thoroughly delineated psychological narrative. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will examine in close detail five texts which I consider to be unusually exemplary in their exploration of the phenomenon of hallucination: texts which do not simply give the illusion of ambiguity, but which leave the matter unresolved right up to—and beyond—the final page. In doing so, I hope to bring out how language, narration, point of view, and characterisation all contribute to a writer’s presentation of hallucinatory experiences, and to explore in more detail why this interest in hallucinatory and visionary sensation became so popular in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

In chapter two I discuss the hallucinatory quality to some of Robert Louis Stevenson’s writing, especially the short story ‘Markheim’ (1885). Paying special attention to the ways in which Stevenson portrays the visitant in the story, I examine the nature of this figure as either a purveyor of divine justice (Peter Penzoldt’s interpretation, for instance) or as a natural development from the story’s preceding descriptions of Markheim’s growing sense of conscience. From my discussion of Stevenson’s writing, I move in chapter three to a discussion of a short story by Vernon Lee, titled ‘A Wicked Voice’ (1890). In particular I focus on the ways in which she portrays the haunting of the character of Magnus. Chapter four focuses on a short story by the friend and mentor of Lee, Henry James; I argue that ‘The Friends of the Friends’ (1896), as well as being a precursor to the better-known novella *The Turn of the Screw*, is an attempt to present a fictional ghostly encounter that both responds to and reacts against those real apparitions which Gurney had analysed in *Phantasms of the Living*, and which James’s own brother William was interested in studying. Chapter five focuses on a novel by Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams*, written around the same time as James wrote ‘The Friends of the Friends’ though not
published in book form until ten years later. I explore Machen’s spiritual and occult interests and argue that these do not preclude a reading of his novel which interprets Lucian’s visionary experiences as hallucinatory, rather than ghostly or spiritual, in nature. The final chapter, on Oliver Onions’s ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ (1911), explores a ‘haunted house’ story which has received little critical attention; like those texts by Stevenson, Lee, and Machen, this story presents aural hallucinations which may or may not be the result of a ghostly female figure haunting the protagonist.

While I do not wish to reduce any of the stories or novels to simple tales of hallucination, I think that the psychological aspect of many ghost stories has not received sufficient attention. Why is hallucination important? Do these stories utilise hallucination in order simply to reflect the contemporary interest in such psychological phenomena, or are there other reasons for their exploration of this figure? And what is at stake in the rationalist/spiritualist debate that has been such a persistent feature of critical readings of, say, *The Turn of the Screw*? Here Jack Sullivan’s words about Shirley Jackson’s fiction are particularly apposite:

Reversing M. R. James’s dictum that a ghost story should leave a narrow ‘loophole’ for a natural explanation, Jackson wrote stories of psychological anguish that leave a loophole for a *supernatural* explanation. The supernatural is a final dark corner in the desolate room where Jackson’s isolated protagonists, usually women, find themselves.137

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Handconsciences

Can you not see within me the clear writing of conscience, never blurred by any wilful sophistry, although too often disregarded? Can you not read me for a thing that surely must be common as humanity—the unwilling sinner? (‘Markheim’)¹

These words can refer to ‘Markheim’ as well as Markheim. The ‘clear writing of conscience’ is what drives Stevenson’s story; it is a tale of an ‘unwilling sinner’ and a powerful delineation of the effects of conscience, with its action intensely focused on just one man, the title character. But it is more than this. The issue of conscience in ‘Markheim’ is bound up with hallucination, in a number of ways.

Stevenson’s interest in the phenomenon of hallucination was ambivalent: curiosity tempered with scepticism. When the President of the Society for Psychical Research, Frederic Myers, wrote to Stevenson in early 1886 concerning *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, to raise ‘certain points which I think that you might expand or alter with advantage’, Stevenson decided against taking up Myers on his suggestions, ‘pleading’, as Roger Luckhurst has it, ‘that the text had been written, revised, and published in ten weeks to satisfy “Byles the Butcher” and other creditors.’² Like Henry James’s later description of *The Turn of the Screw* as a ‘pot-boiler’,³ the issue of writing for money is raised, as if in defence of any weaknesses in the story. Like James, Stevenson was interested in the emerging pseudo-science of psychical research, and in the notion of hallucination, and both *Jekyll and Hyde* and

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¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘Markheim’, in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, edited with and Introduction and Notes by Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 95. Subsequent references to ‘Markheim’ will be given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.
‘Markheim’ reflect this interest. Luckhurst points out that Stevenson possessed some knowledge of the methods and terminology used by the Society for Psychical Research:

Stevenson was aware of categories of veridical hallucinations or phantasms. Richard le Gallienne recorded Fanny Stevenson’s vision in 1888 of a phantasm of Stevenson’s close friend Charles Baxter, ‘evidently in a rage’, and psychically projected across the Atlantic from London to Saranac. Stevenson, ‘aware of his wife’s “psychic” peculiarities’, recorded the date and time like a dutiful researcher. This was a case, Le Gallienne claimed, ‘that deserves a place in Professor Gurney’s book of “Phantasms of the Living”’.4

Certainly the telepathically induced hallucination which Stevenson recorded was reminiscent of Gurney’s theory of the cause of phantasms. ‘But the point is not to play hide-and-seek in Stevenson’s work for the concepts of psychical research’, Luckhurst maintains. ‘It is evident enough that Myers and Stevenson were connecting to some of the same discourse networks about the psyche in the 1880s and 1890s.’5 Luckhurst’s point, complete with pun on hyde-and-seek, is a fair one, and the hallucinatory force of ‘Markheim’ is irreducible to the methods of the SPR. Hallucination in ‘Markheim’ becomes a difficult figure to read among the various symbols at work in the story.

‘Markheim’ is one of the most illustrative, and yet elusive, texts of Stevenson’s in terms of its relationship with psychical research. Written to satisfy the readerly appetite for a traditional Christmas ghost story, it is a short tale which reveals constant problems when one attempts to read its narrative as that of a supernatural horror story. ‘Markheim’ does away with any straightforward notions of the ghostly visitor; like its near-contemporary text, _Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde_, it draws on the then emerging ‘science’ of psychical research. It does this in order to open out the ghost story to encompass new possible explanations for visions, where the ‘ghost’ is no longer merely a supernatural visitation (though more than one critic, as I shall explore, has interpreted the story as though it were so). Now, the

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4 Luckhurst, _Invention of Telepathy_, p. 195.
5 Ibid.
ghost is a symbol of the protagonist’s conscience, and as such hovers between the
divine and the hallucinatory, the supernatural and the psychological.

‘Markheim’ was written by Stevenson in late 1884, but not published until
the following year, when it appeared in the December 1885 edition of Unwin’s
Christmas Annual 1886. The story was originally scheduled for publication the
previous year in the Pall Mall Gazette, but had been withdrawn at the proof stage,
because it was not long enough for the requirements of the newspaper. The story tells
of a man, Markheim, who has gone to see a shopkeeper or ‘dealer’ about purchasing a
Christmas present for a friend. Markheim dislikes the dealer, an old acquaintance of
his, and decides to murder him and loot the shop. After he has done this, his
conscience pricks him, and paranoia begins to take hold of his mind. A strange figure
or ‘visitant’ appears to him and tempts him to compound his evil deed with the
murder of the shop’s maid, who is about to return to find her employer murdered.
Markheim refuses the strange visitor’s suggestion, and, when the maid returns, he
confesses his crime and hands himself over to the police.

Such a description is, of course, reductive; it fails to capture the suspense,
the slow but steady generation of tension and fear as Markheim’s conscience begins
to awaken. When he first completed the story, Stevenson wrote to Charles Morley,
the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, that ‘I do not consider the story, in all parts, up to
my level’. 6 Even when he later submitted the story itself to Morley for consideration,
he could not muster any more excitement, and wrote on 1st December 1884,
‘Herewith “Markheim”. I trust he may prove as much use to you, as he has been
trouble to me.’ 7 Indeed, as well as his well-documented physical illnesses, Stevenson
frequently described his literary work—and leisure—as a form of illness: in a letter to
W. E. Henley, he described the experience of reading Crime and Punishment as being
‘not [like] reading a book’ but closer to ‘having a brain fever’. 8 The parallels between
‘Markheim’ and Crime and Punishment are themselves strangely elusive. ‘The
history of Stevenson’s admiration for Dostoievsky’s novel is not widely known’,

6 Letter to Charles Morley, 1 December 1884, The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. by Bradford
7 Ibid., p. 37.
8 Letter to W. E. Henley, November 1885, in ibid., p. 151.
Claire Harman has noted; ‘the first English translation, in 1886, post-dates “Markheim”, but Stevenson seems to have read the novel in a French version of 1884, a copy of which was handed on to him by Henry James, “only partially cut” as [William Ernest] Henley claimed later.’ The cumulative effect of the parallels between Stevenson’s story and Dostoyevsky’s novel is somewhat startling. Harman explains the similarities between the two works:

In the only two letters where he mentions Dostoevsky’s novel, Stevenson never links ‘Markheim’ with it, but the similarities are striking, as a scholar called Edgar C. Knowlton pointed out as early as 1916. Knowlton compared passages from the two works in parallel columns and came up with evidence of a kind of imaginative shadowing[...]. But from this very close emulation of Dostoevsky’s story, ‘Markheim’ develops in an ingenious way. [...] ‘Markheim’ represents a feverish kind of homage to the power of Dostoevsky’s narrative gifts as much as to his actual tale, an acknowledgement of how affecting the experience of reading him had been.

Markheim’s illness is not physical, but all in the mind: a sort of brain fever.

Michela Vanon Alliata cites Edgar Allan Poe rather than Dostoevsky as a distinct antecedent for Stevenson’s story, and certainly the parallels between ‘Markheim’ and Poe’s stories ‘William Wilson’ (1839) and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843; revised edition, 1845) are similarly instructive. In the former, the eponymous protagonist is dogged throughout his life by a mysterious double, who appears to the narrator at the moments when he is in the process of doing something particularly immoral, such as cheating at cards and seducing a married woman. Eventually, Wilson stabs his doppelganger, and in doing so realises that he has stabbed himself. The final image of the story, which resonates particularly in view of ‘Markheim’, is of what Wilson first believes to be a large mirror, in which the narrator beholds ‘mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood’. ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ is linked to ‘Markheim’ in the way that, in both stories, the protagonist’s conscience leads to strongly suggested aural hallucinations. For Alliata, ‘Markheim’ is

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10 Ibid., pp. 287-8.
structurally ‘divided into two parts’, the first of which takes the form of ‘a study in terror after the manner of Poe, [and] revolves around the preannounced murder, and a steady accumulation of detail increases the suspense to a notable intensity.’

Alliata’s reference to ‘a steady accumulation of detail’ is a perceptive point to note, but it is not the first time a critic of ‘Markheim’ has noted it. Indeed, J. R. Hammond had used that exact phrase when discussing the story, over twenty years before: ‘One of the most remarkable aspects of the story is the manner in which an atmosphere of tension is built up through a steady accumulation of detail.’ Thus this phrase unconsciously suggests itself (assuming this echo is a mere coincidence), lending itself to any delineation of the story: the verbal cues and echoes contained within the text do indeed steadily accumulate, as do the precise images and metaphors, to create a feeling of both tension and intensity, an almost uncanny sense of impending doom or revelation. The steady, constant tap-tapping of Poe’s ‘Tell-Tale Heart’ is here rendered as ‘the beating of the rain’, ‘the tread of regiments marching in the distance’, and ‘the gushing of the water in the pipes’ (p. 92). But it hovers here between hallucination (or sounds uncontrollably taking a hold of the imagination) and wilful imagining that the rain ‘means’ these sounds: footsteps, sighs, the creaking of the door, and the ubiquitous chink of monies. Andrew Lang himself would write a few years later: ‘Noises may be naturally caused in very many ways: by winds, by rats, by boughs of trees, by water pipes, by birds. The writer has known a very satisfactory series of footsteps in an historical Scotch house, to be dispelled by a modification of the water pipes.’

Indeed, such a tap-tapping is also present in Onions’s ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, and it is the steady dripping of a leaking tap in Oleron’s house that leads him to start singing, as if in a trance, the song known as ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, which will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. The aural (and, in Oleron’s case, oral) quality to both characters’ experiences is telling, because it hints at the possibility of

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14 Andrew Lang, Cock Lane and Common-Sense (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), p. 140.
extraordinary supernatural or pathologically psychological potential lying within very ordinary sounds, in not just the hauntingly ‘wicked voice’ of a male castrato (as in Vernon Lee’s tale of that name, of which more in the next chapter) but in the dripping of a tap, or the sound of footsteps. Or the knock at a door. The knocking at the door in ‘Markheim’ is an important moment:

Suddenly, from the street outside, a very jovial gentleman began to beat with a staff on the shop door, accompanying his blows with shouts and railleries in which the dealer was continually called upon by name. Markheim, smitten into ice, glanced at the dead man. But no! he lay quite still; he was fled away far beyond earshot of these blows and shoutings; he was sunk beneath seas of silence; and his name, which would once have caught his notice above the howling of a storm, had become an empty sound. And presently the jovial gentleman desisted from his knocking and departed. (p. 90)

A key point is that although the dealer is ‘called upon by name’, this name is not vouchsafed to us, the reader. This is one time when the narrator wishes to distance us from Markheim, since Markheim is the only one given a name, and even then it is not his given name, but merely his surname: mark-heim. Julia Briggs has detected another important connection in the knocking of ‘Markheim’:

The Shakespearean allusions are linked with another source, De Quincey’s essay ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’ where the notorious Ratcliffe Highway Murders are described. One of these murders featured the unexpected return of the maid, and almost certainly inspired the plot—if not the moral—of ‘Markheim’.15

The Ratcliffe Highway Murders of 1811 shocked the people of London—and the nation at large—and Briggs is right to suggest that these real-life events inspired ‘Markheim’. At least one other critic has picked up on the importance of De Quincey’s essay to ‘Markheim’: Ann Gossman, in her 1962 essay ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in “Markheim”’, remarked that ‘both the play [Macbeth] and De Quincey’s theorizing about it may have influenced Stevenson’s imagination when he

sought to convey the state of mind of his murderer.”\textsuperscript{16} De Quincey’s essay certainly serves as an important precursor to Stevenson’s story, and it is easy to imagine how Stevenson was influenced by such passages as this:

Hence it is that, when the deed is done […] the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.\textsuperscript{17}

The ‘jovial gentleman’ who knocks on the door of the shop in ‘Markheim’ serves to echo the comic Porter from Shakespeare’s play. Tellingly, he calls upon the dealer ‘by name’. Of the four people who feature in this short story, Markheim is the only one to be named to us, the readers. The other three characters—the dealer, the visitant, the maid—remain suitably anonymous, thus highlighting the importance and strangeness of the protagonist’s name. In effect, Markheim is essentially the only character in the story, since the other three people in the narrative are all mere types rather than characters. All that surrounds Markheim is nameless, names are empty of meaning. As to the dealer, ‘his name […] had become an empty sound’ to Markheim; there is always the sensation of ‘something nameless vanishing’ (p. 92). There seems to be a bit of play going on with Markheim’s name when we read that ‘he longed to be home, girt in by walls’ (p. 92). He longs to be home because he is not at home, because he is caught up in an experience of the ‘unhomely’ or unheimlich, or almost.

Stevenson’s story, like Crime and Punishment, would lead the way for other writers who would go on to explore the causal relationship between criminal deeds and hallucination, brought on by one’s conscience. Six years after ‘Markheim’ appeared, Oscar Wilde would offer another take on the conscience-stricken hallucinator in his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891):

\textsuperscript{16} Ann Gossman, ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in “Markheim”’, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 17.1 (1962), 73-76 (p. 73).

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas De Quincey, ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’, in Essays (London: Ward, Lock, 1886), p. 356.
And yet if it had been merely an illusion, how terrible it was to think that conscience could raise such fearful phantoms, and give them visible form, and make them move before one! What sort of life would his be if, day and night, shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places, to whisper in his ear as he sat at the feast, to wake him with icy fingers as he lay asleep! As the thought crept through his brain, he grew pale with terror, and the air seemed to him to have become suddenly colder.18

This description of ‘conscience’ as a quasi-anthropomorphic being occurs after Dorian has committed the murder of Basil, the artist; like Markheim, his conscience only makes itself felt after the event, and takes the form of an almost-human visitation. It is telling that these words from Dorian Gray were not in the original edition of the novel, published in 1890, but were added to the revised and extended edition that appeared a year later; a shadowy afterthought, Wilde’s words seem to be an attempt to justify and strengthen Dorian’s slide into sin, highlighting the effect his treatment of the actress Sibyl Vane has upon him after the event. But this is obviously made even clearer in Stevenson’s story, where the ‘visitant’ that appears to Markheim in the empty house, as Reid points out, ‘represents Markheim’s alienated conscience’.19 In this respect Stevenson’s delineation of Markheim’s unstable mind is informed by contemporaneous medical opinion, because in ‘Markheim’ the title character’s conscience takes a visible, external form. This reflects certain scientific beliefs that were being propounded during this period, such as that of Séglas and Chaslin, who, in 1889, suggested that, in certain cases of mental breakdown, ‘the conscience of the individual—a victim to hallucinations and illusions—closes itself more or less completely to the influence of external perceptions.’20 Thus what appears to be external is actually an internal construction of normally external sounds and perceptions, such as footsteps, the chink of money, the knocking at the door.

Irving Saposnik is undoubtedly right to observe of this visitant that ‘its presence is suggested even before it appears.’\(^{21}\) The word ‘conscience’ is made strange before the appearance of the stranger, first of all in the form of the ‘mirror’ that the dealer offers to Markheim as a ‘Christmas present’ for the lady Markheim is thinking of marrying (p. 86). There, in this moment of anger at being confronted with his own image, we have the first indication of the spectre to come, the other self that will manifest itself more clearly in the form of the nameless visitant. His anger causes him to utter a neologism, combining the concrete realness of ‘hand-glass’ (p. 86) with the abstract psychology of the word ‘conscience’: ‘“I ask you,” said Markheim, “for a Christmas present, and you give me this—this damned reminder of years, and sins and follies—this handconscience! Did you mean it? Had you a thought in your mind?”’ (p. 86). The terrifying import of this moment, and of Markheim’s neologism, this connection of the physical ‘hand’ with the psychological or metaphysical ‘conscience’, had already been made clear to us through subtle verbal suggestion, specifically the repetition of the word ‘hand’ in both abstract and concrete senses: ‘this hand glass’; ‘a shock had passed through Markheim, a start both of hand and foot’; ‘a certain trembling of the hand that now received the glass’; ‘The little man had jumped back when Markheim had so suddenly confronted him with the mirror; but now, perceiving there was nothing worse on hand, he chuckled’ (all p. 86). All of these references to the ‘hand’ culminate in Markheim’s explosive outburst, ‘this—this damned reminder of years, and sins and follies—this handconscience!’ (p. 86).

The stuttering force of ‘this—this’ and ‘—this’ adds further power to the eventual verbal explosion, a kind of portmanteau word that conflates the mind with the hand, thought with action. Again, we think of Macbeth’s references to the blood on his hands, and the way they become metonymic representatives of his guilty deed. This mirror is also a prototype for Dorian Gray’s portrait, and we could just as easily be reading of that picture when Markheim says of the mirror that it is a ‘damned reminder of years, and sins and follies’. The mirror, like so much else in the story, is a boundary, the boundary between the primitive, murderous half of Markheim and the

civilised half, his conscience. He cannot look at himself because he sees this other half, this other self, this ‘handconscience’. In this respect, critics such as Anne Stiles are no doubt right to examine the relationship between *Jekyll and Hyde* and the late-Victorian scientific concept of the double brain. Particularly influential was Henry Maudsley’s essay ‘The Double Brain’, which didn’t appear until 1889, after the publication of both ‘Markheim’ and *Jekyll and Hyde*, but which captured the interest in this idea at a time when theories concerning the mind were growing very popular: *Mind* and *Brain*, two leading journals in the field, had both been founded in the 1870s. In particular, the symbolism of the mirror in both stories is indicative of the visual power of the protagonist’s own face in revealing his sins to himself.

The mark of punctuation that succeeds the word ‘mirror’ in ‘Markheim’ is singularly apt. The semi-colon is perhaps, of all punctuation marks, the most useful to the genre of horror fiction; it creates a dramatic pause that the reader cannot help but observe, even unconsciously and momentarily, and creates tension and suspense to a greater extent than the full stop, which also implies closure and conclusion. The semi-colon denotes that there is unfinished business; the full stop puts a stop to any such idea. Here, Stevenson uses this mark of punctuation to his fullest advantage, creating a feeling of horror and potential danger through a build-up of sharp suggestions (‘jumped back’, ‘suddenly’, ‘confronted’); then he puts them on hold with the semi-colon; finally, he scatters them to the air with the following ‘but’ and the release of suspense in the form of good-humoured laughter (‘he chuckled’). This suspense surrounding the moment with the ‘hand-glass’ prepares us for the moment of the visitant’s arrival, for the figure who ‘at times he thought bore a likeness to himself’ (p. 94). Thus it is a pre-hallucinatory hint, one that is dissolved (albeit only temporarily, much as the semi-colon suspends the end of the sentence but only for the time being) by the chuckle of the dealer.

After the murder, and before the visitant’s appearance, the mirror returns:

He began to bestir himself, going to and fro with the candle, beleaguered by moving shadows, and startled to the soul by chance reflections. In many rich mirrors, some of home design, some from Venice or Amsterdam, he saw his face repeated and repeated, as it were an army of spies; his own eyes met
and detected him; and the sound of his own steps, lightly as they fell, vexed the surrounding quiet. (p. 88)

The ‘reflections’ are supposed to hit us with their full ambiguity, mingling thought and vision in a dizzying moment on the brink of hallucination. We are invited not just to reflect upon the reflections, but to see the image in our minds, ‘in a glass darkly’. Like the ‘twinklings and re-reflections’ which render Oleron’s experiences so mysterious, these ‘rich mirrors’ set Markheim’s own profile against himself. In an article that remains one of the best pieces of criticism on this story, Joseph J. Egan remarked that the ‘mirrors which so mercilessly reveal Markheim’s spiritual decay to his own anguished eyes are thus the means by which Stevenson prepares us for the conclusion of the tale where Markheim’s conscience, the better self in his soul, appears to him and persuades him to forego evil.’ Dorothy Scarborough is similarly alive to the symbolic power of the mirror in supernatural fiction: ‘The looking-glass in fiction seems to be not only a sort of hand conscience, as Markheim calls it, but a betrayer of secrets, a revealer of the forgotten past, a prophet of the future as well. It is also a strange symbol to show hearts as they are in reality, reflecting the soul rather than the body.’

But the idea of the apparition of a man’s double appearing to him with a double-edged influence was not the sole dominion of Stevenson at this time, nor had the mirror-like image of William Wilson at the end of Poe’s story passed down to Stevenson alone. In India, the nineteen-year-old Kipling had completed his first short story, ‘The Dream of Duncan Parrenness’, written in the same year as the first draft of ‘Markheim’, 1884. To borrow Nicholas Royle’s word, Kipling’s story provides an interesting example of a ‘concursor’ to Stevenson’s story. Parrenness, a clerk for the East India Company, is visited by a figure who has the face of Parrenness, but

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25 See Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003): ‘The concursor is a figure of the strange contemporary and the strangeness of the contemporary’ (p. 105, n. 56).
‘marked and lined and scarred’ with ‘evil’.

This weird double of the young clerk offers Parrenness a long and lucrative life, but in order to attain this he must first relinquish his trust in man, his faith in women, and his conscience. This update on the Faustian myth, like The Picture of Dorian Gray a few years later, is bound up with the hallucinatory: Parrenness is inebriated when his double appears to him, ‘roaring drunk’ and ‘fuddled’, making his reliability suspect. Moreover, the appearance of the visitant resembles Parrenness ‘as I once, when I was (Lord help me) very drunk indeed, have seen mine own face, all white and drawn and grown old, in a mirror.’

Like Markheim, Parrenness has a prefiguring of his visitant in the form of his own ghastly reflection, beheld in a mirror. Is this experience a ‘dream’, as the title implies? Or is that word intended to refer to Parrenness’ ambition, his ‘dreams’ for his career? Thus the nature of the vision that offers him this deal is uncertain, as with ‘Markheim’.

The mirror is also a boundary, and one that refuses any simplistic symbolic interpretation. It represents not just the mirror-image or alter ego of Markheim’s own self (or ‘soul’); it also represents the boundary between what is real and illusory, between what is substantial and what is inverse and insubstantial. During the last couple of years, the question of boundaries in relation to Stevenson’s work has been given renewed critical attention: witness the title of one recent collection of essays on his writing from 2006, titled Robert Louis Stevenson, Writer of Boundaries.

‘Markheim’ draws or writes a number of boundaries in different ways. Most prominently, there is the matter of the ‘threshold’: ‘the light that filtered down to the ground story was exceedingly faint, and showed dimly on the threshold of the shop’ (p. 90); ‘The shadow still palpitated loosely on the threshold’ (p. 92); ‘He confronted the maid upon the threshold with something like a smile’ (p. 100). It is telling that two of the three appearances of the word ‘threshold’ in the story are connected to the play of the ‘light’ and a ‘shadow’; as Michela Vanon Alliata observes, the story’s

27 Ibid., p. 240.
28 Ibid., p. 242.
‘most pervasive imagery is that of light and shadow.’29 This threshold suggests the uncertain visual status of everything, uncertain in the sense that we cannot be sure whether what is being described is utterly real or part of Markheim’s overactive and troubled imagination. As the narrator frames it, ‘The sense that he was not alone grew upon him to the verge of madness. On every side he was haunted and begirt by presences’ (p. 92).30 This is also our experience of reading the story, which is apt because, as Glenda Norquay has recently noted, ‘Stevenson’s writing […] has been evoked by nineteenth-century reading historians as highly representative of the tense relationship that had developed between writers and readers.’31 Norquay does not undertake a study of ‘Markheim’ in relation to this idea, and so the present thoughts might be viewed as a kind of supplement to her remarks: the practice of reading ‘Markheim’ is, like that of reading Jekyll and Hyde, undermined by this troubled and strained relationship between author and reader, and it is perhaps in the figure of the threshold that this uneasy reading experience is most conspicuously perceived.

Strange Cases

‘Markheim’ is, to borrow Virginia Woolf’s words about Henry James’s ghosts, ‘ringed by the strange.’32 The story’s everyday setting—its single location—is a shop, selling nothing more outlandish than clocks. And yet the word ‘strange’ hovers about

29 Alliata, “‘Markheim’ and the Shadow of the Other”, p. 308.
30 This sensation shares something with T. S. Eliot’s question in The Waste Land:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

as if waiting to settle. Just after he has murdered the dealer, Markheim finds himself surprised that his victim’s body appears ‘strangely meaner than in life’ (p. 88). The dealer’s body is ‘strangely light and supple’ (p. 91). Right at the end of the story, as he goes downstairs and prepares to give himself up, Markheim finds the shop to be ‘strangely silent’ (p. 99). The visitant himself, of course, has ‘a strange air of the commonplace’ (p. 94): that is, a strange air of the non-strange, contrasted with Markheim’s assessment that ‘this thing was not of the earth and not of God’ (p. 94). A year later, Stevenson would write a book that would be published under the title *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and although the publishers would later add the definite article to the front of that title, its initial absence is significant, and to add a ‘the’ is no less a disservice to Stevenson’s genius than calling the novella simply *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or, even, just *Jekyll and Hyde*. Indeed, several recent editors of the novella have published it under the title *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,33 but Stevenson’s original title is important, since it makes the very grammar of that title strange to us. Short and clipped like a sensational newspaper headline, Stevenson’s original title sets out to hit us with its shocking nature, like the ‘Special edition. Shocking murder of an M.P.’ that the newsboys shout in the novella itself.34 The strangeness is all in the ‘strange’, or rather *not* in ‘the strange’, but in the absence of ‘the’. No definite articles, no definitive answers.

*The Strange Cases of Dr Stanchon* was a title that echoed the failure of its attendant cases to affect us with their strangeness; *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was quite another matter, marking out its strangeness from the start.35 Reading *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson therefore decided, should be a strange experience from the title onwards. In March 1886, he wrote to John Addington Symonds, having just finished reading Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and remarked that reading the novel

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35 *The Strange Cases of Dr Stanchon* was a 1913 volume by Josephine Daskam Bacon, author of mystery stories and pioneer of the Girl Scouts movement.
was like having an illness. [Henry] James did not care for it because the
color of Raskolnikoff was not objective; and at that I divined a great
gulf between us and, on further reflection, the existence of a certain
impotence in many minds of today, which prevents them from living in a
book or a character, and keeps them standing afar off, spectators of a puppet
show. To such I suppose the book may seem empty in the centre; to the
others it is a room, a house of life, into which they themselves enter, and are
tortured and purified.36

For Stevenson, reading is nothing if not an absorbing process. The metaphor of a
‘room’ returns to the idea, popular with Stevenson elsewhere, of a figurative inner
chamber, this time not of the mind but of fiction.37 In this sense it is ironic that
Stevenson should be placing himself on the opposite side of the wall to Henry James:
the ‘house of fiction’ is here scaled down.38 But Stevenson’s house of fiction differs
from James’s: for Stevenson, reading is a tough process, comparable to an ‘illness’.
The simile is not lightly used, given Stevenson’s own long battle with various
illnesses. The reader must undergo torture before s/he can receive appropriate
purification. The talk of ‘the book’ seeming ‘empty in the centre’ is also significant,
as it highlights the importance of reader identification with a protagonist in order to
appreciate a novel such as Crime and Punishment; an emptiness at the centre which
we re-glimpse shortly afterwards between the words ‘themselves’ and ‘enter’, during
our experience of reading Stevenson’s words. Reading is self-centred, it places the
reader at the centre of a ‘house of life’, and the process of reading is one that the
reader ‘lives’ along with the characters within the story or novel.

The ‘house of life’ which the readers enter to be ‘tortured and purified’
could almost be the shop-cum-house which Markheim enters to undergo his ordeal.
While it cannot be maintained that the whole story is a metaphor for the process of

37 In ‘A Chapter on Dreams’ (1888), for instance, he writes that ‘The past is all of one texture […]
whether acted out in three dimensions, or only witnessed in that small theatre of the brain which we
keep brightly lighted all night long’, and ‘the past […] is lost for ever: our old days and deeds, our old
selves, too, and the very world in which these scenes were acted, [are] all brought down to the same
faint residuum as a last night’s dream, to some incontinuous images, and an echo in the chambers of
the brain.’ See Jekyll and Hyde, p. 151. This idea of ‘chambers of the brain’ is also present in
‘Markheim’: ‘brute terrors, like the scurrying of rats in a deserted attic, filled the more remote
chambers of his brain with riot’ (p. 89).
38 See, for instance, Henry James, The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James, ed.
reading, we must note the obvious influence on ‘Markheim’ of *Crime and Punishment*, the novel to which Stevenson was referring when he wrote these words. Joseph J. Egan has written that the dealer’s ‘house […] becomes at once both the image and exterior reflection of Markheim’s troubled mind, and as we follow the tormented murderer from chamber to chamber in this place of “mingled shine and darkness”, we penetrate ever further into the depths of his psyche.’\(^{39}\) Markheim’s movement to the ‘upper drawing-room of the dealer’s house’ represents, for Egan, ‘the innermost depths of Markheim’s consciousness’.\(^{40}\) Although he does not mention it, Egan’s point is borne out by the striking simile in ‘Markheim’ of ‘brute terrors’ which are ‘like the scurrying of rats in a deserted attic’ (p. 89). We cannot fail to draw the parallel between this figurative, deserted, topmost room and the literal, deserted, topmost room which Markheim is working his way towards. But what makes these rats such an ingenious stroke is not simply that they already suggest something to be feared (rats, thanks to centuries of plague, have become a very handy trope for terror) but that, at around the time that Stevenson was writing, they were taking on a renewed significance. The early volumes of the *Proceedings* of the SPR frequently featured references to rats as a shorthand for a rational explanation for things that went bump in the night, as discussed in the previous chapter. Stevenson’s simile fits in with the other auditory hallucinations that Markheim experiences, such as the raindrops and the footsteps and the rush of water in the pipes. The reading mind is thus a haunted one, and Stevenson is keen to draw the parallel between the house in ‘Markheim’ and the broader ‘house of life’ that good fiction signifies.

As ‘Markheim’ testifies, then, reading can also be, for Stevenson, connected with the hallucinatory, and with the powerful force of certain images. Writing in ‘A Gossip on Romance’, an article published in November 1882, he argued:

\begin{quote}
In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book, be rapt clean out of ourselves and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or of continuous thought. The words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward in our ears
\end{quote}

\(^{39}\) Egan, “‘Markheim’: A Drama of Moral Psychology’, p. 380.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 381.
like the noise of breakers, and the story, if it be a story, repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye. It was for this last pleasure that we read so closely, and loved our books so dearly, in the bright, troubled period of boyhood.\footnote{Stevenson, ‘A Gossip on Romance’, in The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, 25 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1911), 9, p. 134.}

Romance, the genre championed by Stevenson’s fellow Scotsman Andrew Lang, perhaps appealed to Stevenson because it turned away from the world of realism and instead presented a world infinitely more exciting and appealing than the real one. The word Stevenson uses for this phenomenon is instructive. In November 1884, he published another essay in Longman’s Magazine titled ‘A Humble Remonstrance’, which responds to some of Henry James’s ideas expressed earlier that year in ‘The Art of Fiction’. Fiction should not, Stevenson argues, attempt to represent real life; reality is too complex to be captured in any meaningful sense in a novel. Instead, he maintains, ‘Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. The arts, like arithmetic and geometry, turn away their eyes from the gross, coloured and mobile nature at our feet, and regard instead a certain figmentary abstraction.’\footnote{Stevenson, ‘A Humble Remonstrance’, in Works, 9, p. 152.} The word ‘certain’ here is playing around its potential for two almost oppositional meanings, caught between the senses ‘determined, unfailing’ and ‘some particular’. Mathematics is founded upon the certain (determined, sure, correct, unfailing), while art is grounded in both specificity and wilful generality, in (to borrow T. S. Eliot’s phrase) ‘certain certainties’.\footnote{T. S. Eliot, ‘Preludes’, in Collected Poems, p. 24.} As Northrop Frye has proposed, ‘Literature, like mathematics, is a language, and a language in itself represents no truth, though it may provide the means for expressing any number of them. But poets and critics have always believed in some kind of imaginative truth, and perhaps the justification for the belief is in the containment by the language of what it can express.’\footnote{Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957), with a Foreword by Harold Bloom (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 354.} Stevenson’s word ‘figmentary’ is itself a prime example of this. We all think we’ve heard it before, think we know what a word like ‘figmentary’ means, but that’s only because of the more solid noun ‘figment’ from
which the adjective is derived—an adjective which, the OED tells us, is ‘rare.’ Indeed, so rare is it that the OED can find only one example of the word with which to illustrate its meaning, from ‘T. Gift’ writing in 1887: ‘The same girl who had been wont to start from shadows the most figmentary.’ So rare, indeed, that Stevenson’s use of it, from a full three years before the 1887 OED citation, seems to have slipped the dictionary by; that most shadowy of figures, the word ‘figmentary’ is bound up with the ghost and the issue of the ghostly from even before its official entry into the language.45

It is not just that the arts turn away from ‘the gross, coloured and mobile nature at our feet’; it is that they, like mathematics, are about exactitudes. There is a science of literature, a science of sounds and the effects sounds produce. This is something Stevenson set about to explain when he wrote that ‘literature alone is condemned to work in mosaic with finite and quite rigid words.’46 Consider these famous lines from Antony and Cleopatra:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne  
Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold,  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were lovesick with them.47

T. S. Eliot may have been drawn to these lines for other reasons, but they appealed to Stevenson as constituting a ‘passage exceptional in Shakespeare—exceptional, indeed, in literature’.48 The sounds of ‘barge’, ‘in’, ‘burnished’, ‘burned’, and ‘beaten’, plus the assonance of ‘poop’, ‘purple’, and ‘perfumed’, struck him particularly ‘because this change from P to F is the completion of that from B to P,

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45 The word would be picked up, fittingly enough, by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (the writer who completed Stevenson’s novel St Ives after his death) in 1920, and used again, fittingly enough, in relation to not only literature but also hallucination: ‘There is in fact, Gentlemen, no such thing as “mere literature.” Pedants have coined that contemptuous term to express a figmentary concept of their own imagination or—to be more accurate, an hallucination of wrath’. See Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, On the Art of Reading (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), pp. 143-4.
already so adroitly carried out. Indeed, the whole passage is a monument of curious ingenuity; and it seems scarce worth while to indicate the subsidiary S, L and W."\(^{49}\) Machen was wryly dismissive of this technique of analysing literary language, referring to ‘the amusing Stevensonian method of counting the “l”s” and estimating the value of medial “s”s” and the terrifiying effect of the final reiterated “r”.\(^{50}\) But there is a little more to Stevenson’s outlining of his theory than this; and, indeed, more to it than Machen can provide to his literary theory of ‘Ecstasy’, which, in the 1902 work *Hieroglyphics*, he defines as the quality that defines ‘fine literature’.\(^{51}\)

This knowledge of the sounds of language helps to make ‘Markheim’ a more effective story, because so much of its effect depends on the representation of the sounds which Markheim is himself hearing, whether he is actually experiencing real noises or merely suffering aural hallucinations. Again, for Stevenson, this is a Shakespearean effect. ‘The effect of words in Shakespeare,’ writes Stevenson, ‘their singular justice, significance, and poetic charm, is different, indeed, from the effect of words in Addison or Fielding.’\(^{52}\) And yet prose could be made to produce similar sound-effects. The writer’s ‘pattern, which is to please the supersensual ear, is yet addressed, throughout and first of all, to the demands of logic’: The genius of prose rejects the *cheville* no less emphatically than the laws of verse; and the *cheville*, I should perhaps explain to some of my readers, is any meaningless or very watered phrase employed to strike a balance in the sound. Pattern and argument live in each other; and it is by the brevity, clearness, charm, or emphasis of the second, that we judge the strength and fitness of the first.\(^{53}\)

The *cheville*: from the French for a pin or plug. Stevenson had good cause for explaining the word’s meaning to his readers: it had first been used in its English sense (according to the *OED*) in 1883, just two years before Stevenson was writing.\(^{54}\)
Not only this, but, as he goes on to write: ‘The beauty of the contents of a phrase, or of a sentence, depends implicitly upon alliteration and upon assonance. The vowel demands to be repeated; the consonant demands to be repeated; and both cry aloud to be perpetually varied.’ That is good prose itself, the way ‘repeated’ is used twice at the end of two successive clauses, only to be varied at the end of the third clause with a shift to that very word, ‘varied’. Good prose, therefore, is about a successful combination of sound and sense, and is similar (though not identical) to what Robert Frost would later call ‘the sound of sense’. Both must be present, Stevenson maintained, in good prose, and there must be no filler, no meaningless phrase. In ‘Markheim’ this theory was put into practice: despite the story’s long descriptions, every image and sound described earns its place, through working effectively with the other images by which it is surrounded.

Stevenson was writing his essay ‘On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature’ around the time he was also writing ‘Markheim’; the essay appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in April 1885. The one appearance of the word ‘hallucination’ in the story gestures towards Stevenson’s theory of the ‘pattern’ or ‘mosaic’ of language. The word ‘hallucination’ appears, then disappears, and only reappears as a spectral figure, an undercurrent to the story, suggested though never re-stated or fully reinstated, but present in truly spectral form in the arrival of the visitant. But the explicit statement of ‘hallucination’ precedes this moment. We find the title character’s hallucinatory experience mirrored in the language of the story: ‘But he was now so pulled about by different alarms that, while one portion of his mind was still alert and cunning, another trembled on the brink of lunacy. One hallucination in particular took a strong hold on his credulity’ (p. 89). As the sounds of ‘lunacy’ and ‘One’ disperse and then reform in the loosening of ‘hallucination’, our reading of the story becomes a strange and unsettling ordeal of reading on the edge, on the brink of our consciousness, much as the subtle rhyme of ‘lunacy’ and ‘credulity’ balance one against the other, echoing Markheim’s reluctance to believe his own eyes or mind. To be ‘on the brink of lunacy’, on ‘the verge of madness’: he is always on the threshold,

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the ‘brink’ or ‘verge’ of losing his mind. There is a sense of psychological transformation—even at an unconscious level—that words, phrases, and even whole narratives exert on us in the act of reading.

In one manuscript draft of the visionary moment in *Jekyll and Hyde* when Mr Utterson ‘sees’ things, Stevenson himself sees things:

Or else he would see a room in a rich house, where his friend lay asleep, dreaming and smiling at his dreams; and then the door of that room would be opened, the curtains of the bed plucked apart, the sleeper recalled, and lo! there would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour of the night, he must rise and do its bidding. The figure in these two faces haunted the lawyer all night; and if at any time he dozed over, it was but to see it glide more stealthily through sleeping houses, or move the more swiftly, and still the more swiftly, even to dizziness, through wider labyrinths of lamplighted city, and at any street corner, crush a child and leave her screaming.57

G. K. Chesterton praised Stevenson for his ability ‘to pick the right word up on the point of his pen’,58 but this excerpt from the manuscript draft of *Jekyll and Hyde* reveals an instance when Stevenson’s pen managed to pick up the wrong word, as his mind sees ‘faces’ where the near-homophonic ‘phases’ is intended. Such a careless error highlights the headlong nature of the passage, but also Stevenson’s abnormal sensitivity to words and the sounds of words, the ‘pattern of sounds’ of which he had written in ‘On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature’.59 After all, ‘faces’, given the context, is not inappropriate, and cannot be said to be any casual slip caused merely by the accidental similarity in sound between ‘faces’ and ‘phases’. Rather, ‘faces’ serves as a semantic echo of the ‘figure’ itself which Utterson dreamily sees appearing over his bed, plucking the curtains apart like the ‘phantasm of a dead

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person’ which Andrew Lang discusses as being able to ‘draw the bed-curtains’. And all this is to fail to mention the breakneck speed at which Stevenson wrote the novella; he is believed to have written the first draft in just three days.

Arthur Machen may have lamented that *Jekyll and Hyde* was written in ‘a thoroughly conscious style, and in literature all the highest things are unconsciously, or at least subconsciously produced’, but this faces/phases example from the manuscript shows that Stevenson’s unconscious was at least doing part of the work. Such might be the experience of reading ‘Markheim’: the experience of being both inside and outside one’s own mind, both inside and outside the narrative and language, undergoing the familiar act of reading but on unfamiliar terms. Stevenson’s obsessive study of the effects of consonantal sounds highlights this, as does his use of imaginary doubles elsewhere in his fiction, so it seems more natural to us that Markheim should see a double of himself following his crime. In the poem ‘My Shadow’, from *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885), Stevenson offers a nursery version of Markheim’s experience:

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,  
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.  
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;  
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

This notion of the child’s playmate as a ‘shadow’ is apt to shade all too easily into a ghostly double, as another poem from the volume, ‘The Unseen Playmate’, demonstrates. But of course Stevenson is also working in an established tradition of Scots literature, with a strong Calvinist past as demonstrated by James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). ‘My Shadow’ is ‘Markheim’ before the Fall, but Stevenson’s Calvinist upbringing may well suggest that, because of Original Sin, the child who imagines their ‘shadow’ playing with

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61 See Luckhurst’s introduction to his edition of *Jekyll and Hyde*, p. xi.
64 Ibid., pp. 81-2.
them is already destined to become the man who kills the shopkeeper and summons his own hallucinatory double. Here Hogg’s work is particularly interesting: it features a double of the protagonist which appears to him and tells him that, since he is predestined for salvation, he can commit whatever immoral acts or crimes that he wishes, hence ‘justified sinner’. This is one reason why critics have been keen to interpret the visitant of ‘Markheim’ as the distributor of divine justice. But Markheim is not so much a justified sinner as an ‘unwilling sinner’ (p. 95). Peter Penzoldt, for instance, in the midst of his discussion of ‘The Ghost Story with a Moral’, writes that ‘Markheim’ is ‘by far the best ghost story with a moral ever written’:

The final revelation that the tempter was not Satan, but God, or at least an Angel, is reminiscent of the ghosts in ‘A Christmas Carol’ who come to teach and regenerate rather than to punish. But Stevenson comes closer to a true supernatural atmosphere, and the reader passes more easily from the feeling of terror to that of awe than he does with Dickens in whose stories neither emotion is allowed to reach its height.65

However, there is more at work in the story than a phrase like ‘true supernatural atmosphere’ might suggest. Penzoldt’s ‘final revelation’ is not as revealing as he might want us to believe:

The features of the visitor began to undergo a wonderful and lovely change: they brightened and softened with a tender triumph, and, even as they brightened, faded and dislimned. But Markheim did not pause to watch or understand the transformation. He opened the door and went downstairs very slowly, thinking to himself. His past went soberly before him; he beheld it as it was, ugly and strenuous like a dream, random as chance-medley—a scene of defeat. (p. 99)

This does not prove that Markheim’s visitant was divinely sent, any more than Markheim’s past going ‘soberly before him’ proves that he is literally witnessing a vision of his past, much as people who have near-death experiences report a supernatural vision of their life flashing before them. Perhaps he is hallucinating at this point; given the earlier ‘hallucination’ of the ‘white face’ at the window, and the

other aural and visual hallucinations Markheim appears to experience, it would be tempting to think so. But it is no more, perhaps, than ‘horrible surmise’. Indeed, Stevenson’s religious belief (or unbelief) was a cause of constant worry to him. Claire Harman describes how, when Stevenson was in his early twenties, his father ‘decided to challenge his son with some straight questions about his beliefs’; Stevenson answered frankly ‘that he no longer believed in the established Church or the Christian religion.’ This news, Harman explains, was ‘a thunderbolt to the bewildered parents, to whom confirmation of Louis’s atheism was of course much more than a devastating personal rebuke or act of filial aggression; to believers like them, it meant the eternal damnation of their only child’s soul, and the possible contamination of other souls.’

Yet Stevenson’s religious upbringing may well have coloured the fiction he would write as an adult, and this seems to be why Penzoldt is so certain that ‘Markheim’ is a moral or religious fable:

Thus the story deliberately excludes the possibility of any kind of moral regeneration in life. The devil, who eventually proves to be God, does everything to convince Markheim that his case is hopeless. Critics have often pointed out the conflict between Stevenson’s nature and his puritan background. The god of ‘Markheim’ represents the vengeful character of the perverted puritan deity, which tradition exhorted Stevenson to worship. It is obviously not a god corresponding with the author’s own generous nature.

This is too matter-of-fact to be a matter of fact: Penzoldt can no more ‘prove’ that the visitant is God than man can categorically prove the existence of God in general. Just because Stevenson may have been ‘exhorted […] to worship’ a puritan idea of God does not mean that he here makes the visitant the embodiment of such a deity. Indeed, the points at which God is mentioned in the lead-up to the visitant’s appearance seem rather to go against Penzoldt’s idea:

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66 Harman, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 79.
67 Ibid.
68 Penzoldt, Supernatural in Fiction, p. 107.
The like might befall Markheim: the solid walls might become transparent and reveal his doings like those of bees in a glass hive; the stout planks might yield under his foot like quicksands and detain him in their clutch; ay, and there were soberer accidents that might destroy him; if, for instance, the house should fall and imprison him beside the body of his victim; or the house next door should fly on fire, and the firemen invade him from all sides. These things he feared; and, in a sense, these things might be called the hands of God reached forth against sin. But about God himself he was at ease; his act was doubtless exceptional, but so were his excuses, which God knew; it was there, and not among men, that he felt sure of justice. (p. 93)

These are all absurd prospects, even the ‘soberer accidents’ he describes; but they are meant to be absurd. They show just how heightened is Markheim’s imagination following the murder: he imagines a multitude of possibilities, none of them at all probable. Why should the house fall and imprison him beside his victim? Because God might decree it. And yet nothing so dramatic happens. That final twinge of hubris on Markheim’s part, where he is described as being ‘at ease’ about God, is supposed to set us up for the moment when justice appears in the form of the visitant. And yet if this is so, Markheim’s mistaken confidence is in man, not God; and so the appearance of the visitant can be said to represent man’s arrival on the scene to dispense justice to the criminal, not God’s.

If this is so, and Markheim’s misplaced arrogance and belief that only God can judge him is mentioned so as to foreshadow the arrival of the double, then the idea of the visitant representing man makes more sense than if it were said to represent God. If Markheim had been rational and had left the scene of the murder straight after the crime, instead of being tempted by the prospect of money, then his conscience would not have pricked him and he would not have been betrayed to the police by the very man he should have been able to rely on most: himself. In staying, he condemns himself to self-betrayal. The moment just before the visitor’s arrival is charged with significance: ‘A flash of ice, a flash of fire, a bursting gush of blood, went over him, and then he stood transfixed and thrilling. A step mounted the stair slowly and steadily, and presently a hand was laid upon the knob, and the lock clicked, and the door opened’ (p. 94). This is the step of the visitant, mounting the stair to come and reveal himself to Markheim. It echoes the earlier mentions of the
sound of footsteps, the ‘Footsteps and sighs’ (p. 92) that Markheim had heard, the ‘tread of regiments marching in the distance’ (p. 92), and ‘a stir of delicate footing’ that seemed to indicate ‘some presence’ (p. 90). None of these rules out the possibility of the visitant being a divine intervener; but what they certainly do achieve is the suggestion that the visitant might after all, like the sound of the ‘tread of regiments’, be instead the product of Markheim’s heightened imagination, and his growing sense of conscience over his terrible crime.

The visitant, like William Wilson’s double before him, is similar to Markheim without being identical. This is an important distinction:

Markheim stood and gazed at him with all his eyes. Perhaps there was a film upon his sight, but the outlines of the new-comer seemed to change and waver like those of the idols in the wavering candle-light of the shop; and at times he thought he knew him; and at times he thought he bore a likeness to himself; and always, like a lump of living terror, there lay in his bosom the conviction that this thing was not of the earth and not of God.

And yet the creature had a strange air of the commonplace, as he stood looking on Markheim with a smile; and when he added: ‘You are looking for the money, I believe?’ it was in the tones of every-day politeness. (p. 94)

This passage tells us a lot about the ‘creature’—the use of which word summons up recollections of Victor Frankenstein’s alter ego from Mary Shelley’s novel. This ‘creature’, it seems to Markheim, is ‘not of the earth and not of God’, and yet ‘had a strange air of the commonplace’. This description hides the third possibility, namely that something that is neither of spiritual nor earthly origin might come from that commonest of places, the human mind. Indeed, the very first words this visitant speaks to him are uttered ‘in the tones of every-day politeness’. This unearthly and ungodly visitor is yet suggestive of what is ‘commonplace’ and ‘every-day’, and in this sense conforms to Freud’s idea of the uncanny: we might here recall Freud’s assertion that ‘an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced’.69 This effacement of the ‘distinction’ between what is real and what is merely constructed within the mind is a matter of the

threshold. That is to say, as the original German title of Freud’s essay makes clear, it
is a matter of the ‘unhomely’, heim being German for ‘home’. This is of importance
to Stevenson’s story because, as Irving Saposnik points out, Markheim’s name may
be translated as ‘bounds of home (Mark-Heim)’ and is of German origin. Thus his
very name is a threshold of sorts, not just the boundary or ‘mark’ but also the
threshold between languages, English and German.

Namings

The visitant, of course, is nameless. He is merely the ‘creature’, ‘visitant’, or ‘thing’.
Names appear to have been hugely important to the writer who gave us Captain Flint,
Long John Silver, and, of course, Jekyll and Hyde. This sense of the importance of
names takes on a heightened level of significance in ‘Markheim’, where the title of
the story is not merely also the name of one of the story’s characters, but indeed the
name of the only character to be named. This is something which Stevenson was fond
of doing: a year later he would give the world a novella titled Strange Case of Dr
Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and one of the most obvious things about that title is also the one
thing modern readers are most likely to overlook: namely that the title arouses
expectations of there being two separate people at the centre of the story, rather
than—and here’s the rub—merely one person who has divided into two parts.

‘Markheim’ is not merely about Markheim; to an extent, ‘Markheim’ is
Markheim, the story being so intensely focused on that character’s internal thoughts
and emotions as to render the narrative and the narrated one and the same. But we
should be wary of any casual labelling of the story as ‘uncanny’, simply because, as
Freud acknowledged, genuine cases of the uncanny are rare. Take the clock, for
instance. Time, in ‘Markheim’, takes on a semi-humanised form, much as the mirror
does at the start. ‘Time had some score of small voices in that shop’ (p. 87), we read.

70 Saposnik, ‘Stevenson’s “Markheim”: A Fictional “Christmas Sermon”’, p. 281. Roger Luckhurst has
pointed out the German origins of ‘mark’ in addition to the modern English meaning of mark as
‘boundary’: ‘in German, Mark has meanings that include “medulla”, “bone”, or “essence” and Heim
means “home”. Some critics have suggested the name might be translated roughly as “seat of the
soul”.’ See Jekyll and Hyde, p. 194 n.
Time, from the beginning, has ‘voices’. This will be picked up again shortly afterwards, the metaphor negotiated this time by way of a pun on ‘tongue’ (as in both a human tongue that produces voices and the tongue of a bell that produces the sound) when we are told that ‘the clocks began to strike the hour’: ‘The sudden outbreak of so many tongues in that dumb chamber staggered him’ (p. 88). The implication, suggested indirectly through the figurative language, is that there are voices or ‘tongues’ in his head, in the ‘dumb chamber’ of his mind. This also raises the possibility of aural hallucination: the dripping tap which engenders the tune in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is a similar case in point.

‘The ticking of many clocks among the curious lumber of the shop’ (p. 86) gives way to an interior, psychological striking or marking of time: “‘Time was that when the brains were out,” he thought; and the first word struck into his mind. Time, now that the deed was accomplished—time, which had closed for the victim, had become instant and momentous for the slayer’ (p. 88). Ann Gossman has written that Markheim ‘confronts, like Macbeth, a world of images to be read in terms of his own guilt, and apparitions that dramatize his spiritual position’,71 and we are encouraged to read this parallel through the slight misquotation from Macbeth (‘the time has been, / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end’).72 These lines blend and distort in Markheim’s mind with the sound of the clocks ticking, and the two conceptions of ‘time’, one verbal and one non-verbal, combine to cause an obsessive panic about time. It is an apt quotation (or misquotation) not just because of the parallels between Macbeth and Markheim, namely the fact that they both murder someone and start to feel the pricking of their conscience after the event; rather, the quotation is appropriate in the context of Stevenson’s story for the idea of there being a time ‘when the brains were out’. In a story so inwardly focused on the interior furniture and workings of a man’s mind, ‘the brains were out’ rings as oddly ironic, this double meaning sounding below the quotation, threatening our own brains in the act of reading. Similarly, the grim pun on ‘momentous’, combining the temporal and physical senses of ‘moment’ (as in moments of time but also

71 Gossman, ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in “Markheim”’, p. 74.
momentum, from the Latin movimentum, ultimately from movere, ‘move’), highlights the strange blurring of the threshold of thought and action, Markheim’s terrible realisation of the effect his murderous act has had on his experience of time.

For Henry James, Jekyll and Hyde was ‘like the late afternoon light of a foggy winter Sunday, when even inanimate objects have a kind of wicked look.’ Indeed, the afternoon setting is key to the novella, but also to its sister-story, ‘Markheim’. After his crime, Markheim seems to lose all concept of time, as his mind becomes preoccupied with strange visions and hallucinations. All this happens, we are told, as ‘the clocks began to strike the hour of three in the afternoon’ (p. 88). Placing the story’s events symbolically at three o’clock in the afternoon in December lends the play of light and shadow in the story an edge; it is not night, but darkness will overtake the world soon. In the meantime, there is an ‘inner door’ which stands ajar, and ‘peered into that leaguer of shadows with a long slit of daylight like a pointing finger’ (p. 88). The ticking of the clocks, repeatedly referred to, is also significant because its regular metronomic sound, like the beating of the tell-tale heart in Poe’s story, hovers on the brink of aural hallucination, like the sounds that are produced out of the beating of the rain on the shop’s windows. Egan writes:

The twenty-four steps to the first story of the pawnbroker’s dwelling, which we are told ‘were four-and-twenty agonies’ for Markheim, are suggestive of the twenty-four hours of the day and reinforce the time-movement motif of the story, which concentrates a lifetime of evil and guilt into minutes, as Markheim wanders alone in the dark passages of his own soul.

F. Scott Fitzgerald would later write that ‘in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning.’ For Markheim, it is three in the afternoon.

In November 1885, when Stevenson was busy completing a new story, ‘Olalla’, as well as correcting the proofs for Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and (presumably) the revised version of ‘Markheim’ ready for publication, he wrote to

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74 Egan, ‘‘Markheim’: A Drama of Moral Psychology’, p. 381.
Louisa Burgess that ‘I am just now literally off my head with work writing a story against time; and correcting the proofs of another’. Writing against time: both writing hurriedly to meet a deadline, and writing a story that is against time in the sense of opposing, attacking, or challenging time. Writing makes Stevenson ‘literally off my head’. Time, such a factor in the writing of both ‘Markheim’ and *Jekyll and Hyde*, plays an important role in ‘Markheim’ in other ways. Markheim, we are told, ‘was tempted to stop the clocks’ (p. 89); ‘the chambers of the house were haunted by an incessant echoing, which filled the ear and mingled with the ticking of the clocks’ (pp. 91-2). One of the most revealing references to clocks, and a desire to stop the clocks, occurs in a simile: musing upon the dead body of the dealer who had until recently been living, Markheim realises that ‘by his act, that piece of life had been arrested, as the horologist, with interjected finger, arrests the beating of the clock’ (p. 91). This sense of ‘arrest’ prefigures the ending of the story, the very last words, when a reformed and contrite Markheim confesses his crime to the maid and so brings about the precipitation of his own arrest: “You had better go for the police,” said he: “I have killed your master” (p. 100).

The word ‘arrest’ seeks to capture and encapsulate the sense of retribution which is at the heart of the story, while also hinting at other meanings. The word ‘arrest’ and the notion of arresting preoccupies and threatens to arrest the narrative of ‘Markheim’: ‘the hand of the constable would fall heavy on his shoulder, and his nerves would jerk like a hooked fish; or he beheld, in galloping defile, the dock, the prison, the gallows, and the black coffin’ (p. 89). Or the ‘hallucination’ which ‘took a strong hold on his credulity’:

The neighbour hearkening with white face beside his window, the passer-by arrested by a horrible surmise on the pavement—these could at worst suspect, they could not know; through the brick walls and shuttered windows only sounds could penetrate. (p. 89)

Such moments arrest our attention because they prime us for the moment when Markheim’s crime will be found out, and when justice and retribution will fall on his

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shoulder like the constable’s hand. We know it will happen: it is undoubtedly one reason why critics have viewed the story as a fable featuring a visitant who delivers divine justice upon Markheim. But, as I have endeavoured to show, this precludes another, more likely interpretation: that it is Markheim himself, and his own conscience, which condemns him. Talk of God lets the story off the hook. To read the hallucination as the central image of the whole story is to show how everything else feeds into this central idea: the notion of hearing things, inspired by the clocks and the sound of the rain, feeding into the footsteps of the approaching visitant; and the hallucination of the neighbour with the white face, foreshadowing the arrival of the double.

‘It has music,’ wrote Machen of *Jekyll and Hyde*, ‘but it has no undermusic, and there are no phrases in it that seem veils of dreams, echoes of the “inexpressive song.”’ Music, however, does matter to Stevenson, and especially to Markheim:

> A bar of that day’s music returned upon his memory; and at that, for the first time, a qualm came over him, a breath of nausea, a sudden weakness of the joints, which he must instantly resist and conquer. (p. 91)

As Joseph J. Egan has noted, ‘It is important to see that the better self appears at precisely the moment that Markheim hears “the music of a hymn, and the voices of many children” from “the other side” of the partition and begins to think back on past moments of goodness.’ Markheim’s sensitive ear, which picks up on the sounds of the rain and the clocks and transforms them into something else, thus takes the sound of the hymns being sung as the prompt for the awakening of his conscience. But music would play an even more important part in the creation of a hallucinatory effect in the writings of other authors.

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77 Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 72.
78 Egan, “‘Markheim’: A Drama of Moral Psychology”, p. 382.
‘...genuine ghosts...’

Vernon Lee’s writing haunts itself. ‘A Wicked Voice’ was originally published in French under the title ‘Voix maudite’ in *Les lettres et les arts* in August 1887, and later translated into English by Lee and included in her 1890 volume *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*. Years later, Lee claimed that she disliked the story, preferring instead an earlier version of the tale called ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’, which had been published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1881.¹ However, as Catherine Maxwell has noted, Lee did acknowledge that ‘in terms of craftsmanship and polish, “A Wicked Voice” was by far the superior production, being, as [Lee] candidly admitted, “quite perfect in plot and lovely in single episodes and background”’.² Maxwell also points out that, in this story, ‘the voice is evidently linked to sexual temptation, which overpowers the intellect and bypasses the soul, addressing itself solely to desire.’³ Like the mysterious ‘phantasmagoria’ that bewitches Lucian Taylor in *The Hill of Dreams* and the musical notes of the ‘Beckoning Fair’ that enthrals Paul Oleron in Onions’s story, the ‘wicked voice’ that possesses Magnus, Lee’s protagonist, is ‘supernatural’ and yet natural, sexual and yet pure, a product of the atmosphere and yet also, somehow, a product of the mind.

Lee is an interesting figure, at once concealed behind her androgynous pseudonym, her real name Violet Paget relegated to parentheses in most biographies of her. She was, as Roger Luckhurst points out, ‘fairly contemptuous of the vulgar pleasures of Gothic and supernatural fiction’, and ‘dismissed psychical research as ruinous to supernatural mystery.’⁴ In her preface to *Hauntings*, she wrote: ‘That is the thing—the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated.

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 970.
by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from.¹⁵ Unlike Stevenson, who had a keen interest in psychical research and developments in psychology, Lee seems to have been less interested in creating ambiguity about the origins or causes of the ghostly apparitions, and more about using hallucination as a means of contrast, as, if you like, the ‘Other’. It would really not be going too far to state that hallucination, particularly in ‘A Wicked Voice’, works through its absence, through the ways in which Lee’s language serves to set her story apart from her contemporaries, many of whom were influenced by Phantasms of the Living and the SPR. Lee would also write in the preface to Hauntings that ‘my four little tales are of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; they tell of no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research, of no specters that can be caught in definite places and made to dictate judicial evidence.’⁶ Genuine, but not genuinely scientific: this is the essence of Lee’s inessential ghosts.

‘A Wicked Voice’ is the story of a nineteenth-century Norwegian composer, Magnus, a follower of Wagner who has travelled to Venice to compose his opera, Ogier the Dane. He learns of an eighteenth-century castrato singer, Balthasar Cesari, known as ‘Zaffirino’; a fellow lodger at the boarding-house where he is staying, Count Alvise, shows him an engraving of the singer and tells him that his great-aunt had become obsessed by, and was eventually killed by, the haunting voice of the castrato. Magnus himself soon becomes obsessed by the singer as well, and begins to ‘hear’ the voice of Zaffirino, until he is unable to compose his own Wagnerian work and is instead seeking to replicate the sound of the castrato’s voice. He leaves Venice and goes to stay with the Count at his palace, in the very room where the Count’s great-aunt had died from hearing the voice. The story ends with Magnus still haunted by this powerful singing voice, though now unable actually to hear it, exclaiming, ‘O wicked, wicked voice, violin of flesh and blood made by the Evil One’s hand, may I

¹⁵ Cited in Luckhurst, ibid.
not even execrate thee in peace [...] May I not hear one note, only one note of thine, O singer, O wicked and contemptible wretch?\(^7\)

Hallucination is never mentioned in ‘A Wicked Voice’. This is important given the essential proto-text or precursor to the story, namely ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’, which was published in 1881. As the protagonist of that story, Julian Winthrop, confides: ‘The consequence naturally was that, as the impression of the adventure grew fainter, I began to doubt whether it had not been all a delusion, a nightmare phantasm, due to over-excitement and fever, due to the morbid, vague desire for something strange and supernatural.’\(^8\) ‘Fever’ is an important word for ‘A Wicked Voice’, too. Furthermore, the appearance of the word ‘hallucination’ in ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’ highlights this idea of the supernatural by absenting it from the narrative: ‘Little by little I settled down in this idea, regarding the whole story as an hallucination.’\(^9\) That brief glint of self-awareness, ‘the whole story’, is a nice touch. The phrase is used, of course, of something that is not a story, but is a real-life event which we want to suggest is exciting or incredible enough to be like a fiction; but here, occurring in a story as it does, the phrase reminds us of how playful Lee can be. This gestures towards the idea of the ‘true ghost story’, as the OED and Kipling had it in the opening chapter—the idea that ‘ghost stories’ can be either fictional or real-life. ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’ is widely regarded as a precursor-text to ‘A Wicked Voice’, and the similarities are obvious. Like the later story, ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’ relates how an ‘artist’ (a painter in this case, as opposed to a composer) becomes haunted by the voice of an eighteenth-century singer; in neither story is the word ‘castrato’ used, but the implication is there. In both stories, a portrait of the singer in question is also an important factor: both Julian Winthrop and Magnus see a painting of the castrato before they start to become haunted by the singer’s voice.

Winthrop himself decides, upon telling the story, that it was all a hallucination. This is also what happens in ‘Amour Dure’, a story published in Hauntings alongside ‘A Wicked Voice’. ‘Could it have been all a hallucination or a

\(^7\) Vernon Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’, in Hauntings, pp. 154-81 (p. 181). Subsequent references to this story will be given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.


\(^9\) Ibid.
dream—perhaps a dream dreamed that night?’ Or, ‘A hallucination? Why, I saw her, as I see this paper that I write upon’.10 But ‘A Wicked Voice’ contains no mention of the word ‘hallucination’, nor does it attempt to suggest hallucination as a cause of the protagonist’s experiences. It is a departure from these other stories, then, but it is nevertheless a hallucinatory one; Lee is simply more sophisticated in this story in her suspending of an answer to the question as to whether the voice is a ghost, or some form of illusion. The word ‘hallucination’ is used sparingly in Lee’s supernatural stories, but then so is ‘ghost’: in the whole volume of Hauntings, ‘ghost’ or ‘ghosts’ appears only a dozen times, with the related word, ‘phantom’, appearing only once (in the subtitle to ‘Oke of Okehurst’, ‘The Phantom Lover’). ‘Phantasm’, Gurney’s word of choice, never appears. These statistics reveal how far Lee wishes to rely on suggestion in her stories, shying away from the received idea of the ‘ghost story’ and even the idea of the ‘ghost’.

‘Oke of Okehurst’ contains the most sustained appeal to rationalism by one of its characters. The narrator seeks to assure the Okes that their house is not haunted by the supernatural:

I poured out volumes of psychological explanations. I dissected Mrs. Oke’s character twenty times over, and tried to show him that there was nothing at the bottom of his suspicions beyond an imaginative pose and a garden-play on the brain. I adduced twenty instances, mostly invented for the nonce, of ladies of my acquaintance who had suffered from similar fads. I pointed out to him that his wife ought to have an outlet for her imaginative and theatrical over-energy. [...] I laughed at the notion of there being any hidden individual about the house. I explained to Oke that he was suffering from delusions, and called upon so conscientious and religious a man to take every step to rid himself of them, adding innumerable examples of people who had cured themselves of seeing visions and of brooding over morbid visions.11

But such a heavy-handed and heavy-worded dismissal of the supernatural is clearly not something Lee is inviting the reader to share. The narrator’s hypocrisy leaks out in his admission that he invented most of the ‘instances’ of delusion which he cites to

bolster his argument, and in his casual sidelining of Oke’s wife in favour of addressing his remarks to the husband, as if Mrs Oke is merely a hysterical woman (‘I pointed out to him that his wife’). We should be wary of accepting such rationalist certainties, as the tone of the narrator’s righteousness makes clear. So it is with the whole of Hauntings.

The volume Hauntings contained ‘A Wicked Voice’ and three other tales which concerned the supernatural in some way: ‘Amour Dure’, ‘Dionea’, and ‘Oke of Okehurst’. Here ‘supernatural’ requires some qualification: Lee herself wrote in the preface to the volume that her ghosts ‘are what you call spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones), of whom I can affirm only one thing, that they haunted certain brains, and have haunted, among others, my own and my friends’.

Peter Gunn has glossed this: ‘They were not such [ghosts] as would interest her friend Edmund Gurney and his Society for Psychical Research, being unlike those experiences considered worthy of “scientific” investigation; nor are they what are usually known as ghost stories.’ The problem of categorisation returns. For while such a title as Hauntings would appear to settle the matter, a glance at the Oxford English Dictionary reveals quite another story (as it were), since ‘haunt’ can refer to ‘imaginary or spiritual beings, ghosts, etc.’ and mean ‘to visit frequently and habitually with manifestations of their [that is, these beings’] influence and presence’. Imaginary or spiritual: one can be haunted by a ghost or one can be haunted by some imaginary phantasm, one conjured up by the mind.

Lee’s subtitle is not much more helpful. ‘Fantastic’ has been used to mean, variously, ‘existing only in imagination; proceeding merely from imagination; fabulous, imaginary, unreal’; ‘pertaining to, or of the nature of, a phantasm’; and (in more modern use) ‘of alleged reasons, fears, etc., perversely or irrationally imagined.’ While some of these senses are now obsolete and were rare in Lee’s lifetime, they all crowd around the central idea of the phantasm and the root from which that word is derived: the Greek meaning ‘to show’. For, more than any of the other stories

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13 Ibid.
included in *Hauntings*, ‘A Wicked Voice’ concerns a certain uncertainty about the idea of haunting, and what it means to haunt or be haunted.

For Christa Zorn, Lee’s subtitle, ‘fantastic stories’, works in a more or less Todorovian sense. ‘Comparable to some of the most prominent specimens of the decadent gothic, such as Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, John Meade Falkner’s *The Lost Stradivarius*, or Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw,*’ Zorn writes, ‘Lee’s fantastic stories range between the “uncanny” and the “marvelous” on Todorov’s scale’:

She uses the transgressive possibilities of the fantastic to visualize sensations and feelings normally hidden from the external world and even from our own consciousness. Fantastic moments occur, when the reader, or narrator, hesitates between a natural and a supernatural explanation. Such ‘moments of hesitation’ (Todorov) are often produced by the neurotic or overwrought minds of her narrators, obsessive writers and scholars as Lee herself surely was.¹⁴

Lee’s writing certainly fits in with James’s view of haunting, but it is not an exact fit: as I demonstrate in the next chapter, James’s ghost stories, especially ‘The Friends of the Friends’ and *The Turn of the Screw*, weave together an understanding of psychical research and a highly personalised view of the supernatural. To read ‘A Wicked Voice’ alongside the SPR journals would achieve nothing and not yield very much. One thing that Lee’s protagonists (such as Magnus) share with, for instance, James’s female narrator in ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is their unreliability: we are never sure whether they are in their right mind or not, as they often betray highly emotional and irrational characteristics. For Vorn, writers of the time had an ‘awareness of the unstable human psyche’ which ‘entered their texts in the form of an unreliable narrator’; similarly, the ‘self-reflections and obsessiveness’ of Lee’s narrators ‘create pathological patterns that have much in common with Browning’s dramatic monologues.’¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 142.
‘No genuine ghosts in the scientific sense’, ‘spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones)’: in Lee’s preface the word ‘genuine’ is used for both kinds of ghosts, the ones found in the pages of the SPR and the ones found haunting the characters of Lee’s tales. Her choice of words is intriguing because in saying that hers are ‘spurious ghosts’ and that these are, for her, ‘the only genuine ones’, she opens up a lexical paradox—‘genuine’ being defined by the *OED* (sense 3) as ‘really proceeding from its reputed source or author; not spurious’; and ‘spurious’, as if leaping to complement it, being defined (in sense 3) as ‘not true or genuine’. Spurious—according to me the only genuine ones: such language does not help her to clarify her stance. She deliberately problematises the polarity of such a pair as genuine-spurious in order to demonstrate the inadequacies of such terms to encapsulate her concept of the ‘ghost’. Elsewhere in the preface, she is hardly more helpful:

Altogether one quite agrees, having duly perused the collection of evidence on the subject, with the wisdom of these modern ghost-experts, when they affirm that you can always tell a genuine ghost-story, by the circumstances of its being about a nobody, its having no point or picturesqueness, and being, generally speaking, flat, stale, and unprofitable.16

This, like the whole preface in general, is a little too wry and flippant to be taken without the customary grain of salt; but it does display Lee’s impatience with Gurney and the SPR’s interest in the classification of supposed ghostly experiences. Indeed, ‘the collection of evidence on the subject’ is plainly a reference to *Phantasms of the Living*. The gentle teasing of ‘tell’ (meaning to discern or distinguish, but, given its context in the phrase ‘tell a genuine ghost-story’, carrying unmistakable suggestions of ‘narrate’ or ‘describe’) reveals just how deep this flippancy ran, as does the none-too-subtle allusion to *Hamlet* (‘How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable’).17 This Shakespearean nod also highlights how Lee, unlike the scientists and pseudo-

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17 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by T. J. B. Spencer with an introduction by Anne Barton (London: Penguin, 1980; repr. 1996), I.2.133. This Hamletian reference is also present in Lee’s prefatory letter to ‘Oke of Okehurst’, written in July 1886 to Count Peter Boutourline: ‘if, as I fear, the story of Mrs. Oke of Okehurst will strike you as stale and unprofitable’ (*Hauntings*, p. 105).
scientists of the SPR, wishes to claim the ‘vulgar’ ghost story for art, rather than for psychological dissection. But the allusion is also very deliberately made because *Hamlet* contains the kind of ghost in which she is interested: the kind that is not ‘genuine’ in a scientific sense. When she does make reference to *Hamlet*, she takes the opportunity to make another side-swipe at Gurney and the whole enterprise of the psychical method, by mentioning ‘the story of the murdered King of Denmark (murdered people, I am told, usually stay quiet, as a scientific fact)’. The biting force of ‘scientific’ could frighten ghosts at fifty paces.

All this would tend to give the impression that Lee’s stories deal with ghosts, not hallucinations. In a very simple sense, this is true. And yet, in another sense, this is not the whole truth, or even the beginning of the truth. (Again, choosing to subtitle her volume *Fantastic Stories*, rather than, say, ‘ghost stories’, is instructive here.) It is not so simple a matter that we can acknowledge her interest in the old-fashioned kind of ghost over the modern kind and leave it at that. In particular it is one passage in her preface that complicates things, when she writes of the ‘genuine ghosts’ (the word keeps returning to her preface, until it becomes genuinely unsettling):

They are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour (we all know it), musty and damp, but penetratingly sweet and intoxicatingly heady, which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning.

The genuine ghost? And is not this he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard …?  

This is not so distinct from Gurney’s ghosts as its writer would like; and while fictional ghosts created by us for the purposes of entertainment are separate from those ghosts which people ‘see’ and wrongly believe to be supernatural agencies,

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19 Ibid., p. 39.
both are creatures of the imagination. The out-and-out supernatural is here sidelined, perhaps even altogether rejected. Both Lee’s and Gurney’s ‘ghosts’, moreover, are ‘fragmentary vivid impressions’, since it is a significant fact with Gurney’s phantasms that many of them are vividly encountered (so much that the spectator believes them ‘real’) and yet only fragmentarily perceived (else they would be seen as what they usually are, namely tricks of the eye). The almost pathetically parenthetical ‘we all know it’ knows this, and knows it all too well. Lee is determined to get us on side. For Vineta Colby, the connections between Lee and Henry James run deeper than their strained and eventually estranged friendship:

Like Henry James, Vernon Lee was interested in the psychological rather than the psychic, not the ‘vulgar apparition’ but the ‘inner ghost … the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies’. While James found most of his ghosts in some element of himself, notably the aging bachelor who is haunted by the sense of having missed something in life … Vernon Lee’s stories of the supernatural owe their inspiration to history, mythology, and art.20

This is particularly true of ‘A Wicked Voice’ with its interest in the long musical history of Italy and the connotations that Venice immediately brings to mind.

At the root of ‘A Wicked Voice’ is the uncertainty of the voice, and to what extent it is external to Magnus’ own mind. Is he hearing things? Or, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, does it manifest itself to everyone at first, but thereafter is ‘revealed’ solely to Magnus? This uncertainty is expressed in a number of ways, but it is perhaps chiefly through the word ‘malady’ and the figure of disease.

‘…strangest of maladies…’

‘Malady’, of course, means disease. The OED defines it as ‘A specific kind of illness; an ailment, a disease.’ But there is also the figurative sense of the word: ‘The condition of mental, spiritual, or moral ill health (of an individual, of society or some

section of it, or of the human race); any such condition that calls for a remedy.’ So malady can denote both physical and moral ill-health; it can also specifically refer to mental ill-health. We are given several hints that the narrator, Magnus, may be of unsound mind. ‘Is it that horrible palpitation,’ he asks, referring to one of Zaffirino’s arias, ‘which is sending the blood to my brain and making me mad?’ (p. 162). But most of the time Lee prefers to hint at the possibility of madness, rather than have her narrator openly state it as fact. Indeed, the madness is first hinted at in a pun: an American etcher, Magnus tells us, has brought him an engraving of an eighteenth-century singer, ‘knowing me to be mad about eighteenth century music and musicians’ (p. 156). ‘Mad’ indeed; and, as it will turn out, maddened. ‘Puns’, on the whole, is too strong a word for what Lee is doing with language in ‘A Wicked Voice’; but she does tend to play upon the fine differences of meaning of certain words, such as ‘mad’. This is seen later in the story when ‘mad’ emerges in a more literal rather than idiomatic sense. ‘And I set to singing madly,’ Magnus tells us, ‘singing I don’t know what’ (p. 162); ‘I begin to laugh myself, madly, frantically, between the phrases of the melody, my voice finally smothered in this dull, brutal laughter’ (p. 163). ‘Madly’, with its musical chiming with ‘malady’, is a key word for ‘A Wicked Voice’, as it will be for Onions in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. Later in Lee’s story, we read of ‘an insane, insanely merry jumble of bellowing and barking, mewing and cackling and braying’ (p. 172). In addition to this, Magnus enters heightened imaginative and imaginary states even while not being ‘haunted’ by the ghost of Zaffirino: ‘The story of Ogier ran into a dream, as vivid as my waking thoughts had been vague. I was looking no longer at the pool of moonlight spreading round my couch, with its trickles of light and looming, waving shadows, but the frescoed walls of a great saloon’ (p. 164). Indeed, Ruth Robbins has remarked upon ‘the haunted madness’ of the protagonist of this story; ‘haunted’ here is not meant in a narrowly supernatural sense.21

Moreover, ‘malady’ was being used in discourse concerning hallucination and apparitions, as in Andrew Lang’s book on ghosts, *Cock Lane and Common-Sense*

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(1894). In a chapter on hallucinations, he outlined some of the previous work undertaken on the subject, and drew attention to ‘long lists of apparitions which are not spectres, or ghosts, but the results of madness, malady, drink, fanaticism, illusions and so on.’ Moreover, ‘the tendency of common-sense is to rank […] the wraith and ghost […] with all the other kinds, which are undeniably caused by accident, by malady, mental or bodily, or by mere confusion and apprehension, as when one, seeing a post in the moonlight, takes it for a ghost.’

‘For, after all, may I not recover from this strangest of maladies?’ (p. 155): thus asks the narrator with a twinge of desperation. We are back to the moon, the full moon, this night:

It was a breathless evening under the full moon, that implacable full moon beneath which, even more than beneath the dreamy splendour of noontide, Venice seemed to swelter in the midst of the waters, exhaling, like some great lily, mysterious influences, which make the brain swim and the heart faint—a moral malaria, distilled, as I thought, from those languishing melodies, those cooing vocalizations which I had found in the musty music books of a century ago. I see that moonlight evening as if it were present. (p. 156)

Although this is a ‘breathless evening’, Venice seems to be breathing out, ‘exhaling’ with a kind of ‘moral malaria”—malaria carrying within it not just the Italian air but the Italian for air, ‘aria’. Moreover, the melodious sound of ‘malaria’ threatens to catch those ‘melodies’ in the air, forming between them the very ‘maladies’ which form such a central part of the narrative of this story: ‘The most skilful physicians were kept unable to explain the mysterious malady which was visibly killing the poor young lady’ (p. 160); ‘it became necessary to see a doctor; from whom, however, I carefully hid away all the stranger symptoms of my malady’ (p. 171). Maladies, as the OED testifies, can refer to both physical and moral illness. Unlike The Picture of Dorian Gray—first published in 1890, the same year as Hauntings—this story is concerned not so much with ‘the malady of reverie’ as reverie about maladies; the

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22 Andrew Lang, Cock Lane and Common-Sense (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), p. 181.
23 Ibid., pp. 181-2.
accumulation of *mal-* words (malady, maladies, malaria, malignant) testifies to the evil or malicious atmosphere that is developing around the narrator.\(^{24}\)

It is fitting that the Venetian count’s aunt died while listening to a song named *L’Aria dei Mariti* (‘Husband’s Air’), performed by Zaffirino (p. 128), a song which, as Angela Leighton observes, ‘induces another, but equally mortal fever.’\(^{25}\) Carlo Caballero has written: ‘Is this “moral malaria” that strikes Magnus really no more than a fever? Such would be the clinical report of Magnus’s harrowing adventure at Mistrà. Indeed, his hosts there warn him of mosquitoes, of fevers caught in the garden at night. He ignores their warnings and opens his shutters to the night air.’\(^{26}\) Leighton also makes this air-malaria connection: ‘“Airs”, like “vapours” in this story, circulate maddeningly through several meanings, playing literal against metaphorical, ghosting their own common sense. The “air” of Venice is a miasmal, unhealthy atmosphere, and that sickliness becomes literal at Mistrà where … the “bad air” is etymologically a “mal-aria” which kills.’\(^{27}\) Fevers, too, are in the air: the young Count Alvise refers to ‘the fevers of this country’ (p. 176), to which the reply is, ‘Oh! you’ve got fever in this part of the world, have you? Why, your father said the air was so good!’ (p. 176). Oh, no: bad air, all right. ‘A Wicked Voice’ is shot through with such morbid language and feverish imagery. If ‘Markheim’ constitutes a weird sort of brain fever, then the fever of ‘A Wicked Voice’ is both psychological and physical, attacking body as well as mind.

This is the key point, though: Lee is not presenting Magnus’ hauntedness as being somehow caused by a fever, or, if she is, she is doing so retrospectively; all the references to fevers and malaria come well over three-quarters into the story. Before that, fevers are not mentioned; after that, talk of fevers abounds. By this point, of course, Magnus’ own ‘fever’ has already taken hold, and Leighton is right that the


\(^{27}\) Leighton, *On Form*, p. 121.
‘malaria’ only ‘becomes literal at Mistrà’. But it is more than this. Like Freud’s ‘antithetical sense of primal words’, these mal- words pull two ways, implying both supernatural evil and mental disease. The ‘moral malaria’ that infects the air of Venice takes hold of a very destructive physical illness and uses it figuratively to indicate the infectious immorality of the city; thus ‘malaria’ is bound up with corrupt, possibly supernatural forces, as well as a corrupt, all-too-natural force. The same with ‘malady’: the ‘maladies’ of the story may signify the evil or, as the story’s title has it, ‘wicked’ (malicious, malignant, maleficent) intent of Zaffirino’s ghost (‘spiritual, or moral ill health’, as the OED puts it), but may also denote illness or disease (malady, petit mal, malaria), or more specifically the mental illness of Magnus himself. ‘Malignant’, a word which is used in the story, tells a similar story, referring to both bodily and mental ill-health (malignant tumour), and to evil influences (specifically, showing ill will). The instance of this word in ‘A Wicked Voice’ bears out this double-sided meaning. Despite most often denoting bodily illness, the word is here used of a pernicious influence: ‘That cursed eighteenth century! It seemed a malignant fatality that made these brutes choose just this piece to interrupt me’ (pp. 169-70). Alongside the deathly seriousness of ‘fatality’, this word strikes us with what seems almost its misuse (or mal-treatment, if you will) at the hands of Lee: malignant tumours are fatal, ‘malignant’ pieces of music (usually) are not.

The malaria is also a form of infection, however; and it is here that sex and gender come into play in the story. Vernon Lee, whose work is infused with notions of gender right down to her suitably androgynous pseudonym, may well have known that it is the female mosquito that is a threat to humans; male mosquitoes do not carry and spread malaria. Given the castrato’s feminised yet predatory nature, this notion of malarial infection is important. What makes the malaria so effective a presence in the story is that it is in keeping with the Venetian setting, but it also heavily suggests notions of infection and being preyed upon, as well as raising the issue of feverish mental states, which can cause hallucination. In ‘A Wicked Voice’, the influences which suggest this ‘moral malaria’ are apt to ‘make the brain swim and the heart faint’ (p. 156). But there is a strong homoerotic suggestion here too. ‘That effeminate, fat face of his is almost beautiful,’ Magnus tells us, ‘with an odd smile, brazen and
cruel. I have seen faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women’ (p. 162). This is delicately put. We learn that Magnus finds the castrato ‘almost beautiful’, only then to be told that this is because of some distant recollection of similarly devious but beautiful women; but the homoerotic elements have already been suggested, and remain as a presence throughout the story.

Like the malaria that pervades the story, Venice is infectious; the literary and artistic importance of this city has been highlighted by Tony Tanner. After 1797, he writes, Venice ‘effectively disappeared from history’:

After that, it seems to exist as a curiously marooned spectacle. Literally marooned, of course—the city growing mysteriously out of the sea, the beautiful stones floating on the water; but temporally marooned as well—stagnating outside of history. [...] But as spectacle—the beautiful city par excellence, the city of art, the city as art—and as a spectacular example, as the greatest and richest and most splendid republic in the history of the world, now declined and fallen, Venice became an important, I would say central, site (a topos, a topic) for the European imagination. And more than any other city it is inextricably associated with desire.28

The marine imagery of ‘A Wicked Voice’ is thus peculiarly bound up with the geography of the city, then, as well. Tanner goes on to observe: ‘In decay and decline (particularly in decay and decline), falling or sinking to ruins and fragments, yet saturated with secretive sexuality—thus emanating a heady compound of death and desire—Venice becomes for many writers what it was, in anticipation, for Byron: “the greenest land of my imagination.”’29 And this fragmentary nature of Venice is also central to ‘A Wicked Voice’, and the story is, like Browning’s poem, a tale of ‘love among the ruins’—albeit love that has a sinister and compulsive erotic side. ‘I cannot cope with it, it submerges me,’ Lee wrote of the city, invoking watery language again for Venice; ‘Wagner was right to die there.’30 Wagner’s own death in Venice in 1883, just four years before ‘Vaux maudite’ appeared, highlights just how important, for Lee, the connections between Venice, music, Wagner, and history.

29 Ibid., p. 8.
30 Cited in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 245.
were. The importance of such places was later summed up by her in her 1899 work *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*:

To certain among us, undeniably, places, localities (I can find no reverent and tender enough expression for them in our practical, personal language) become objects of intense and most intimate feeling. Quite irrespective of their inhabitants, and virtually of their written history, they can touch us like living creatures; and one can have with them friendship of the deepest and most satisfying sort.  

It is this quality, this spiritual kinship, that Lee describes as the ‘genius loci’, that essence of a place which ‘is of the substance of our heart and mind, a spiritual reality.’  

John Barker has argued that, in 1882, ‘for all his vacillations of judgment, it seems safe to say Wagner generally had come to consider Venice as something like his favourite place on earth.’ This is somewhat stronger than Lee, talking of being ‘submerged’ by the city, puts it; but both Wagner and Lee shared a passionate interest in Venice which is suggested through the Venice-bound Magnus’ devotion to the Master in ‘A Wicked Voice’. As Arnold Whittall has recently observed, Wagner ‘must have found the mixture of admiration and incomprehension that came his way in such a place intriguing and therefore stimulating.’

But Lee herself did not personally find Wagner so stimulating. ‘While Vernon Lee’s musical tastes were broad enough to embrace a considerable amount of nineteenth-century music,’ Vineta Colby notes, ‘they could not stretch to Richard Wagner.’ Indeed, for Lee and many of her contemporaries, his work ‘threatened not only the cultural status quo but the mental health of its audiences.’ Thus the threatening of the Wagnerian Magnus’ mental health by an eighteenth-century Italian singer represents, for Lee, an inversion of sorts. Carlo Caballero has written of the significance of Magnus’ name that ‘Magnus is a figure for Wagner: the likeness of names, the clever inversion of Wagner’s “W,” are deliberate. No less deliberate is the

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32 Ibid., p. 5.
34 Arnold Whittall, review of John W. Barker, *Wagner and Venice, Music and Letters*, 91.1 (2010), p. 120.
35 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 221.
36 Ibid.
reversal of etymology: “Magnus” (Latin, “great”) shows himself puny in his fruitless resistance to Zaffirino’s seductive voice. How Caballero can be so sure that this Wagnerian inversion is ‘deliberate’, we ourselves cannot be so sure; and ‘Magnus’ is a not wholly ironic name, and Magnus himself confides to us that ‘I am but half bewitched, since I am conscious of the spell that binds me’ (p. 155). Like one who hallucinates and yet knows what he sees is but a product of his imagination, Magnus’s bewitchment is a self-conscious, semi-conscious one. But the suggestion of a deep malaise, whether moral, cultural, or psychological, remains. Colby sees significance for this story in Lee’s ‘revulsion from the emotional excesses of Wagner’, concluding that ‘music for her was not an abstract form but an expression of the health or malaise of its society.’

The power of music was something that Lee was aware of, however: in 1909 she would write that ‘music can do more by our emotions than the other arts’, but this knowledge of the almost mesmerising nature of music is already present in ‘A Wicked Voice’. The story-within-a-story which forms the subject of Magnus’ magnum opus, *Ogier the Dane*, brings this home: upon returning home and finding ‘all changed, his friends dead, his family dethroned, and not a man who knew his face’, Ogier despairs, but is comforted by a minstrel who ‘had taken compassion of his sufferings and given him all he could give—a song, the song of the prowess of a hero dead for hundreds of years, the Paladin Ogier the Dane’ (p. 164). This story serves to remind Magnus, and the reader, of the positive power of music and song, and the ability of them to tell epic stories, much like those told by Richard Wagner in his vast operas. But this is counterbalanced by the evil and infectious nature of the castrato’s music, his voice which sets out not to comfort but to entrap Magnus:

This silence lasted so long that I fell once more to meditating on my opera. I lay in wait once more for the half-caught theme. But no. It was not that theme for which I was waiting and watching with baited breath. I realized my delusion when, on rounding the point of the Giudecca, the murmur of a voice arose from the midst of the waters […] scarce audible, but exquisite,

38 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 211.
which expanded slowly, insensibly, taking volume and body, taking flesh almost and fire, an ineffable quality, full, passionate, but veiled, as it were, in a subtle, downy wrapper. The note grew stronger and stronger, and warmer and more passionate, until it burst through that strange and charming veil, and emerged beaming, to break itself in the luminous facets of a wonderful shake, long, superb, triumphant. (p. 167)

The predatory carnality glimpsed in the phrase ‘taking flesh’ is not lost on us, once we realise that the castrato’s voice carries sexual overtones (as it were). Everyone else who has heard the castrato’s voice is busy speculating on who could possibly have been singing; but Magnus is repulsed by the voice, ostensibly because it represents everything he detests about eighteenth-century Italian music, but also with a soupcon of a suggestion that he is somehow disturbed by a deeper, possibly sexual, awakening.

This is present alongside the horror and revulsion that Magnus feels when he witnesses the re-creation of the fatal seduction of the count’s great-aunt at the palace at Mistrà: ‘But I recognized now what seemed to have been hidden from me till then, that this voice was what I cared most for in all the wide world’ (p. 179). What follows is Magnus’ realisation of what he is witnessing:

Suddenly, from the dimly lighted corner by the canopy, came a little piteous wail; then another followed, and was lost in the singer’s voice. During a long phrase on the harpsichord, sharp and tinkling, the singer turned his head towards the dais, and there came a plaintive little sob. But he, instead of stopping, struck a sharp chord; and with a thread of voice so hushed as to be scarcely audible, slid softly into a long cadenza. At the same moment he threw his head backwards, and the light fell full upon the handsome, effeminate face, with its ashy pallor and big, black brows, of the singer Zaffirino. (p. 179)

What he is witnessing is death, not only to the woman but to Magnus as well; thus the almost sexual desire the woman feels for Zaffirino’s song is present, too, in Magnus, and he knows that he must escape from the voice, to go where he cannot hear it. ‘I was very calm,’ Magnus tells us, prior to this moment, ‘as one is calm sometimes in extraordinary dreams—could I be dreaming?’ (p. 178). Given Magnus’ earlier vivid dream of Ogier the Dane, the answer is yes—but with the proviso that he may be
awake and experiencing some extraordinarily powerful hallucination. This moment comes at the climax of the story, when Magnus’ mental well-being has deteriorated considerably; we as readers can only look on and wonder.

‘…languishing phrases…’

‘Puns have a fruitful afterlife in this story,’ writes Angela Leighton, ‘returning to haunt the narrative, even to lead it to illogical destinations.’ For Leighton, wordplay is central to the haunting quality of the story:

‘A Wicked Voice’ haunts us, not so much by its events, or even its misty atmosphere of derangement, but by its repetitions and puns, which stir threateningly or seductively in the text. They thus slip the frames of reference set up, just as stories, dreams, and waking life slip the hierarchies of their respective convictions.

Puns are thus ghost-words, pulling two ways, generating uncertainty and uncanniness by being both familiar and yet strange to us. Indeed, ‘The narrative takes its direction from them, as if pegged to the dream wishes of language itself. Ultimately, the fun of the whole story is that Lee can give us a “spurious” ghost in whom, like fiction, we do not need to believe, but whose beauty is cravingly desired and pursued.’

There are two central problems with such an interpretation. First, the story does not really work through a network of ‘puns’, and what little obvious wordplay the story uses is subtler than such a label as ‘pun’ would suggest: the playing-off of the ‘mal-’ words against each other, for instance, or the ways in which ‘air’ circles around its related meanings of ‘aria’ or ‘piece of music’ and ‘atmosphere’. Second, this wordplay is not really haunting as such; Leighton seems aware of this when she goes on to talk about ‘the fun of the whole story’. How can the story be ‘fun’ and yet ‘haunt’ us in any real sense? Unnerve or shock or frighten us, yes; but haunting seems at odds with fun. The chiming of key words such as malady/maladies and

40 Ibid., p. 122.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
melody/melodies may well be deliberate, but it is not this wordplay that haunts us about the story, but rather the detailed descriptions we are given of Magnus’ ‘malady’.

Haunting in the story goes beyond any easy recourse to words such as ‘haunting’ itself. It is the atmosphere that Lee creates—not just of malarial Venice but of Magnus’ own feverish mind—that unnerves us, not the clever wordplay (even if there were much). For a text that first appeared in a volume pointedly titled *Hauntings*, and for all its perceived repetition of various key words, ‘A Wicked Voice’ contains only one mention of the word ‘haunting’.43 This sole appearance of what in many ways is a central word to the story coincides with the only appearance in the narrative of the word ‘ghost’: ‘I felt the need of noise, of yells and false notes, of something vulgar and hideous to drive away that ghost-voice which was haunting me’ (p. 168). This absence is significant for suggesting the ways in which Lee creates the effects of haunting without relying on such an obvious signifier as that word, ‘haunting’, itself. *Hauntings* haunts by its virtual absence of ‘haunting’.

This haunting might even be of a sexual kind. Take Magnus’ suggestive reference to lycanthropy: ‘My old nurse, far off in Norway, used to tell me that werewolves are ordinary men and women half their days, and that if, during that period, they become aware of their horrid transformation they may find the means to forestall it. May this not be the case with me?’ (p. 155). This reference to werewolves is highly instructive in a story that becomes almost preoccupied with the moon and moonlight: in total, moons and moon-related words feature thirty-two times in the narrative. It is, in many ways, a lunar text. It is almost as if Lee is inviting us to draw connections between the moonlight and such fantastical or ‘weird’ phenomena as lycanthropy and lunacy. The moon is not so much one of Leighton’s puns as a multi-referential sign, suggesting not only madness (Magnus) or werewolves but also some otherworldly power, something which is, like the moon, literally unearthly and unworldly. The moon is associated with supernatural and unearthly agency, but also with madness. But the werewolf motif also points to Magnus’ growing awareness that

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43 The word ‘haunt’ appears in two other places in the story, in the form ‘haunted’: see pp. 140 and 141. It is perhaps telling that all three instances of the word ‘haunt’ and its derivatives appear within the space of a few paragraphs in the story.
he is being transformed by the influence of the feminised, but ultimately male, castrato: original readers of the story would have had little difficulty in reading into the significance of this ‘monstrous’ transformation. Given the sexually suggestive nature of Magnus’ seduction by the castrato, we cannot gloss over altogether the homoerotic elements to this story.

The moon, then, is, like the malaria, a multifaceted symbol that can be interpreted in a number of ways. One thing commonly glossed over by critics of this story is the way in which the moon functions as a visual equivalent for the sounds that bewitch Magnus. ‘Suddenly there came across the lagoon,’ we read at one point, ‘cleaving, chequering, and fretting the silence with a lacework of sound even as the moon was fretting and cleaving the water, a ripple of music’ (p. 166). He tells us: ‘I realised my delusion when […] the murmur of a voice arose from the midst of the waters, a thread of sound slender as a moonbeam’ (p. 167). Later, Magnus finds himself feeling as though he is ‘turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds as the moonbeams mingled with the dew’ (p. 179). The moon is fluid and liquefying, turning what it touches into a flowing watery substance, like the liquidity of the bewitching voice itself. But this link between the aural and the visual is most succinctly represented by the synaesthesia from which Magnus suffers: ‘The people round the piano, the furniture, everything together seems to get mixed and to turn into moving blobs of colour’ (p. 162). Tellingly, the earliest instance of the word ‘synaesthesia’, according to the OED, is 1891; composers Rimsky-Korsakov and Liszt famously had synaesthesia, and a great deal of research was beginning to be done into this condition at the end of the nineteenth century.

The implication is that the musical sound of Zaffirino’s voice is causing Magnus to hallucinate. ‘Is it that horrible palpitation’, he asks, ‘which is sending the blood to my brain and making me mad?’ (p. 162). Much as in J. Meade Falkner’s The Lost Stradivarius, which would appear a few years later in 1895, a piece of music summons a visual experience, which is presented as ghostly but which has its ghostliness muddled by the constant indications of an overworked brain which surround the experience of the ‘ghost’.
The moon is the meeting-point of this visual-aural-mad connection in Lee’s tale. ‘Moonbeam’, too, is used to suggest some sort of illusion, a wavering and watery vision that may or may not be real. Twice it appears in rapid succession, as the narrator’s sense of the ‘imaginary’ builds and builds until it almost reaches a culmination:

I had stopped my gondola for a moment, and as I gently swayed to and fro on the water, all paved with moonbeams, it seemed to me that I was on the confines of an imaginary world. It lay close at hand, enveloped in luminous, pale blue mist, through which the moon had cut a wide and glistening path; out to sea, the little islands, like moored black boats, only accentuated the solitude of this region of moonbeams and wavelets; while the hum of the insects in orchards hard by merely added to the impression of untroubled silence. On some such seas, I thought, must the Paladin Ogier have sailed when about to discover that during that sleep at the enchantress’s knees centuries had elapsed and the heroic world had set, and the kingdom of prose had come. (p. 166)

The word ‘moonbeam’, like the moon in general, keeps returning to the story: ‘that sea of moonbeams’ (p. 166) effectively relates both the moon and the water in a more than juxtaposing sense. To all intents and purposes, the moon is a sea. This image seems immediately fitting, and it is only if we realise the latent natural connection between the moon and the sea—namely the tides—that we discover why it strikes us as so natural. Indeed, ‘The moonlight had transformed the marble floor around me into a shallow, shining pool’ (p. 163). Not only this, but the moon and tides are bound up with menstrual cycles, and the femininity that can be seen throughout the story is thus further suggested by these subtle invocations of women’s sexual potential, something embodied not least by the castrato himself, with his feminine qualities. Lee seizes upon moonbeams in her preface to Hauntings, when she writes that the supernatural must perforce entail a great air of mystery, ‘the mystery that touches us, the vague shroud of moonbeams that hangs about the haunting lady […] while the figure itself wanders forth, scarcely outlined, scarcely separated from the surrounding trees; or walks, and sucked back, ever and anon, into the flickering shadows.’ The moon’s continual presence in ‘A Wicked Voice’ might then be seen as part of the

feminine imagery that pervades the story, what Patricia Pulham has called ‘a menacing femininity that remains sexually ambiguous.’

‘In short,’ writes Vineta Colby, ‘Zaffirino is un homme fatale.’ The erotic—indeed, homoerotic—elements to the story are striking. Music is the tool of seduction, and the human voice contains a tumescent quality. The repetition of ‘swelling’ is highly suggestive here: ‘The note went on, swelling and swelling’ (p. 165); ‘that exquisite voice, swelling, swelling by insensible degrees’ (p. 180); ‘I heard the voice swelling, swelling, rending asunder that downy veil which wrapped it’ (p. 180). This act of symbolic penetration is working on several levels: first, there is the seductive nature of Venice in general; second, there is the significance of the castrato, lacking any physical masculine power, still succeeding in penetrating another man through the medium of music; and third, there is the power of music to influence and even perhaps to possess others in an almost supernatural way.

‘Little by little I began to perceive sounds’, Magnus tells us; ‘little, sharp, metallic, detached notes, like those of a mandolin’ (p. 164). The repetition of ‘little’ not once but twice sets the trend for the repetitions that will follow: ‘and there was united to them a voice, very low and sweet, almost a whisper, which grew and grew and grew, until the whole place was filled with that exquisite vibrating note, of a strange, exotic, unique quality’ (p. 165). The treble repetition of ‘grew’ is bouncing off the subtler treble repetition of ‘detached notes’, ‘vibrating note’, and the ‘note’ which ‘went on’ (p. 165). Indeed, this note is ‘swelling and swelling’ with a quasi-sexual power. This repetition echoes the vibrating of the voice and music, but also has an almost hypnotic quality, as if echoing the bewitchment or mesmerising hallucination of Magnus himself.

Bound up with the mosquitoes and the malarial infection there is, more specifically, ‘the hum of the insects in orchards hard by’. Like the insect references in The Lifted Veil, The Hill of Dreams, and ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, this entomological detail is a reminder of the narrator’s superior sensitiveness to sounds around him: the hum of insects, we are told, ‘merely added to the impression of

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46 Colby, Vernon Lee, p. 245.
untroubled silence.’ The passage is full of paradoxes. The hum of the insects somehow makes everything seem quieter. The little islands actually make the sea appear more solitary and empty. But in ‘A Wicked Voice’ the insects hold a more specific significance. ‘A nascent malady of the ear may produce buzzings,’ Andrew Lang wrote, ‘and these may develop into hallucinatory voices.’ The buzz of insects is an easy thing to gloss over in our reading of the story, since it is natural to expect to find insects buzzing in the hot, oppressive, malarial atmosphere of Venice; but they also suggest the hallucinatory potential of buzzing sounds, so pertinent to Magnus’ plight in this story.

From The Lifted Veil onwards, insects have been connected to the concept of telepathy. Pamela Thurschwell has pointed out that telepathy is ‘linked to the older concept of sympathy and the newer word empathy’ and that ‘telepathy is also related to love—the desire for complete sympathetic union with the mind of another.’ Empathy was indeed a new word: none other than Vernon Lee herself is credited with introducing the word into the English language, in 1904. And this idea of ‘sympathy’ or understanding is an important one for Lee’s supernatural stories. Following his reading of Hauntings, her half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton wrote to Lee to criticise her story ‘Dionea’ for being too ‘baffling’ for most readers to be able to understand. She wrote back:

As regards obscurity in the narrative, I think that if you read it three months hence that would not strike you; for you will regain a habit of twigging suggestions and of easily following tortuosities of narrative which is the habit of consecutive reading. You will then, I think, agree with me that such a story requires to appear & reappear & disappear, to be baffling, in order to acquire its supernatural quality. You see there is not real story; once assert the identity of Dionea with Venus, once show her clearly, & no charm remains.

47 Lang, Cock Lane and Common-Sense, p. 184.
49 In 1904, in her diary, according to the OED: ‘Passing on to the æsthetic empathy (Einfühlung), or more properly the æsthetic sympathetic feeling of that act of erecting and spreading.’ I am indebted to Ruth Robbins for drawing attention to this fact: see her ‘Apparitions Can Be Deceptive’, p. 199.
50 Vernon Lee’s Letters, with a preface by her executor Irene Cooper Willis (Privately printed, 1937), p. 363; cited in Catherine Maxwell, ‘Vernon Lee and Eugene Lee-Hamilton’, in Vernon Lee:
Lee believed, as her preface to *Hauntings* had made clear, that ‘the supernatural, in order to call forth those sensations, terrible to our ancestors and terrible but delicious to ourselves, sceptical posterity, must necessarily, and with but a few exceptions, remain enwrapped in mystery.’\(^{51}\) This comes close to a sort of ‘negative capability’, the theory that Keats defined as that state ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’.\(^{52}\) It is also close to Henry James’s statement that ‘so long as the events are veiled, the imagination will run riot and depict all sorts of horrors, but as soon as the veil is lifted, all mystery disappears.’\(^{53}\) The order Lee chooses here—‘appear & reappear & disappear’—is intriguing because it disrupts and disturbs the usual or expected order, namely appear, disappear, and *then* reappear. After all, how can something reappear if it has not yet disappeared? Furthermore, Lee’s ampersands, like Keats’s own in his letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, suggest a fleeting briskness that serves to generate the same flitting nature of the appearance and disappearance of mysterious experiences. Ostensibly, it suggests the brevity of notation frequent so often in letters and semi-informal correspondence; and yet it is worth noting that earlier in the passage, Lee had not plumped for the abbreviation, and had written ‘and’ (‘of twigging suggestions and of easily following tortuosities of narrative’). If the word ‘and’ is, as William Empson has it, ‘perhaps the flattest, most general, and least coloured in the English language’, then it follows that ‘&’ is the flattest, &c. of all symbols.\(^{54}\) Brusque, brisk, and unobtrusive, it allows the matter of appearance and reappearance to stand out for what it is: brief yet momentous.

Lee’s correspondences extended to friendship with Henry James, who also turned—or, more accurately, returned—to writing ghost stories in the 1890s. Another author of supernatural fiction discussed here, Robert Louis Stevenson, wrote to

Vernon Lee; and yet at the same time he did not write to her. In August 1886 she wrote to him to tell him that she had asked Blackwoods to send him a copy of her recently published story, ‘A Phantom Lover’ (or ‘Oke of Okehurst’ as it was later titled, this original name being relegated to the phantasmal position of subtitle), which later appeared in *Hauntings* alongside ‘A Wicked Voice’. Stevenson wrote later that month that he had returned and ‘found the dreadful [i.e., the penny dreadful or story] and your note’: ‘I have just begun to read the *Phantom*; but will try to keep this open till I have finished it and add my word.’55 Whatever he made of ‘Phantom’ we will doubtless never know: he appears to have kept the letter open indefinitely and never sent it.56 It may be that he redrafted it, sent it, and the eventual letter has been lost; or it may be that Stevenson lost Lee’s story, or never got round to reading it, and so never replied. Or it may be that he read the tale and disliked it, that he found it to be ‘dreadful’ in an adjectival as well as nominal sense, and could find no way of replying in an honest yet friendly manner to someone he did not know.57 Henry James had suffered a similar problem two years before, when Lee had sent him a promotional copy of her first novel, *Miss Brown*, which was dedicated to James and which he found ‘very bad’ and ‘a rather deplorable mistake’.58 James found his ‘tongue […] tied in speaking of it—at least generally’, because of his friendship with Lee and the fact that his name appeared on the dedication-page; perhaps Stevenson felt a similar reluctance to be impolite about Lee, whom he seems not to have known and in whose fiction he appears not to have taken a great interest.59

This letter which never arrived is in many ways representative of the relationship between Stevenson and Lee: one interested in the pursuits of the SPR, the other seeking to distance herself from them; one writing fantasies set in darkest, semi-Gothic London and adventure tales, the other writing quasi-roman-à-clef-type stories

56 Ibid., p. 307 n. 3.
57 Stevenson and Lee appear never to have met or corresponded before this moment of (non-)correspondence.
59 See ibid. Certainly the diplomatic James took a while to untie his tongue: he finally got round to writing a reply to Lee in May the following year, apologising for the ‘odious, unmannerly and inconceivable delay in writing’ (p. 84).
satirising her friends, including Henry James.\textsuperscript{60} Her friendship with Henry James, which, as this testifies, was to cool later in the 1890s, prompted James to write to her in April 1890 to congratulate her on the success of *Hauntings*, which he described as ‘gruesome, graceful, *genialisch*’, praising ‘the bold, aggressive speculative fancy’ of the tales.\textsuperscript{61}

Lee’s voice is bold in ‘A Wicked Voice’, because Magnus’ voice is bold, especially at the moment near the end of the tale when Magnus travels to the house where the Count’s great-aunt died from hearing Zaffirino’s voice: ‘I rushed down the narrow stair which led down from the box, pursued, as it were, by that exquisite voice, swelling, swelling by insensible degrees’ (p. 180). What is swelling here? Rather like a good old-fashioned dangling participle, Magnus’ ‘swelling’ hangs about, belonging to either Zaffirino’s voice or to himself—or a part of himself. Lee is playfully suggesting the homoerotic now. What she goes on to do is to do more than merely suggest the supernatural. The description of his escape from the house before succumbing to the castrato’s voice signals a re-glimpsing of the moon:

> The door gave way beneath my weight, one half crashed in. I entered. I was blinded by a flood of blue moonlight. It poured in through four great windows, peaceful and diaphanous, a pale blue mist of moonlight, and turned the huge room into a kind of submarine cave, paved with moonbeams, full of shimmers, of pools of moonlight. It was as bright as a mid-day, but the brightness was cold, blue, vaporous, supernatural. (p. 180)

This is the culmination of this moon-water word association, as moonlight is described in terms of a ‘flood’ and ‘mist’ and ‘pools’. Even ‘submarine’ submerges the words in water. As ‘way’ moves fluidly into ‘weight’ and ‘cave’ into ‘paved’, Lee’s prose seeks to emulate the liquid shimmeriness of the scene. Shortly after this, Magnus escapes from the house and returns to Venice. ‘People expressed much satisfaction at my recovery’, he tells us. ‘It seems that one dies of those fevers’ (p. 181).

\textsuperscript{60} Henry James wrote to his brother William in January 1893 that Lee ‘has lately, as I am told … directed a kind of satire of a flagrant and markedly “saucy” kind at me (!!)—exactly the sort of thing she has repeatedly done to others’. See ibid., p. 402. James was referring to Lee’s volume *Vanitas*, published in 1892.

\textsuperscript{61} ‘Letter to Violet Paget, 27 April 1890’, in ibid., p. 276.
In an essay titled ‘Beauty and Sanity’ (1909), Lee wrote of music as a haunting and potentially destructive art form:

I was listening, last night, to some very wonderful singing of modern German songs; and the emotion that still remains faintly within me alongside of the traces of those languishing phrases and passionate intonations, the remembrance of the sense of—how shall I call it?—violation of the privacy of the human soul which haunted me throughout that performance, has brought home to me, for the hundredth time, that the Greek legislators were not so fantastic in considering music a questionable art, which they thought twice before admitting into their ideal commonwealths. For music can do more by our emotions than the other arts, and it can, therefore, separate itself from them and their holy ways; it can, in a measure, actually undo the good they do to our soul.62

‘A Wicked Voice’ is her most successful fictionalising of this potential for music to be a beautifully destructive force. The ‘traces of those languishing phrases’: ‘A Wicked Voice’ has ‘frivolous or languishing little phrases’ (p. 171), ‘long, languishing phrases’ (p. 179), and ‘flourishes and languishing phrases’ (p. 181). Angela Leighton has written of Lee: ‘Her fictional ghosts are abstracted forms, semi-inventions of their beholders, go-betweens, uncertain, ancestral presences, dependent in part on the desires of the ghost-seers. This may also be why her ghost stories don’t quite work.’63 But this is precisely why it might be argued that Lee’s stories, such as ‘A Wicked Voice’, do work: because they are not supernatural entities per se but reflections of the beholder, much as Henry James’s ghosts often appear to spring from his characters’ own fears, desires, and neuroses.

This may also be why Henry James returned to the ghost story in 1891, shortly after Hauntings was published. As T. J. Lustig has it, James’s renewed interest in the ghost story probably stemmed, at least in part, from ‘a desire to keep up with the Vernon Lees, the Stevensons, the Wildes and the Kiplings of the contemporary fictional scene.’64 James’s story ‘The Way It Came’, published in the volume Embarrassments in 1896, contains a go-between, and a ghost which, to

63 Leighton, On Form, p. 109.
64 Lustig, Henry James and the Ghostly, p. 88.
borrow Leighton’s words, may be a semi-invention of its beholder, as well as ‘presences’ the interpretation of which is ‘dependent in part on the desires of the ghost-seers.’ That story became ‘The Friends of the Friends’.
Psychical Cases

The ghost story, like any genre of fiction, needs to develop in order to retain its power and credibility. Virginia Woolf was certain, in 1921, that ways could be found—and, indeed, had been—to rejuvenate the form and content of the ghost story. She effected this in two ways that year. First, her short ‘story’, ‘A Haunted House’, testified to this spirit of rejuvenation. In this prose-fragment of just six hundred words, a ‘ghostly couple’ wander a house searching for something, and the rhythmical prose beats like a heart with the repeated refrain: “Safe, safe, safe,” the pulse of the house beat softly.1 This mantra reappears later, with ‘softly’ changed to ‘gladly’, and then again in the final paragraph as the couple are reunited, with the adverb changed to ‘proudly’ and ‘pulse’ upped to ‘heart”—and, suggestively, the tense shifted from past to present, as ‘beat’ morphs into ‘beats’:

‘Safe, safe, safe,’ the heart of the house beats proudly. ‘Long years—’ he sighs. ‘Again you found me.’ ‘Here,’ she murmurs, ‘sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—’ Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes. ‘Safe! safe! safe!’ the pulse of the house beats wildly. Waking, I cry ‘Oh, is this your buried treasure? The light in the heart.’2

Was it all a dream? The pulsing sound that beats through the prose in its almost poetic rhythms could almost suggest the quickening heartbeat of the narrator as s/he awakes. The accumulation of active present participles, of ‘sleeping’, ‘reading’, ‘laughing’, ‘rolling’, and ‘stooping’, only intensifies the here-and-now of the moment being crystallised in prose. That final phrase, ‘The light in the heart’, looks back to the use of both ‘heart’ and ‘light’ earlier in the same paragraph; we readers can know

2 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
nothing, looking into the heart of light, the silence. Woolf’s ‘story’ positions itself neatly between dream-vision and ghost story, reinventing both using the new style of modernism and that movement’s interest in shifting tense and perspective. ‘The ghostly couple can be read, therefore,’ Julian Wolfreys cannily observes, ‘as installing into the text a doubling—of which they themselves are already a double figure—which is itself redoubled in the formal and temporal aspects of the narrative.’

George Johnson has interpreted ‘A Haunted House’ as Woolf’s response to Henry James. Indeed, for Johnson, ‘A Haunted House’ not only ‘responds and rewrites James’s ghost stories, particularly The Turn of the Screw’ but also contains ‘an echo of James’s “The Friends of the Friends” in that the couple had been separated in the past and is now reunited in the spiritual realm.’ The year the story was published, 1921, was also the year in which Woolf published her essay on James’s stories; in it she has little patience for those who cry that the ghost story is dead:

To admit that the supernatural was used for the last time by Mrs. Radcliffe and that modern nerves are immune from the wonder and terror which ghosts have always inspired would be to throw up the sponge too easily. If the old methods are obsolete, it is the business of a writer to discover new ones. The public can feel again what it has once felt—there can be no doubt about that; only from time to time the point of attack must be changed.

Psychical research, the science of the ghostly, was the chief development which allowed for this change in ‘the point of attack’, as Woolf acknowledged elsewhere when quoting Henry James’s own remark concerning the ghost story that the ‘new type … the mere modern “psychical case”, washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap, ... the new type clearly promised little.’

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The ellipses are Woolf’s, and she does James’s remark a slight disservice, first by shifting the closing quotation marks from the end of ‘psychical’ to the end of ‘case’, and second by neglecting to quote the whole of James’s sentence:

The new type indeed, the mere modern ‘psychical’ case, washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap, and equipped with credentials vouching for this—the new type clearly promised little, for the more it was respectably certified the less it seemed of a nature to rouse the dear old sacred terror.7

A “‘psychical’ case” is not, after all, the same thing as a “‘psychical case”’: the latter implies mere quotation of an established phrase, whereas in the former there is far heavier stress placed in the reader’s mind upon the word ‘psychical’, as though there were something suspect, dubious, or questionable about the word’s ‘credentials’.8 James’s own ambivalent attitude to the merging of contemporary quasi-scientific enquiry and the demands of fiction is illustrated through his choice of words, as ‘mere’, ‘clean’, ‘queerness’, and ‘clearly’ wash around each other, mixing the scientific and rational with the weird, irrational, or ‘queer’ nature of the ‘dear old sacred terror’ that had been a staple of the traditional ghost story.

‘The new type indeed’: James was writing in 1908, the year that Algernon Blackwood’s volume of stories featuring John Silence, the paranormal investigator, appeared. There is a good chance that the ‘mere modern “psychical” case’ which James dismisses in the Preface constitutes a thinly veiled reference to Blackwood’s stories. For James’s idea of the ghost as seen through the eyes of the psychical researcher was somewhat different from Blackwood’s, or William Hope Hodgson’s Carnacki, the ‘ghost-finder’, who would appear two years later. James’s stories of the 1890s, in particular, involve a detailed reworking of the ghost story in light of the trends and interests of psychical research, but without being indebted to them in any

8 It might be worth quoting here Edmund Gurney’s cautious clips around this word in his Phantasms of the Living, as cited under sense 3 of the word ‘psychical’ in the OED: “‘Psychical’ phenomena. [Note] The specific sense which we have given to this word needs apology. But we could find no other convenient term, under which to embrace a group of subjects that lie on or outside the boundaries of recognised science.” See Gurney, Phantasms, 1, p. 5, n. 2.
obvious sense. *The Turn of the Screw* is the most famous of these, but that novella has an important and highly interesting precursor.

Henry James’s ghost story ‘The Friends of the Friends’ first appeared under the title ‘The Way It Came’ in the volume of stories titled *Embarrassments*, published in 1896. One reviewer referred to the story as ‘a brief but tantalising excursion into the domain of the quasi-super-natural.’\(^9\) The story takes the form of a ‘found’ text: a nameless editor opens the story by prefacing the ensuing ‘contents of a thin blank-book’ with the statement that ‘the fragment I send you after dividing it for your convenience into several small chapters [...] has the merit of being nearly enough a rounded thing, an intelligible whole.’\(^10\) This prefatory statement then gives way to the ‘fragment’ itself, in which a nameless female narrator tells of how two of her friends, one male and one female, who have themselves never met, both share much in common, principally that they both claim to have seen the ghost of a parent at the moment of that parent’s death. Like the narrator herself, neither of these friends is named. The narrator tries to engineer a meeting between the two, but every time it is arranged they will meet, something intervenes which prevents their meeting. Over time, the narrator falls in love with the male friend; after this, she actively prevents the two of them from finally meeting when they might actually have done so. Her jealousy reaches its height when the female friend dies and the man claims to have seen the woman at the moment of her death. In her death, they have finally ‘met’. The female narrator sends the man away from her, and the narrative ends with her relating how she heard, several years later, of the man’s suicide, which she describes as ‘a response to an irresistible call’ (p. 364).

Several things are immediately noteworthy about the form of the story, and the decisions James makes in the telling of it. First, and most strikingly, there is the absence of all names from the narrative. Not one single character is named. For a writer who, just a few years before ‘The Friends of the Friends’, had given us ghost stories called ‘Sir Edmund Orme’ and ‘Owen Wingrave’, this namelessness seems all

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the more intriguing.\textsuperscript{11} If one of the most salient features of the language of ‘Markheim’ is the absence, with the exception of the title character, of names, then ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is about a total absence of names and naming. The introduction to the story informs us that the narrator ‘has given her friends neither name nor initials’ (p. 324). It is clear that James is trying to make the experience the story chronicles appear as universal as possible; names carry prejudice with them, and if James had named the characters within the story, it would have jeopardised our objectivity further, and it is important that we, however subjectively we approach the story, are still less subjective than the narrator.

The second thing which strikes us about the form of ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is the way it is presented as being somewhere between private and public. It is not quite a diary, not quite closed and secret: although the anonymous ‘editor’ who opens the story makes mention of the woman’s ‘diaries’, he goes on to explain that the ‘fragment’ he has collected together here is from ‘a thin blank-book’ (p. 323). A diary is a personal and private thing: to borrow the title of another of James’s ghost stories, a diary is a record of ‘The Private Life’, of personal thoughts and feelings. A ‘blank-book’ is slightly different, although potentially just as private and secret. The other thing to note is that the editor’s prefatory note seems to be itself a fragment, the fragment of a prior correspondence between him and another, unidentified person. ‘I find, as you prophesied, much that’s interesting’ (p. 323)—this is how the story opens. Because the addressee of this preface is not identified, this adds to the seeming privacy of the narrative that ensues: although ‘the possibility of publication’ is mentioned, it is, the editor remarks, ‘a delicate question’ (p. 323). This is subtly different from an editor’s preface which addresses the reader of the published text. Instead, it is a further private correspondence, on top of the female narrator’s ‘fragment’. There is something private and personal about the narrative, even regarding the fictional editor’s relationship with it. As Glen Cavaliero writes, ‘the enclosure of one narrative within another is vital to the effect of “The Turn of the

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Sir Edmund Orme’ was published in 1891; ‘Owen Wingrave’ first appeared in 1893.
Screw” and “The Friends of the Friends”. Both texts involve a narrative written by a woman being presented to us as a text ‘found’ by a male editor. From the start, then, the issue of gender is being raised as one that is central to both texts, and to that all-important question in ghost stories that haunts Woolf’s ‘Haunted House’: the question of perspective.

But ‘The Friends of the Friends’ has an extra dimension to it, which adds to its power and suggestiveness. Woolf’s verdict of the story is that it takes the form of a short, not-so-sharp shock:

Obstacles are essential to The Wings of the Dove. When he removed them by supernatural means as he did in The Friends of the Friends he did so in order to produce a particular effect. The story is very short; there is no time to elaborate the relationship; but the point can be pressed home by a shock. The supernatural is brought in to provide that shock. It is the queerest of shocks—tranquil, beautiful, like the closing of chords in harmony; and yet, somehow obscene. The living and the dead by virtue of their superior sensibility have reached across the gulf; that is beautiful.

While wonderfully attentive to the ‘superior sensibility’ of the principal characters (a phrase which recalls not only Latimer’s ‘abnormal sensibility’ in The Lifted Veil but also Oleron’s ‘abnormal sensitiveness’ in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’), this is a little too reluctant to throw up the sponge, since the ‘supernatural means’ Woolf sees as being at work in ‘The Friends of the Friends’ are never openly stated. She knows this, and admits it when she states that ‘something remains unaccounted for’ in James’s stories (she is writing specifically about The Turn of the Screw). The ‘ghost’ in ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is not so much a supernatural entity as an unknown quantity, something that is described only in the most skeletal and fragmentary manner. Woolf goes on to state that James’s ghosts ‘have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts—the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark

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lanes and windy commons.’ Indeed, ‘They have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange.’ Woolf is writing in 1921, just two years after Freud’s essay on the uncanny was first published.

Woolf’s detection of the ‘supernatural means’ of ‘The Friends of the Friends’ raises the issue, in some ways central to any reading of the tale, of what form is taken by the ‘ghost’ of the narrator’s male friend which appears to her female friend. ‘Woolf evokes threat and invasion without being able to specify the nature of that agency or its target,’ David Seed has written of her essay on James; ‘and it is specifically that inability which confirms the perceived power of the narrative since it opens up a space and hints at a sequence of action for the reader to speculatively fill out.’ But such unspecifiable power is not limited to James’s ghost stories. T. J. Lustig has written perceptively of the ghostly in James’s fiction as a whole: ‘Even in his most programmatically “realist” phase, the ghostly was an important figurative resource for James; indeed, one could argue that it became increasingly potent as metaphor rather than literality, as a form of subjectivity rather than an object for subjectivity.’ By 1896, the year he wrote and published ‘The Friends of the Friends’, the ghostly had become a figurative device for James. Indeed, ‘The Way It Came’ (as it was then known) first appeared in the volume Embarrassments, which also contained ‘The Figure in the Carpet’. It is my argument in this chapter that, far from being a traditional ‘ghost story’, much less a ‘pot-boiler’ (the term James used for many of his ghost stories), ‘The Friends of the Friends’ presents itself as conventionally ‘ghostly’ in order to enable James to explore some of the issues which are central to his work. It is something he would do again, two years later and more famously, with the publication of The Turn of the Screw. But ‘The Friends of the

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16 Ibid., p. 291.
19 Not everyone was enamoured of this volume: one anonymous reviewer wrote of the volume that ‘these stories are often Embarrassments in a sense other than that intended by their author.’ See the Critical Heritage, p. 259.
Friends’ was there first; it represents a turn in James’s own fiction, the turn from generic ghost story to playfully subversive narrative. James had been writing ghost stories again since the start of the decade, beginning with ‘Sir Edmund Orme’ in 1891. As Lustig suggests, James’s renewed interest in the ghost story probably stemmed, at least in part, from ‘a desire to keep up with the Vernon Lees, the Stevensons, the Wildes and the Kiplings of the contemporary fictional scene.’

Indeed, James had written to Vernon Lee in April 1890 that the ‘supernatural story, the subject wrought in fantasy, is not the class of fiction I myself most cherish (prejudiced as you may have perceived me in favour of a close connotation, or close observation, of the real—or whatever one may call it—the familiar, the inevitable).’

Impulses

James’s story electrifies not so much by way of a ‘shock’ (Woolf’s word) as by an impulse. Like the ‘pulse’ that courses through Woolf’s own ‘A Haunted House’, the word ‘impulse’ keeps returning to the narrative of ‘The Friends of the Friends’, as if hovering between the bodily and the mental, the physical and the psychical, the scientific and the spiritual. For ‘impulse’, particularly in the 1890s, was charged not only with its older meaning of ‘incitement or stimulus to action arising from some state of mind or feeling’ or ‘sudden or involuntary inclination or tendency to act, without premeditation or reflection’, but also its newer, electrical meaning of ‘a sudden, momentary change in voltage or current from an otherwise steady (or slowly varying) value’ (first recorded in 1883). It was also embraced by a whole raft of Decadent writers as exemplifying the bodily above the spiritual, emotion above thought, instinct above careful judgment. The word’s first appearance in ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is triggered by the discovery of a coincidence, the coincidence (if it can be so called) that two of the narrator’s friends had seen a parent’s ghost at the moment of that parent’s death elsewhere:

As for him, dear man, he had seen his mother’s—so there you are! I had never heard of that till this occasion on which our closer, our pleasanter acquaintance led him, through some turn of the subject of our talk, to mention it and to inspire me in so doing with the impulse to let him know that he had a rival in the field—a person with whom he could compare notes. (p. 327)

Here the word ‘ghost’ is skirted, vanishing before it has even appeared, disappearing into the aposiopesis of the dash. All mention of ‘ghost’ has dashed off, instead being replaced by the abracadabra of ‘so there you are!’ Almost impulsively, the narrator decides to eschew the word ‘ghost’ as though it harbours talismanic properties. But the word ‘ghost’ returns to the narrative. It is destined to return in the figurative turn of phrase, ‘laying the ghost’: ‘It was more and more impressed on me that they were approaching, converging. [...] At last I felt there was only one way of laying the ghost’ (p. 338). It’s as if ‘ghost’ has become a shadow, or ghost, of its former self: the word has retreated from the narrative, since that earlier conversational mention of ‘the one, you know, who saw her father’s ghost’ (p. 327). ‘Ghost’ can only appear if it is in the mouths of others, or else used in some colloquial, innocuous phrase.

The question is, if James can use the word ‘ghost’ in such a figurative and almost figmentary sense in what is, after all, a ‘ghost story’, then what is the significance of the ghost, and the ghostly, in ‘The Friends of the Friends’? The ghostly seems to be working as some sort of metaphor; but a metaphor for what? Lustig is right to point up the relationship between the ghostly and the figurative in James’s later work, but ‘The Friends of the Friends’ seems almost shy of the ghost, cautious around anything that might be deemed supernatural or ghostly in the traditional sense. The word ‘ghost’ will appear on these two occasions early on in the story, but not again. It vanishes: the word ‘ghost’ has given up the ghost.

If one were to demonstrate the turn in James’s attitude to the ghost story, and his growing sophistication in the art of telling it, one could do worse than to chart the disappearance of that very word, ‘ghost’, from his stories. ‘The Ghostly Rental’, an early attempt at the ghost story which first appeared in 1876, contains nearly thirty uses of the word ‘ghost’, including, of course, in the title itself. ‘Owen Wingrave’,
published three years before ‘The Friends of the Friends’, contains just three uses of
the word. *The Turn of the Screw*, published two years after ‘The Friends of the
Friends’, contains only one mention of the word ‘ghost’ in its entire 43,000-word
narrative. While I am not suggesting that the ghostly is so simple a figure in James’s
fiction as to be a matter of counting words, these statistics are instructive. They show
how James moved away from the conventional terminology of the ghost story
(including the use of that very word, ghost) and turned to a subtler language in order
to create a ghost-effect.

The suggestion of both the scientific and the spiritual that a word such as
‘impulse’ is capable of producing is again found in the common antipathy to
photography that both of the narrator’s friends exhibit: ‘But the great sameness, for
wonder and chatter, was their rare perversity in regard to being photographed. They
were the only persons ever heard of who had never been “taken” and who had a
passionate objection to it’ (p. 332). The discussion of the photograph marks the point
of the return of the word ‘impulse’, when the narrator, having successfully elicited the
gift of a photograph from the male friend, requests the same from the female friend:
‘She laughed and shook her head; she had headshakes whose impulse seemed to
come from as far away as the breeze that stirs a flower’ (p. 335). From this moment
until the end of the story, the recurrences of ‘impulse’ in the narrative will be
accompanied by a delineation of the strange kinship felt by the narrator about the
non-relationship between her two friends of friends: ‘The impulse seemed to me
exquisite, and that was the way I took it’ (p. 348). And: ‘She had been to him—yes,
and by an impulse as charming as he liked; but oh she hadn’t been in the body! It was
a simple question of evidence’ (p. 351). For a moment, ‘been to’ buzzes between the
senses of ‘visited’ and ‘meant to’: ‘She had been to him’—but the dash marks the
point where, as with the disappearance of ‘ghost’ before it, the word ‘impulse’ will
surge back into the woman’s narrative. The dash acts as a sort of grammatical shock-
tactic to mark the re-emergence of ‘impulse’. Indeed, James’s notebook jottings that

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23 Lustig points out this fact about *The Turn of the Screw*: ‘One of the most notable absences in the
narrative of the governess is that of the word “ghost”. The only use of the word in the text occurs when
Douglas speaks cautiously, and with reference only to Griffin’s story, of a “ghost, or whatever it was”’. See
*Henry James and the Ghostly*, p. 126.
proved the genesis of ‘The Friends of the Friends’ show how he believed the narrator’s ‘impulse of reparation’ would prove one of the turning points in the story. Impulses abound in fiction concerned with the supernatural that appeared in the final years of the nineteenth century, influenced in part, no doubt, by the word’s use in the pages of the Proceedings and Journal of the SPR. Phantasms of the Living refers repeatedly to ‘telepathic impulses’ to describe the ways in which apparitions might be transmitted from a dying person to a friend or loved one during the moments prior to death. But ‘impulse’ also resounds with wider connotations of influence and sensual awakening in fiction of the period. Consider the almost telepathic ‘impulses’ that the impulsive Dorian Gray experiences. Shortly after meeting Lord Henry for the first time, Dorian feels a growing bewilderment, a form of inner awakening. Originally, he did not. Between the manuscript and the typescript of the 1890 text, Wilde added several paragraphs outlining the youth’s state of mind:

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh impulses were at work within him, and they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him—words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful paradox in them—had yet touched some secret chord, that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses.

These ‘impulses’—picked up again later in the paragraph by the word ‘pulses’—are the first hint of the strange influence that Lord Henry will come to exercise over him. The language itself pulses and vibrates: there is really very little difference between ‘vibrating’ and ‘throbbing’, yet both verbs are used to generate a rhythmical vibration within the text to correspond to the pulsing that Dorian is feeling within himself. These are ‘curious pulses’, and therefore not merely the pulse of a quickening heartbeat but the vibration of a deeper excitement, a spiritual or unconscious awakening of the mind or soul. The word ‘impulses’ would be changed to

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‘influences’ for the 1891 revision of the text, which would appear to diminish the impulsive forcefulness of this passage.\textsuperscript{27} The word ‘influences’, however, serves to heighten the subtle rhythm and message of the text, suggesting the inflowing of a more permanent and potentially more compelling power rather than a mere (and possibly short-lived) ‘impulse’. ‘Influence’ implies a steady influx or inflow of ideas and effects rather than the heady, sporadic impact of an ‘impulse’. Thus the passage—first by being added to the text at all, and then by being modified by the substitution of one word for another—highlights in a subtle and almost secret fashion the inauguration of the influence Lord Henry will exert over Dorian, from this point onwards.

The impulses of James’s text are even more far-reaching. They feed into the spiritual and psychical issue of the ‘ghostly’ visitation that the male character experiences, and build an almost invisible network or kinship between him and the female friend. Impulses also interested Henry’s brother, William James, who in the first of his lectures published as the 1902 work \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience} would write: ‘If the inquiry be psychological, not religious institutions, but religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography.’\textsuperscript{28} The repetition of ‘religious’ (not ‘religious feelings and impulses’ but ‘religious feelings and religious impulses’) adds an extra impulsion to the words, highlighting the difference between instinctive emotion and organised religion. Impulses are part of ‘subjective phenomena’ because they can never be anything other than subjective; one of the subjective phenomena James will go on to discuss, of course, is hallucination. Hallucination is tied up with the idea of ‘motor impulses’:

\begin{quote}
Interpreting the unknown after the analogy of the known, it seems to me that hereafter, wherever we meet with a phenomenon of automatism, be it motor impulses, or obsessive idea, of unaccountable caprice, or delusion, or hallucination, we are bound first of all to make search whether it be not an
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} See Michael Patrick Gillespie’s note to this passage in \textit{Dorian Gray}, p. 199, n. 5.
\textsuperscript{28} William James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature} (London: Longmans, Green, 1902; repr. 1915), p. 3.
explosion, into the fields of ordinary consciousness, of ideas elaborated outside of those fields of subliminal regions of the mind.\(^{29}\)

This idea had been set out in slightly different terms by Edmund Gurney in his 1886 work *Phantasms of the Living*, which he co-authored with Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore: ‘Physiologically,’ Gurney wrote, ‘we might compare these undeveloped flashes of hallucination to a motor effect which, instead of taking the complex form of automatic writing, is limited to a single start or twitch.’\(^{30}\) Moreover, he suggested that ‘the sequel of a telepathic impulse might be a single tremor or vibration … and in the rudimentary hallucinations the stimulation of the sensory centre may be conceived as of the same simple and explosive sort.’\(^{31}\) Indeed, in some cases of hallucination he was led to the supposition ‘that each of the parties might receive a telepathic impulse from the other, and so each be at once agent and percipient.’\(^{32}\) ‘Impulse’ is the key word: for Gurney, hallucinations of the dying can be explained, in part, by telepathic impulses.

Hallucinations are the focal point of Gurney’s *Phantasms of the Living*. Although the title seems to preclude all discussion of apparitions of dead people, Gurney’s book does devote much word space to exploring the issue of apparitions of the dying: ‘The authors particularly focused on apparitions of dying people,’ Janet Oppenheim notes, ‘perceived by geographically distant friends and relatives who had no knowledge of the impending demise.’\(^{33}\) Indeed, rather than view such occurrences as mere chance, ‘the authors sought to elucidate these apparitions as hallucinatory images produced through the varying operations of telepathy.’\(^{34}\) Gurney’s aim in *Phantasms of the Living* was to explore the idea that, as Alex Owen succinctly puts it, ‘the phantasm corresponds to something that is actually occurring elsewhere.’\(^{35}\) Apparitions of the dying form a considerable bulk of the cases Gurney examines. As

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 235.
\(^{30}\) Gurney, *Phantasms*, II, pp. 73-74.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 74.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 153.
\(^{34}\) Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 142.
Owen explains, ‘a young woman might suddenly become aware of the figure of a close friend in the room, and perceive her in full day attire, suitably coiffured, and so on, when in fact, unbeknown to her, her friend was at that moment lying in bed and at the point of death.’ Clearly, either such occurrences were down to chance, or they were the result of some as-yet unexplained phenomenon such as telepathy. Gurney began his chapter on ‘The Theory of Chance-Coincidence’ by stating:

An issue has now to be seriously considered which I have several times referred to as a fundamental one, but which could not be treated without a preliminary study of the subject of sensory hallucinations. That, as I have tried to show, is the order of natural phenomena to which ‘phantasms of the living’ in general belong; they are to be regarded as projections of the percipient’s brain by which his senses are deceived. We have further found that in a certain number of cases—which may be taken as representing the still larger number to be cited in the following chapters—a phantasm of this kind is alleged to have coincided very closely in time with the death, or some serious crisis in the life, of the person whose presence is suggested.

This is a book which James certainly owned: Peter G. Beidler tells us that James bought a copy of *Phantasms of the Living* in Christmas 1886, shortly after its publication. Whether the idea of a person’s ghost manifesting itself to somebody at the moment of that first person’s death was in some way suggested to James by Gurney’s book, is something we shall probably never know for certain. Nevertheless, we can deduce with some certainty that James had read *Phantasms*, or at the very least was familiar with its contents, since in the preface to the 1908 New York edition of *The Golden Bowl* (also containing *The Turn of the Screw*) he writes, referring to such psychical cases in detail:

Different signs and circumstances, in the reports, mark these cases; different things are done—though on the whole very little appears to be—by the persons appearing; the point is, however, that some things are never done at

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36 Ibid., p. 172.
all: this negative quantity is large—certain reserves and properties and immobilities consistently impose themselves.³⁹

‘The Friends of the Friends’ might then be seen as an attempt to take the contemporary language employed by psychical researchers to the analysis of ghosts and to fuse this sense of realism with a situation that contained powerful internal drama and romantic conflict. Indeed, David Seed notes of the word ‘testimony’ in ‘The Friends of the Friends’ that it ‘reflects the legalistic self-consciousness of recording apparitions induced by the publications of the Society for Psychical Research’; moreover, ‘the story contains a number of challenges to authenticate its various accounts.’⁴⁰ James may well have been familiar with the pages of Phantasms that discuss this ‘theory of chance-coincidence’; such a thing would hardly be a coincidence itself.

This problem of coincidence is one which Gurney spends considerable time discussing. He writes:

Nay, if we take even one of our critics, and bring him fairly face to face with the question, ‘If you all at once saw in your room a brother whom you had believed to be a hundred miles away; if he disappeared without the door opening; and if an hour later you received a telegram announcing his sudden death—how should you explain the occurrence’? he does not as a rule reply, ‘His day and hour for dying happened also to be my day and hour for a spectral illusion, which is natural enough, considering how common the latter experience is.’ The line that he takes is, ‘The supposition is absurd; there are no really authentic cases of that sort.’ Under the immediate pressure of the supposed facts, he instinctively feels that the argument of chance-coincidence would not seem effective.⁴¹

Indeed, through careful calculation based on recorded cases, and in keeping with the procedure of the Society for Psychical Research, Gurney worked out that ‘the probability that the hallucination and the death will fall within 12 hours of one another’ is ‘1 in 4,114,545’; calculating it a different way, he worked out the chance

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⁴⁰ Seed, “Psychical” Cases’, p. 46.
⁴¹ Gurney, Phantasms, II, p. 5.
of the two events coinciding through mere accident as being ‘about a thousand billion trillion trillion trillions to 1.’ Gurney’s reasoning here is somewhat startling:

We do not know why the conditions of death generally, or of sudden death, or of any particular form of death, or of excitement or collapse, should be effective; but we at all events know that the conditions are themselves unusual. Similarly in most cases of experimental thought-transference, the agent’s mind is unusually occupied by its concentrated fixation on a single object; and whether it be in the curiosities of an afternoon or in the crises of a lifetime that telepathy finds its occasion, the peculiarity of the agent’s state has at any rate that degree of explanatory power which succeeds in connecting the rare effect with the rare cause. In neither case can we trace out the actual process whereby the percipient is influenced; but we have the same sort of ground for refusing to attribute to chance the oft-repeated apparitions at the time of death, as the oft-repeated successes in guessing cards and reproducing diagrams.

With arguments like this, one can see why one Times reviewer of Phantasms of the Living found it necessary to observe that explaining such apparitions ‘by telepathy was surely, in the present condition of our knowledge, to beg the whole question.’ Furthermore, the comparison with card games does not help his case, since even open-minded empiricists who believed in the possibility of telepathy would not necessarily see any such paranormal activity at work in a game of cards. The vagueness of ‘the conditions of death generally, or of sudden death, or of any particular form of death’ is counter-productive too. It denies specificity precisely where it is most needed.

Andrew Lang was clearer when, in 1894, he wrote about this theory of chance-coincidence:

Precisely, hallucinations do occur; the only question is, do coincidences correspond with them more frequently than the laws of chance allow for, or are the hallucinations and the coincidences so common as to suggest a causal connection? Lord Brougham, as a boy, made a covenant with a friend that he who died first should appear to the survivor. The friend went to India. Many years passed; the friend was not in Lord Brougham’s conscious

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42 Ibid., p. 17.
43 Ibid., p. 27.
44 Cited in Oppenheim, The Other World, p. 142.
mind when he appeared to that nobleman in his bath! The friend’s day for
dying chanced to coincide with Lord Brougham’s day for having an
hallucination. This is very scientific, but it is also scientific to ask whether
such coincidences are more frequent than mere chance will explain. Oddly
enough the writer’s rural friend, already spoken of, at once introduces the
phrase, ‘the supernatural’. This argument is a mere survival. Nobody is
talking about ‘the supernatural’; we are merely discussing the rather
unusual. A ‘wraith,’ if wraiths there be, is as natural as an indigestion.45

This is not clear as to whether it would treat such coincidences as hallucinations born
of the unconscious mind or images projected by a close relative at a crisis moment
(the possible ‘causal connection’). In fence-sitting as it does, it sums and summons up
the division within the SPR between Gurney’s and Myers’ respective theories of the
causes of hallucination, namely telepathy and the subliminal self. The semi-facetious
comparison of wraiths with indigestion, calling for a refusal of the ghostly *per se*, was
nothing new. Dickens even had Scrooge use it to describe the unreliability of his
senses: addressing Marley’s ghost, he dismisses it as a ‘slight disorder of the
stomach’, or possibly ‘an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese,
a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you,
whatever you are!’46

But for Henry James the matter was at least as much about graves as
gravies. Both James brothers wrote about hallucination, one in the form of
philosophical inquiry and the other in the form of the ghost story. Their father, Henry
James Senior, ‘had been fascinated by the various forms and spiritualism and
possession by spirits’, as Peter G. Beidler has pointed out; indeed, the early founders
of the SPR ‘praised Henry James’s father as an early and reliable observer of spiritual
phenomena.’47 Moreover, both had an interest in the activities of the Society for
Psychical Research: William James was president of the British SPR from 1894 until
1896, the same time that his brother was developing and writing the story that became
‘The Friends of the Friends’.48 As Beidler notes:

45 Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), pp. xi-xii.
48 Ibid., p. 15.
There can be no doubt [...] that Henry James knew about the Society for Psychical Research. Henry James was personally acquainted with Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, and Frederic Myers. He also knew Arthur Balfour, the brother of Mrs. Sidgwick and an active member of the society. And just before Christmas 1886, James bought a copy of Gurney’s *Phantasms of the Living*.49

Not only this, but in October 1890, Henry James would read out a paper written by his brother, William, at a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research, an idea which William himself described to his brother as ‘the most comical thing I ever heard of.’50

But James was aware of the potential problems of drawing too heavily on the findings of psychical research when it came to writing fiction. He would later write in his 1908 preface to *The Turn of the Screw*: ‘Recorded and attested “ghosts” are in other words as little expressive, as little dramatic, above all as little continuous and conscious and responsive, as is consistent with their taking the trouble—and an immense trouble they find it, we gather—to appear at all.’51 This connects pointedly with Andrew Lang’s misgivings in 1894 about the practicability of fusing fiction with the scientific approach of the Society for Psychical Research:

Readers of the Proceedings of the Psychical Society will see that the modern ghost is a purposeless creature. He appears nobody knows why; he has no message to deliver, no secret crime to reveal, no appointment to keep, no treasure to disclose, no commissions to be executed, and, as an almost invariable rule, he does not speak.52

Peter G. Beidler has pointed out that there is ‘ample evidence [...] of [James’s] interest in the [...] many reported cases of “real” ghosts.’53 But James’s decision, in *The Turn of the Screw*, to ‘renounce’54 the idea of apparitions as they are documented in the annals of the Society for Psychical Research shows that James could choose the dramatic over the scientific, and do so successfully. But in ‘The Friends of the

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50 Cited in ibid., p. 153.
52 Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), p. 95.
Friends’ he had already shown that it was possible to write a ghost story which would sound plausible in the age of psychical research while at the same time steering clear of the categories and terminology employed by the society.

James knew, as his namesake and contemporary Montague Rhodes did, that suggestion was an important element of all ghost stories, and that the real fear that ghost stories generated was more about anticipation than about the actual revelation itself. The story’s original title, ‘The Way It Came’, demonstrates this by immediately presenting the reader with a mystery. What is ‘it’? To what thing does that pronoun refer? It hangs there, between ‘way’ (itself suggestive of not only ‘manner’ but also ‘direction’ or ‘route’) and ‘came’ (a deictic marker suggesting something not so much receding as approaching, albeit in the past). As with Machen’s title change from *Phantasmagoria* to *The Hill of Dreams*, James’s change of heart raises an interesting question about the language employed to explain visionary experiences. ‘The Friends of the Friends’: everything is happening at one remove, as with the strange narrator who ushers us into the world of ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. Mediation, agency, betweenness, or, to borrow James’s own word, the ‘*entremetteuse*’: these are the most striking and distinct characteristics of ‘The Friends of the Friends’.55

In one of his New York prefaces, written in 1908, James would write of his wariness of illustrations that accompanied works of fiction:

Anything that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being, while placed before us, good enough, interesting enough and, if the question be of picture, pictorial enough, above all in itself, does it the worst of services, and may well inspire in the lover of literature certain lively questions as to the future of that institution. That one should, as an author, reduce one’s reader, ‘artistically’ inclined, to such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn’t permit him to rest till he has noted or recorded them, set up some semblance of them in his own other medium, by his own other art—nothing could better consort than that, I naturally allow, with the desire or the pretension to cast a literary spell.56

This call for the visual aspect of fiction is borne out by ‘The Friends of the Friends’, where not only the ‘ghost’ of the woman is construed in visual terms (rather than the

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56 James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 332.
aurality and orality which haunt Magnus in ‘A Wicked Voice’), but we are also
witnesses to a photograph, and the fact that both of the narrator’s friends have a ‘rare
perversity in regard to being photographed’ (p. 332).

The Third Person

Time is perhaps the most powerful device in the story. Take the word ‘preconcerted’,
and the way that word places or displaces everything into either past or future. The
word ‘preconcerted’, much like James’s coinage ‘aftersense’, is disconcerting
precisely because it disturbs our usual understanding of before and after, much like
the word ‘prophesied’ with which the story opens. Here it is perhaps significant that
the story was itself a preconception or precursor to the more famous ghost story, The
Turn of the Screw. But ‘preconcerted’ is interesting because it is simultaneously
suggestive of something already worked out in the past (not ‘preconcerting’ but
‘preconcerted’), and yet of something concerning the future, being certain of
something before it has occurred. Not only this but, as James wrote in his notebooks,
the story would be about the ‘possible doubt and question of whether it was before or
after death’ that the ghost appears to the male character.58 The word ‘preconcerted’
appears twice, in rapid succession:

They were in a word alternate and incompatible; they missed each other
with an inveteracy that could be explained only by its being preconcerted. It
was however so far from preconcerted that it ended—literally after several
years—by disappointing and annoying them. (p. 333)

For ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is not really about the appearance of a ghost, but
about what happens before and after its supposed appearance. Unlike the near-
contemporary novella, J. Meade Falkner’s The Lost Stradivarius (1895), there is no
detailed and painstaking description of the moment of the ghost’s appearance. The

57 See, for instance, The Art of the Novel, p. 150; and Henry James, Autobiography, ed. by Frederick
ghostly moment itself is peculiarly absent. This story is not just about the absence of the present but the absence of presences. As the original title of the story demonstrates, it is about a ghost having visited rather than the ghost visiting. It is ‘The Way It Came’, past tense. If ‘it’, that is, ever came at all. This is in keeping with Gurney’s central ‘definition of a sensory hallucination’, namely ‘a percept which lacks, but which can only by distinct reflection be recognised as lacking, the objective basis which it suggests.’

So the decisive moment in the narrative is not when the ghost appears, but when the narrator discovers that a ghost supposedly has appeared. This dramatic point in the story depends partly on the force of the dash and on the simple word ‘saw’:

He stared with the strangest expression, his eyes searching mine as for a trap. “Last evening—after leaving you?” He repeated my words in stupefaction. Then he brought out, so that it was in stupefaction I heard, ‘Impossible! I saw her.’
‘You “saw” her?’
‘On that spot—where you stand.’

This called back to me after an instant, as if to help me to take it in, the great wonder of the warning of his youth. ‘In the hour of death—I understand: as you so beautifully saw your mother.’

‘Ah not as I saw my mother—not that way, not that way!’ (p. 347)

Here the dashes accumulate, heightening the drama of the moment (one might recall James’s own advice to novelists: ‘Dramatise, dramatise!’). But they also suggest a jolting, juddering manner of speaking, as if to highlight the breakdown of understanding between the female narrator and the man. For a moment ‘where you stand’ becomes ‘I understand’, and there seems to be a chance that they can at least appreciate each other’s feelings about the supposed vision. But this one point where they seem to understand each other is immediately negated: ‘Ah not …’

‘The phantasm,’ writes Alex Owen, summarising Gurney’s conclusions from Phantasms of the Living, ‘is a kind of telepathic hallucination produced through

59 Gurney, Phantasms, I, p. 459.
the active and imaginative involvement of the percipient. In James’s story, the narrator cannot understand how the man can possibly have ‘seen’ the woman, but then we as readers are invited to share her consternation since James denies us anything approaching a reliable description of the moment of the ghostly visitation. The method of narration—first-person rather than third-, and first-person at one remove at that—sees to this. And this is because he wishes us to share completely in the narrator’s experience of the ghost. This is why ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is not so much a ghost story as an around-the-ghost story, not about what happens when you see a ghost but what happens after someone else claims to have seen one. The narrator believes him, just as she had shown such an interest and readiness to believe in the visitation of his mother at the moment of her death. But the narrator herself is deliberately portrayed as being unreliable, passionate rather than rational, naïve rather than circumspect. However, here she is, at least to an extent, following contemporary thought. In 1886, Frederic Myers had written (note the use of that psychical word ‘testimony’ again): ‘Testimony proves that phantasms (impressions, voices, or figures) of persons undergoing some crisis,—especially death,—are perceived by their friends and relatives with a frequency which mere chance cannot explain.’ That’s all well and good for friends; but what about ‘friends of friends’?

The narrator is therefore reluctant to accept the man’s account of the ghostly apparition as undeniable fact: ‘You had a visit, at an extraordinary hour, from a lady—soit: nothing in the world’s more probable. But there are ladies and ladies’ (p. 352). But her doubts seem to stem more from her jealousy than her rational scepticism: it is not the fact that a lady has appeared to the man that prompts her suspicion, rather the fact that it is this specific lady. She goes on to ask the question that every reader of the story must be thinking: ‘How in the name of goodness, if she was unannounced and dumb and you had into the bargain never seen the least portrait of her—how could you identify the person we’re talking of?’ (pp. 352-3). The man’s reply is itself a question: ‘Haven’t I to absolute satiety heard her described? I’ll describe her for you in every particular’ (p. 353).

60 Owen, Place of Enchantment, p. 172.
61 Frederic Myers, ‘Introduction’ to Gurney, Phantasms, I, p. lxvi.
Glen Cavaliero has written of this story that ‘uncertainty as to the supernatural becomes the crux of a personal drama.’\(^{62}\) Indeed, the narrator ‘maintains that this is a ghostly visitation, an easier supposition to bear than is his, that it was a physical encounter. Aware of a continuing relationship between the two, she comes to realize that her own interpretation is even more destructive than is his’\(^{63}\).

The other-world has proved more powerful than the material one, since it imposes its own verdict upon it. The story, indeed, is double: the narrator’s interpretation of what she has been told emerges as a determining reality of a potency equal to the specific manifestation which she knows of only at one remove (and the reader at two). In this story, the actual ‘appearance’ being offstage, the spiritual relationship between the three people involved is fully developed on its own terms. The supernatural here assists James to convey what would otherwise be the incommunicable.\(^{64}\)

James’s positing of the two possibilities—physical or supernatural—actually succeeds in suggesting a third possibility, one hidden within the language of the story. That is the possibility of hallucination. The man’s belief that the appearance was physical is seemingly negated by the time and place at which the visitation occurred; the narrator’s unreliability renders her belief in a supernatural cause somewhat suspect. Given the well-known and widely discussed cases of apparitions of the dying, in *Phantasms of the Living* and elsewhere, the possibility of hallucination emerges as an equally plausible, though undecided, possibility. James refuses to draw the issue to a definite close. Why he chooses to do this is of interest in itself.

In December 1895, just before Christmas, James wrote out in his notebook some thoughts about the story that would become ‘The Way It Came’ (before it became ‘The Friends of the Friends’):

There would be various ways of doing it, and it comes to me that the thing might be related by the 3d person, according to my wont when I want something—as I always do want it—intensely objective. It’s the woman who’s the ghost—it’s the woman who comes to the man. I’ve spoken to them of each other—it’s through me, mainly, that they know of each other. I


\(^{63}\) Ibid.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., pp. 165-66.
mustn’t be too much of an *entremetteur* or an *entremetteuse*: I may even have been a little reluctant or suspicious, a little jealous, even, if the mediator is a woman.65

But ‘the 3d person’ who will narrate the finished story of ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is a world away from third-person narration, and the unsettling uses to which Oliver Onions puts that form of narrative voice in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. ‘The Friends of the Friends’ is quite pointedly a first-person narrative, first by being told in the ‘I’ of one of the principal characters, and second in being a ‘found’ text, the extracts from the woman’s diary which have been edited by the initial narrator, who opens the story with the first ‘I’ of many: ‘I find, as you prophesied ….’ Thus the text is presented not only in the Gothic or uncanny tradition of something formerly hidden which has now come to light, but as a secret and secretive text, a collection of diary extracts, personal and intensely subjective. The third person, the go-between or ‘*entremetteuse*’, is anything but ‘intensely objective’, not so much unsettling as unsettled. It is no mere coincidence that James would go on to write a ghost story pointedly titled ‘The Third Person’.66

The notion of a ‘third person’ is found in James’s other ghost stories, including *The Turn of the Screw*; at one point in her narrative, while sitting with Flora, the governess ‘began to take in with certitude and yet without direct vision the presence, a good way off, of a third person.’67 But James’s ‘3d person’ in his notebook entry is stuck between the third person (third-person narration, objectivity, omniscience) and a third person (the third person in a love triangle, the *entremetteuse* or gooseberry). It is telling that, during his note-making, he slips from the third person (referring to the *entremetteuse* of the story as ‘the 3d person’) to the first person (‘I’ve spoken to them of each other’). After all, when James writes that using ‘the 3d person’ would enable the story to be ‘intensely objective’, he is referring to third-person narration, but the fact that he eschewed this form of narration when he

65 *Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, p. 144.
66 ‘The Third Person’ first appeared in 1900, four years after the publication of ‘The Friends of the Friends’. Like that story, it is concerned with the relationship between men and women: it tells of two middle-aged spinsters who inherit a house and are visited by a ghost.
came to write the story suggests that objectivity, intense or otherwise, was, for once, not to be his aim. This is important because the narrative voice James chooses to tell his story in changes the way we view the so-called ghostly revelation (except that word, ‘ghost’, is not used about the actual event: itself highly suggestive).

The narrator’s unreliability is important because it transforms the story from merely a first-person account of a ghostly occurrence (the sort found among the 702 cases of apparitions discussed by Gurney in *Phantasms of the Living*) into a story about jealousy, love, and control. The ghost is that most ghostly of things, a liminal figure. T. J. Lustig has written thoughtfully of the narrator’s failing grip on the facts:

The tale contains slight but unmistakable indications of the narrator’s unreliability. She tells her fiancé that her friend looked at his photograph during their final meeting whereas in fact this incident occurred during a previous visit. She claims she had said to herself that there was a ‘relation’ between her two friends whereas it was her female friend who spoke of the ‘relation’.68

These are the factual elements of her unreliability, but there is also the important issue of her emotional engagement with both the male and female friends. We need look no further than the issue of her jealousy for evidence of her vanishing objectivity. On 21st December, James’s embryonic narrator ‘may’ turn out, he posited, to be ‘a little jealous’. But this seed of jealousy grew and festered over the Christmas season, until on 10th January he was writing more confidently of the story, and had planned the moment of the appearance of the woman’s ‘ghost’ to the man shortly before her death:

The marvel of this, the comparison of notes. The possible doubt and question of whether it was before or after death. The ambiguity—the possibility. The view we take—the view I take. The effect of this view upon me. From here to the end, the attitude, on the subject, is mine: the return of my jealousy, the imputation of the difference that seeing her has made in him; the final rupture that comes entirely from ME and from my imputations and suspicions. I am jealous of the dead; I feel, or I imagine I feel, his

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detachment, his alienation, his coldness—and the last words of my statement are: ‘He sees her—he sees her: I know he sees her!’ x x x x x

Again, the emphasis on the first-person pronouns, ‘I’ and ‘me’, is supported by the fact that James here has slipped into the mind of the narrator, is already narrating the story, in a sense. Indeed, the emphatic italics lose all power to emphasise, as ‘I’ and ‘me’ give way to ‘him’; and when James returns to the first-person mode, he feels compelled to resort to capital letters to adumbrate the importance of first-person perspective: ‘ME’. Such pronominal emphasis was to make it into the final story, when the female narrator announces to the male friend: ‘Well, you must take it now as I wish—you must let me go’ (p. 355). ‘I’ and ‘me’, not ‘you’, are italicised.

James’s planned final words of the narrator (‘He sees her—he sees her: I know he sees her!’) contain a dense accumulation of pronouns—seven out of the eleven words, in fact. The dash that separates ‘her’ from ‘he’ marks a separation between man and woman that the story has been out to highlight: not just the gulf between the living and dead that separates the two friends, but the difference of feeling that divides the man from the female narrator. It is telling that James chose not to use a second dash but a colon to divide the second ‘her’ from the personal pronoun ‘I’: the gulf is not between woman and woman, but between the sexes. Dashes are powerful things in this story. That planned final sentence of the narrator’s shares something with Henry Jekyll’s joltingly pronominal utterance: ‘He, I say—I cannot say, I.’ There, too, the dash forms a cutting void that becomes almost a language in itself.

The narrator’s final words in the finished story are not, in fact, ‘He sees her—he sees her: I know he sees her!’ although these words, in a slightly different form, do appear in the story near the end of her final confrontation with the man: ‘You see her—you see her: you see her every night!’ (p. 362). The difference is obvious. The first-person pronoun has disappeared. Instead, the narrator refers merely to her two friends, bypassing all mention of herself and addressing the man directly.

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70 Robert Louis Stevenson, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales, ed. by Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 63.
In some ways, James’s story is markedly different from ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, ‘Markheim’, and The Hill of Dreams. Those texts all focus—sometimes painstakingly—on the moment of vision, on the details of hallucination. It seems ironic, on the surface, that the one text out of these four which is written from the first-person perspective should be the one with the least detailed description of the personal moment of hallucination or vision. However, because James displaces the event, and chooses to tell his tale from the point of view of one who does not witness the vision, he is able to explore the relationship between the man and woman, and between the living and the dead, in an unusual but effective way. In a sense the vision is not the central moment of the story at all; it merely brings the narrator’s jealousy to a head, and the confrontation between her and the male character is the grand scene of the story. It was in doing this that James created an environment where he could go on to create The Turn of the Screw, which not only eschews talk of the ‘ghost’ but also unsettles our understanding of what it is to experience a ‘ghost’. Virginia Woolf, when writing of ‘The Friends of the Friends’, is alive to this notion of a new way of approaching the ghost story, and her summary of the strange experience of reading this story is among the best criticism of it that has been written (and serves to remind us of James’s own remark, with its curiously placed comma, that the public’s reading of an artist constitutes ‘the not unthinkable private, exercise of penetration’).\(^{71}\)

The live man and the dead woman have met alone at night. They have their relationship. The spiritual and the carnal meeting together produce a strange emotion—not exactly fear, nor yet excitement. It is a feeling that we do not immediately recognize. There is a weak spot in our armour somewhere. Perhaps Henry James will penetrate by methods such as these.\(^{72}\)

\(^{71}\) James, Art of the Novel, p. 228.

Phantasmagorias

In ‘The Reality of the Unseen’, the third lecture he gave as part of the series that was published as *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James remarks:

> It often happens that an hallucination is imperfectly developed: the person affected will feel a ‘presence’ in the room, definitely localized, facing in one particular way, real in the most emphatic sense of the word, often coming suddenly, and as suddenly gone; and yet neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual ‘sensible’ ways.¹

Like Oliver Onions’ delineation of the ghost as something whose ‘proximity [may] be felt and his nature apprehended in other ways’ than by being ‘seen by the eye’, James here highlights the way in which many supposedly supernatural experiences are labelled as such because the experience of them cannot be attributed to what might be called the ‘traditional’ senses.² Such is the nature of James’s gently ambiguous ‘sensible’, where the quotation marks point up this inability to pin down what one has felt (if ‘felt’ is quite the word). James’s ‘sensible’ hovers between the neutral meaning (perceived by the senses, such as sight, sound, touch, and so on) and the other, more loaded meaning (or, if you will, the sense) of the word ‘sensible’: that is, ‘having or showing wisdom or common sense; reasonable, judicious’ (*OED*). The conventional Aristotelian idea that there are five senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, smell—left a considerable amount of scope for undefined and unusual experiences which therefore became attributed to a so-called sixth sense, because the ‘presence’ being felt (the quotation marks are James’s) could not be ascribed to conventional sight, sound, and so on. ‘[M]en’, as Arthur Machen has it in *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), ‘are continually led astray by the cheat of the senses’, and the word ‘cheat’ is

meant to hit us here with full force. The echo of William Blake’s idea that man was ‘clos’d by [his] senses five’ was also to open up Machen’s protagonist to a new way of seeing the world around him.

Machen was one of a number of writers who, around the turn of the century, produced supernatural stories and novels which, like many of the experiments and investigations carried out by the Society for Psychical Research around the same time, fused science with spiritualism, the psychological with the mystical. Indeed, for a short time Machen was a member of not only the Society for Psychical Research but also the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an occult group whose experiments Machen described as being ‘halfway between psychology and magic’. Indeed, in a piece published in September 1898 titled ‘Science and the Ghost Story’, Machen wrote with some cynicism that ‘there are few steps between the laboratory and the séance’.

Andrew Lang was another author and psychical research enthusiast who noted the scientific flavour that many of the new ghost stories carried. In ‘Ghosts up to Date’ (1894), he remarked that ‘ghost stories, the delight of Christmas Eve, have been ravaged and annexed by psychology’, and makes the important point:

Now there are many educated persons, who, if asked, ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ would answer, ‘We believe in apparitions; but we do not believe that the apparition is the separable or surviving soul of a living or a dead man. We believe that it is a hallucination, projected by the brain of the percipient, which, again, in some instances, is influenced so as to project that hallucination, by some agency not at present understood’. To this experience of the percipient, who is sensible, by emotion, by sight, hearing, or touch, or by all of these at once, of the presence of the absent, or of the dead, the name telepathy (feeling produced at a distance) is given. Any one

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3 Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 143. All subsequent references to this text will be given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.
may believe, and many do believe, in telepathy, yet not believe in the old-fashioned ghost.\(^7\)

Indeed, his interest in psychical phenomena led to numerous essays on the subject of ghosts and hallucinations. He heard and read a great number of accounts of ghostly happenings, many of which he found ‘palpably ridiculous’.\(^8\) (It is indicative of just how popular such studies were that in 1894, the same year as Lang’s essays were published, the Society for Psychical Research published its 400-page ‘Census of Hallucinations’, containing some 830 first-hand accounts of ‘apparitions’.)\(^9\) Lang concluded that ‘the identity of the alleged phenomena, in all lands and all ages, does raise a presumption in favour of some kind of abnormal occurrences, or of a common species of hallucinations’.\(^10\) As Roger Luckhurst comments, ‘The order of this hedged bet—abnormal phenomena before hallucination—indicated that Lang had absorbed psychical research, and was using its categories to order anthropological data.’\(^11\) Not only that, but the obvious yet crucial point that Lang, a staunch supporter of the romance genre of fiction, considers the ‘abnormal’ as a more preferable, if not more likely, cause for these apparitions.

For many, including Lang himself, the scientific approach of psychical research and the ultimately imaginative nature of fiction were, however, largely incompatible. As Luckhurst frames it, many viewed ‘the dogged empiricism of psychical research as ruinous to the hesitation, the suspense between natural and supernatural explanations, theorized by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic*’.\(^12\) And yet the supernatural tales of such writers as Algernon Blackwood and William Hope Hodgson, which began to appear in the early years of the twentieth century, showed that the two disciplines could coexist with some (albeit limited) success. But perhaps it is in Arthur Machen’s fiction that hallucination, specifically, is most vividly drawn.

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\(^7\) Andrew Lang, ‘Ghosts up to Date’ (1894), in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c. 1880-1900*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 286, 287.

\(^8\) Cited in Luckhurst, *Invention of Telepathy*, p. 162.


\(^10\) Luckhurst, *Invention of Telepathy*, p. 162.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Ibid., p. 187.
as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, akin (yet not identical) to Jonathan Harrison’s talk of ‘quasi-hallucinations’, which ‘differ from ordinary hallucinations in that they are paranormally induced and that they give some objective information about the world, such as that a near relative, whom the quasi-hallucination resembles, has recently died.’

Machen, as a keen enthusiast of many things occult and mystical, was well acquainted with the ambiguity surrounding such terms as ‘ghost’, ‘apparition’, and ‘phantom’, and the investigations that were being undertaken at the time to determine the source of ghostly occurrences. His relationship with the ghostly is perhaps mostly famously symbolised through his part in the creation and subsequent popularity of the ‘Angel of Mons’ legend in the First World War. But Machen knew well that the term ‘ghostly’ need not always imply the straightforwardly supernatural. And it is knowledge he puts to good use in his novel *The Hill of Dreams*, while describing the fantasies of the novel’s protagonist, Lucian Taylor: ‘Even as he struggled to beat back the phantasmagoria of the mist, and resolved that he would no longer make all the streets a stage of apparitions, he hardly realised what he had done, or that the ghosts he had called might depart and return again’ (p. 184). At this point in the novel, we are still unclear as to whether Lucian really has ‘called’ these apparitions, at least consciously, or whether he has been hallucinating, these ‘ghosts’ being the product of his unconscious. Machen well knew the suggestiveness of such phantasmal words; he even toyed with the possibility of calling the novel *Phantasmagoria* while he was engaged in writing it during the 1890s. Such a book would have been very different, or at least our expectations of it, since the word ‘phantasmagoria’ itself is so rich in meaning, almost dizzyingly alive with possible senses and implications. It also points up Machen’s own attitude to the novel he was writing, namely that it would position

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14 ‘The Bowmen’ originally appeared in the *Evening News* on 29 September 1914. As Mark Valentine puts it: ‘By a process which can now only be conjectured, but which is evident again and again in the diffusion of folklore, the story and variations upon it began to be repeated as fact, and by the spring of 1915 the assertion that there was indeed supernatural intervention at Mons gained widespread credence.’ See Valentine, *Arthur Machen* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995), pp. 99-100.
15 Ibid., p. 53.
itself somewhere between ‘psychology and magic’, inhabiting a borderland between hard scientific fact and mystical, supernatural fantasy.

The word ‘phantasmagoria’ is an intriguing choice. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines ‘phantasmagoria’ as ‘a shifting series of real or imaginary figures as seen in a dream’ and ‘an optical device for rapidly varying the size of images on a screen’. Several things about this definition are of interest here. First, the word ‘phantasmagoria’ suggests a vision that can be either real or imaginary. Thus it can be hallucinated, dreamt, or thought; conversely, it can be ‘real’, in the sense that it is not hallucinated, but is actually perceptible, and therefore, to an extent, an objective vision. Second, the word ‘phantasmagoria’ can describe either an abstract experience of moving images or a concrete, tangible ‘device’ for ‘rapidly varying the size of images on a screen’. From Machen’s title alone, it is impossible to say with any certainty which of these two senses is intended. The novel could be about a phantasmagoria (that is, sense two) or the novel itself could be a phantasmagoria (in sense one). The title refuses to say, left hovering between the real and the possibly unreal or imaginary.

Mark Valentine has remarked, ‘Machen may have intended in the original title a deliberate ambiguity both about what happens on the hill, and as to the actuality of all Lucian’s later visions’. That is to say, the either/or of the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*’s ‘real or imaginary’ points up that a phantasmagoria can imply either something imagined in the mind or something that is actually there, whether by natural or supernatural means. Phantasmagoria is, after all, etymologically linked to the word ‘phantasm’. ‘Phantasm’ itself has an almost spectrally evasive entry in the dictionary: ‘an illusion, a phantom […] an illusory likeness […] a supposed vision of an absent (living or dead) person’. What does the dictionary mean by ‘a supposed vision’? In doubting the veracity of a phantasmal vision, the dictionary attempts to capture the ambiguity or spurious authenticity of the ‘phantasm’. But ‘vision’ itself invites ambiguous readings, suggesting both supernatural (even religious) and psychological (that is, imagined) experiences: how can a ‘vision’ be ‘supposed’ to be anything, when ‘vision’ itself covers a multitude of different experiences? But the

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16 Ibid., p. 54.
real evasion comes when the dictionary tries to explain the origins of the second half of that word, ‘phantasmagoria’. The whole etymological entry reads thus:

prob. f. F *fantasmagorie* (as PHANTOM + fanciful ending)

The almost comical fancifulness of the entry, descending into language that only vaguely sounds like technical linguistic terminology, is itself interesting. That ‘fanciful ending’, which cannot be traced back to any precedent (or concedent), sounds like a lexicographical cop-out, the dictionary’s unwillingness or inability to explain in satisfactory terms the real meaning of the -agorie that rounds off the phantasmagoria in the original French. Even the ‘prob.’ admits that it cannot say for certain that this is the correct origin.

The phantasmagoria thus suggests an evasion or ambiguity of language, one that cannot be completely done away with. It is perhaps mere coincidence that ‘phantasm’ stems from the Greek *phantazō*, which itself is ultimately derived from the verb *phainō* meaning ‘show’, while the word ‘fanciful’—used to such bathetic effect in the second half of the etymology—is also derived from the same Greek root, *phainō*, ‘show’. The entry for ‘phantasmagoria’ is not only evasive and uncertain about the facts it puts forward, but there is also a measure of circularity to the language it uses to articulate this uncertainty. The *Oxford English Dictionary* itself scarcely manages to impart the spurious origins of the word any better: after claiming that the second part of the word is probably from ‘-agora’, the Greek for ‘place of assembly’, the dictionary goes on to admit, in parentheses: ‘But the inventor of the word prob. only wanted a mouth-filling and startling term, and may have fixed on -agoria without any reference to the Greek lexicon’. So much for that: it is enough to note the trouble the word appears to have caused the most prominent lexicographers. Phantasmagorias are anything but linguistically (or indeed semantically) straightforward.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* itself offers this definition for ‘phantasmagoria’: ‘A shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures, as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created
by literary description’. The first recorded use of the word in this sense, the OED tells us, was 1803. This definition is even more ambiguous and circular: ‘A shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures’ posits the fact that a phantasmagoria can involve either supernatural images—that is, ‘phantasms’—or ‘imaginary figures’. So far so good: the supernatural/psychological ambiguity remains. And yet if we turn to the OED definition of the word ‘phantasm’, we find the following: ‘Illusion, deceptive appearance’; ‘An illusion, an appearance that has no reality; a deception, a figment; an unreal or imaginary being, an unreality; a phantom’; and ‘An apparition, a spirit or supposed incorporeal being appearing to the eyes, a ghost’. Again, that seems fair enough. A ‘phantasm’ is, broadly speaking, either an ‘illusion’ or a ‘ghost’. And yet the dictionary goes on to admit that this last, ghostly sense is ‘Now only poet. or rhet.’ Thus the outward appearance of the word ‘phantasm’—that is, that it signifies both supernatural and psychological illusions—is deceptive and illusory, since the essential meaning of ‘phantasm’ boils down to psychological roots, not supernatural ones. The word retains a ghostly association without signifying anything so ghostly in actual fact. As Terry Castle has put it, ‘since its invention, the term phantasmagoria, like one of Freud’s ambiguous primary words, has shifted meaning in an interesting way. From an initial connection with something external and public … the word has now come to refer to something wholly internal or subjective: the phantasmic imagery of the mind.’17 But words have a habit of carrying around the ghosts of their former meanings with them, and ‘phantasmagoria’ cannot quite ‘wholly’ shrug off its initial sense.

Before we leave the dictionary definition for ‘phantasmagoria’ behind us, let us consider one final feature of the main definition: ‘a shifting series of real or imaginary figures as seen in a dream’. ‘As seen in a dream’: that is, as either experienced literally in a dream, or experienced only as though in a dream or dreamlike state. The ‘as’ invites either reading. When we experience a phantasmagoria, therefore, the shifting series of figures we see can either be real (whether that means they are seen through a phantasmagoria, that is, ‘an optical

device for rapidly varying the size of images on a screen’, or via some other, perhaps supernatural, means) or imaginary, which implies something dreamed or dreamlike. Therefore, presumably, the imaginary figures can be either deliberately imagined (as in a daydream or other conscious process of thought) or imagined beyond one’s control (as in a dream or hallucination). But the idea that a phantasmagoria can involve wilfully imagining a series of shifting figures is almost altogether ruled out by that qualifier, ‘as seen in a dream’: dreams, in the purely psychological sense of the word, are anything but deliberate on the part of the dreamer. Therefore some sort of waking dream is implied, so that the phantasmagoria is an experience of something that is like a dream without being literally dreamy in its nature. It retains a sense of reality, experienced while the spectator is awake and in the real world, which dreams cannot possess. What this definition implies but refuses to spell out is that the phantasmagoria is, essentially, a hallucinatory experience.

This is something that Machen no doubt had in mind when he plants the word in the first chapter, when Lucian wakes up the day after his hillfort experience:

Lucian tossed and cried out in his sleep that night, and the awakening in the morning was, in a measure, a renewal of the awakening in the fort. But the impression was not so strong, and in a plain room it seemed all delirium, a phantasmagoria. (p. 22)

Here, as with the dictionary, ‘phantasmagoria’ does not imply ‘dream’. The narrator does not appear to be saying, ‘and it was all a dream’, but is suggesting that, to Lucian’s freshly awakened mind, his experience at the fort seems like some sort of fevered hallucination, ‘all delirium’, rather than a vivid and real encounter. The subtly shifting sense of ‘awakening’ between its two appearances in this passage—first as simply ‘waking up’ and second as ‘becoming aware’—suggests the ways in which conscious and unconscious experiences are already merging together in Lucian’s mind, in ways of which he is only half aware.

‘I have thought about what I saw, or perhaps I should say about what I thought I saw, and the only conclusion I can come to is this, that the thing won’t bear
recollection. The words of Vaughan in Machen’s 1895 tale, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, written around the same time as *The Three Impostors*, and shortly before he began work on *The Hill of Dreams*. Vaughan goes on to rationalise his experience in that story: ‘As men live, I have lived soberly and honestly, in the fear of God, all my days, and all I can do is believe that I suffered from some monstrous delusion, from some phantasmagoria of the bewildered senses’. There is no equivocation here about the word ‘phantasmagoria’: it very clearly and pointedly concerns hallucination, something imagined. This makes the ambiguity of the figure of the phantasmagoria in *The Hill of Dreams* even more interesting. It may be that Machen’s continuing interest in the occult led to his writing of that novel; after the success and notoriety of *The Three Impostors*, he felt in a more favourable position as a professional writer to explore this figure in more spiritual, ambiguous terms.

If, as Mark Valentine believes, the incident on the hillfort is ‘a metaphor of sexual awakening’, then this awakening is deliberately swathed in ambiguity, since we remain uncertain as to whether it really (that is, physically) took place: ‘As he awoke, a brief and slight breeze had stirred in a nook of the matted boughs, and there was a glinting that might have been the flash of sudden sunlight across shadow, and the branches rustled and murmured for a moment, perhaps at the wind’s passage’ (p. 20). This is his first awakening—after he fell asleep on the fort ‘and lay still on the grass, in the midst of the thicket’ (p. 19)—and it is full of the phantasmagorical uncertainty that is supposed to be running through Lucian’s mind in this state of semi-wakefulness. The language of uncertainty in ‘might have been’ and ‘perhaps’ is rendered more indeterminate by the flitting nature of Lucian’s experience of his surroundings: ‘brief and slight’, ‘flash of sudden sunlight’, ‘for a moment’. ‘As he awoke’: following Mark Valentine’s persuasive suggestion, the words resound with a sexual as well as a psychological sense.

Indeed, this has already been implied through deliberately ambiguous language in the preceding passage: ‘And then he began to dream, to let his fancies

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19 Ibid.
stray over half-imagined, delicious things, indulging a virgin mind in its wanderings’ (p. 18). Is Lucian’s mind ‘a virgin mind’ because it has not experienced this ‘untrodden, unvisited’ (p. 18) landscape before, or because he is himself a virgin in sexual matters?

Not a branch was straight, not one was free, but all were interlaced and grew one about another; and just above ground, where the cankered stems joined the protuberant roots, there were forms that imitated the human shape, and faces and twining limbs that amazed him. Green mosses were hair, and tresses were stark in grey lichen; a twisted root swelled into a limb; in the hollows of the rotted bark he saw the masks of men. His eyes were fixed and fascinated by the simulacra of the wood, and could not see his hands, and so at last, and suddenly, it seemed, he lay in the sunlight, beautiful with his olive skin, dark haired, dark eyed, the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun. (pp. 18-19)

The nature of this passage suggests that we read Lucian’s experience as a sort of spiritual awakening, with the spiritual not necessarily being clearly distinguishable from the sexual. The two merge in this sensuous and powerful paragraph. In Machen’s novel, the ‘forms that imitated the human shape’ and ‘masks of men’ which Lucian sees within the trees could be just that, tricks of the eye and of the mind. There is no way of knowing whether ‘Green mosses were hair’ is to be taken literally, or read as a strong direct metaphor that forcibly conveys to us the subjective nature of Lucian’s vision. To him, the green mosses really are hair, but to the rest of the world they would perhaps appear as just mosses. At this point, there is no way of determining this, for he is, to all intents and purposes, alone. Indeed, even the word ‘vision’ seems to scheme against us, being used not to describe Lucian’s ‘dream’ (p. 18) but his bodily form: ‘the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun’. Does this mean that a faun is experiencing Lucian within its vision (itself an ambiguous idea, suggesting either plain sight or some sort of visionary experience) or that Lucian’s appearance resembles that of a faun? Either way, the syntax refuses to spell it out for us.

There is, of course, a third way of reading the passage, which involves this incident being read neither as out-and-out hallucination nor as a supernatural
personification of the woodlands. This whole scene seems to be caught somewhere between the two, as Lucian becomes ‘fascinated’ and ‘amazed’ by the beauty of the natural world, and consciously imagines the forest coming alive as a creature with limbs, hair, and a humanlike face. Such a reading would involve seeing Lucian’s ‘dream’ as neither a hallucinatory experience nor a spiritual awakening, if ‘spiritual’ necessarily implies supernatural forces at work. Rather, it partakes of the Wordsworthian belief that inanimate objects such as rocks, stones, and trees all contribute to the life of a place, without literally believing that the trees of a forest are invested with strictly human qualities. This is the notion of hallucination as simulacra, where ‘the simulacra of the wood’ which Lucian’s eyes ‘were fixed and fascinated by’ acts as a deliberately polyvalent, multifaceted scene in which our minds are swamped in confusion and doubt as to what has caused Lucian’s visions. That way, reader, narrator, and protagonist are all united in the shared moment of Lucian’s hillfort experience.

Both reading and the hilltop landscape around him, we are told, had worked a strange influence over young Lucian as a boy, when ‘books, the thoughts of books, the stirrings of imagination, all fused into one phantasy by the magic of the outland country’ (p. 36). The word ‘phantasy’, spelt as it is here with ph- rather than f- (elsewhere Machen has ‘fantasies’ (pp. 175, 228, 232)), recalls the earlier ‘phantasmagoria’ (p. 22), the word the narrator had used to describe Lucian’s reaction to his hilltop experience, the morning after he had fallen unconscious at the fort. Thus it imparts not simply the sense of ‘fantasy’ that denotes a conscious and controlled exercise of imagination (as in ‘fantasy’ literature), but the additional sense connoting the idea of phantasms, of phantasmagorias and hallucination, or, to borrow the word Shakespeare has Brutus use in *Julius Caesar*, the ‘phantasma’:

> Between the acting of a dreadful thing  
> And the first motion, all the interim is

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21 ‘Phantasy’ is also the spelling used in the English translations of Freud’s works containing the word, published from the 1920s onwards. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states: ‘In mod. use *fantasy* and *phantasy*, in spite of their identity in sound and in ultimate etymology, tend to be apprehended as separate words, the predominant sense of the former being “caprice, whim, fanciful invention”, while that of the latter is “imagination, visionary notion”.’
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.22

Here, as with Machen’s ‘phantasmagoria’, ‘phantasma’ is not the same as dream, but neither is it the same, at least in any normal sense, as being awake. These words recall the title of a book which Machen undoubtedly knew, namely Gurney’s Phantasms of the Living. Such is the experience of reading for Lucian in The Hill of Dreams: out of his control, between dream and wakefulness, phantasma, hallucination.

The notion of phantasmagoria, of phantasms, persists in the novel and pervades it. The fact that Machen rejected Phantasmagoria as the title and decided on the final title of The Hill of Dreams does, in fact, replace one ambiguous title with another. ‘The hill of dreams’: it sounds straightforward enough, but it suggests two clearly distinct readings. The ambiguity turns on the preposition, ‘of’. ‘The hill of dreams’: the title suggests that there will be a real, geographical hill which will give rise to dreams. But does it not equally imply that the ‘hill’ is a construct of someone’s dreams, merely a fabricated or imagined structure? Does the hill create the dreams, or do the dreams give rise to the hill (as it were)? This may seem like a small point but it does point up the subtle ingenuity of the title, which succeeds in seeming ostensibly simple and straightforward, while in actuality being poised between two very different meanings, one grounded in reality, the other in fantasy. And this ambiguity is not really dissipated as we begin to read the novel. Although we learn that there is a tangible hill that gives rise to visions of imaginary Roman citizens and landscapes, these imaginary landscapes become so vividly real to Lucian as to render them the reality, so that what is in fact imaginary becomes a form of delusion which appears real to him. To borrow Mark Valentine’s words again, on the original title, Phantasmagoria: ‘Machen may have intended in the original title a deliberate ambiguity both about what happens on the hill, and as to the actuality of all Lucian’s later visions.’23 But is this statement not equally applicable to the eventual title, The Hill of Dreams? The hill is both a place where dreams happen and a part of the landscape of those dreams. The real and the imaginary are curiously intertwined.

23 Valentine, Arthur Machen, p. 54.
Valentine has written of that title, ‘the hill of dreams’:

The final title, though, brings us back to his first experience, and its significance for the rest of the book. In what way is the old Roman fort a hill of dreams? Is it a place of magic itself, was Lucian visited by some supernatural figure or by the lovely country girl Annie, whom he afterwards worships from afar? Was he bewitched there, does all else follow inexorably, a ‘doom’ upon him? Did he in fact sin against the earth?

It is part of the allure of the book that Machen does not give us outright answers to these questions, and denies us any plain demarcation between the external and internal elements of Lucian’s life. […] We may put everything down to madness or to drugged hallucinations, yet there remains an occult implication.24

That is well said, and there is another possible reading of the title: that the word ‘dreams’ signifies aspirations rather than unconscious visions, and that it specifically refers to Lucian’s ambition of writing a work of literary perfection. ‘The hill of dreams’: his experience on the hill gives him the inspiration, whether psychological or spiritual, to endeavour to write such a work.

The hillfort experience returns to Lucian, and to the reader, in a number of ways. But the ambiguity concerning its significance is not resolved. When Lucian drinks cider with Morgan, he experiences something strange as Annie, the girl, leans over him to pour him some of the drink. ‘For a moment the ghost of a fancy hovered unsubstantial in his mind’ (p. 31). The word ‘ghost’, though intended in a figurative sense, does succeed in drawing our attention back to Lucian’s earlier experience on the hill. That expression, ‘ghost of a fancy’, refuses to resolve the question either way, Annie’s significance to Lucian’s vision hovering here between the two loaded words, ‘ghost’ and ‘fancy’. David Vessey writes that when Lucian first encounters Annie, ‘he thinks of her not as a woman but only as another child’; later, when he is ‘in the grip of the confused impulses of pubescence’, he toys with the idea of kissing her (as quoted above). Eventually, as Vessey notes, ‘Annie ceases to be a woman of flesh and blood (Lucian hears of her marriage to a young farmer with amused indifference); she is metamorphosed into a figure of dream, a phantasma in an

24 Ibid.
enchanted landscape of the mind.' 25 The sexual becomes subsumed into the psychological: like a phantasma or a curious dream.

‘…wild domed hills…’

For Dorothy Scarborough, The Hill of Dreams is one of the texts that exhibits what she calls ‘dream-supernaturalism’. 26 The hyphenation is important, for the word ‘ghost’ cannot, by itself, be trusted to provide an answer to the meaning of the visions Lucian experiences. However, the supernatural element to the ‘hill of dreams’ will be stressed more heavily shortly after his first encounter with the woodlands, when he witnesses a ‘ghostly battle’:

Thin and strange, mingled together, the voices came up to him on the hill; it was as if an outland race inhabited the ruined city and talked in a strange language of strange and terrible things. […] Already about the town the darkness was forming; fast, fast the shadows crept upon it from the forest, and from all sides banks and wreaths of curling mist were gathering, as if a ghostly leaguer were being built up against the city, and the strange race who lived in its streets. (pp. 54-55)

The strangeness, emphasised through a refusal to resort to synonyms (the word ‘strange’, appearing in ‘Thin and strange’, is used twice in quick succession in ‘a strange language of strange and terrible things’, and resurfaces in the talk of ‘the strange race who lived in its streets’), unites the events, the people, and even language itself, as all being a part of the lucid strangeness which Lucian is experiencing. For it is, to borrow Keats’ apt phrase, to the matter of ‘language strange’ that The Hill of Dreams continually returns. 27 The narrator’s inability to express the experience using any other adjective than ‘strange’ is powerful in suggesting to us that he is witnessing

what Lucian is witnessing, thus imparting to us via a sort of telepathic network that this is too strange even for language, or at least for the thesaurus. No other word, save ‘strange’, will cut it.

This vision of an ancient Roman legion appearing on the hillside shares much with A. E. Housman’s ‘Wenlock Edge’ poem, published in *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), in which the ‘lad’ of the title imagines the ancient town of Uriconium, which had once stood on the area of Shropshire he now occupies:

On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble;  
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;  
The gale, it plies the saplings double,  
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger  
When Uricon the city stood:  
'Tis the old wind in the old anger,  
But then it threshed another wood.28

The subtle violence in ‘thresh’ (different from ‘thrash’, though carrying the same meaning and being a variant of that word; ‘thresh’ carries specifically rustic implications which are utterly in keeping with the poem’s setting) enacts the unremitting force of nature, a sense of time beyond our own narrow span, which we cannot utterly comprehend or accept.29 Although they are writing at the same time, Housman’s vision departs from Machen’s in its unequivocal stance concerning the Roman city: for Housman, the Roman he imagines is merely that, an imaginary person mused upon by his fictitious lad. But Uriconium was an actual place, which other Shropshire writers such as Mary Webb and Wilfred Owen would later write about.30 The same sense of reality cannot be applied to the fictitious Caermaen, a reinvention of Caerleon which then becomes the ‘stage of apparitions’ Lucian carries

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30 Mary Webb grew up in Leighton, Shropshire and many of her novels, published during the early to mid-twentieth century, are set in Shropshire. One of Wilfred Owen’s earliest poems was titled ‘Uriconium: An Ode’.
to London with him. For Lucian, the imagining goes far deeper than that, until we cannot be sure whether the Roman soldiers he sees really are ghosts, rather than simply the product of a fertile imagination.

Machen’s first volume of autobiography, *Far Off Things* (1922), begins with a vision. He tells of how, while attending a function for a literary society one night, ‘from the heart of this London atmosphere I was suddenly transported in my vision to a darkling, solitary country lane as the dusk of a November evening closed upon it thirty long years before.’ The vision is bound up with the memory of his younger self, still then striving to become an author: ‘I saw myself,’ he tells us, ‘a lad of twenty-one or thereabouts, strolling along this solitary lane on a daily errand’; the errand in question is waiting for the postman, to whom the younger Machen would give ‘my packet—the day’s portion of “copy” of that *Heptameron* translation that I was then making and sending to the publisher in York Street, Covent Garden.’

Reflecting on this, he concludes that ‘I am convinced that anything which I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in earliest childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land.’ This ‘enchanted land’ as here portrayed by Machen is one largely of solitariness. Note the ‘solitary country lane’ and ‘this solitary lane’, which serve to remind us of Machen’s admiration of Wordsworth; he even borrowed the title of his memoir from Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’: ‘Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow / For old, unhappy, far-off things’. And yet the hyphen is a ghostly absence in Machen’s title: ‘far off things’, not ‘far-off things’. The disappearance of the hyphen suggests that not only are the memories of childhood and youth now far in the past, but that Machen himself is some way from where he’d hoped to be by this stage in his life. Wordsworth could look back on his childhood, even to some extent in 1805, with his fame assured, but Machen was less sure of his literary immortality: ‘I am convinced that anything which I may have accomplished in literature ….’ One suspects it is not

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32 Ibid., p. 17.
33 Ibid., p. 18.

Hills keep turning up in Machen’s fiction. *The Hill of Dreams* was the culmination of hillsides and hill-landscapes in his writing of the 1890s. Like Housman’s ‘blue remembered hills’,\footnote{Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, p. 70.} they are usually bound up with the past, with nostalgia—as the etymology of that word indicates, the pain of returning to one’s native land. Consider these instances of the phrase ‘the wild domed hills’ in Machen’s writing. First, from ‘The Shining Pyramid’:

Yes, haunted. Don’t you remember, when I saw you three years ago, you told me about your place in the west with the ancient woods hanging all about it, and the wild, domed hills, and the ragged land?\footnote{Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, p. 7.}

Second, from *The Hill of Dreams*:

And these were moments when the accustomed vision of the land alarmed him, and the wild domed hills and darkling woods seemed symbols of some terrible secret in the inner life of that stranger—himself.\footnote{See *The Hill of Dreams*, p. 38.}

Where the first quotation opens the story with a case of ‘haunting’, the second pushes home the interiority of such a haunting: faced with adulthood and the real world, our childhood and homeland always come back to haunt us with their bittersweetness. But they also nod towards a deeper haunting from generations, even centuries, back—the haunting of our ancestors. Similarly, the tales in *The Three Impostors* abound with talk of ‘the woods and wild hills’, ‘unearthly battlements of the wild tors’, and ‘a wild and savage hillside’.\footnote{Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2007), pp. 56, 19, and 45. Joshi appears to suggest that the phrase ‘the wild, domed hills’ also appears in ‘The Novel of the Black Seal’ (in *The Three Impostors*), but he is perhaps confusing that tale with ‘The Shining Pyramid’—see S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 1990; repr. 2003), p. 25.} Woods and hillsides are repeatedly described together, as
though part of a mythical past, before industrialisation and also before adulthood. *Far Off Things* makes reference to ‘the huge domed hills which we in Gwent call mountains.’

Speaking of Sheridan Le Fanu’s childhood, Jack Sullivan has remarked on the ‘romantic surroundings and childhood loneliness [which are] also a commonplace in accounts of later writers, particularly Machen and Lovecraft.’ Small wonder, then, that when he praised Machen in his celebrated essay ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, H. P. Lovecraft chose to weave this phrase into his eulogy: ‘Mr. Machen, with an impressionable Celtic heritage linked to keen youthful memories of the wild domed hills, archaic forests, and cryptical Roman ruins of the Gwent countryside, has developed an imaginative life of rare beauty, intensity, and historic background.’ Small wonder, either, that Lovecraft would write to August Derleth in 1928 that his (that is, Lovecraft’s) story ‘The Dunwich Horror’ ‘takes place among the wild domed hills of the upper Miskatonic Valley’, or that Lovecraft would use the phrase in the opening paragraph to his 1930 story ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’: ‘To say that a mental shock was the cause of what I inferred—that last straw which sent me racing out of the lonely Akeley farmhouse and through the wild domed hills of Vermont in a commandeered motor at night—is to ignore the plainest facts of my final experience.’ The hills, it would seem, are alive (and well).

The phrase would thus have an afterlife beyond Machen, but it was in his fiction written in the 1890s that he would use it as a recurrent symbol for home and

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40 Machen, *Far Off Things*, p. 68.
43 Cited by Joshi in Lovecraft, *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1984), p. 101. This cannot, I think, be dismissed as coincidence; even the title of Lovecraft’s story, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, appears to have been suggested to him by Arthur Machen’s novella *The Terror* (1917), a book Lovecraft is known to have read and which even features the town of Dunwich. Moreover, in this story, as M. J. Elliott points out, ‘the character of Dr Armitage refers to the work of … Machen … [and] the terms “Aklo” and “ Voorish” [which Lovecraft uses in this story] are lifted from Machen’s 1899 story *The White People’*. See M. J. Elliott, ‘Introduction’ to H. P. Lovecraft, *The Whisperer in Darkness: Collected Stories, Volume One*, selected and introduced by M. J. Elliott (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2007), p. xii.
44 H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, in *The Whisperer in Darkness: Collected Stories, Volume One*, p. 217. This story was written in 1930, and ‘The Dunwich Horror’ in 1928, just a year after ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’—which first alludes to Machen’s ‘wild, domed hills’—was published.
all that comes with our notions of home—childhood, the past, memory, innocence. Darryl Jones has recently argued that Machen’s body of work ‘might fairly be thought of as one extended project, in which the same themes and ideas recur constantly.’\textsuperscript{45} But in \textit{The Hill of Dreams} he does not present it as merely a literal place, but a mental one as well. Indeed, the real world retreats and this world of imagination comes to the fore: ‘In the garden of Avallaunius his sense of external things had grown dim and indistinct; the actual, material life seemed every day to become a show, a fleeting of shadows across a great white light’ (p. 139). Once more we are returned to the flitting movement of light and shade, the projection of the phantasmagoria. It is at this point, however, that we read of Lucian’s disillusionment. The word ‘disillusion’ acts in a kind of double sense, since although he has lost the ‘boyish imagination’ he once possessed, he has come to believe that what he experienced before was merely an ‘illusion’ (thus he has, in a sense, become both disillusioned and re-illusioned):

for the second time he scaled the steep hillside, and penetrated the matted brake. He expected violent disillusion, but his feeling was rather astonishment at the activity of boyish imagination. There was no terror nor amazement now in the green bulwarks, and the stunted undergrowth did not seem in any way extraordinary. Yet he did not laugh at the memory of his sensations, he was not angry at the cheat. Certainly it had been an illusion, all the heats and chills of boyhood, its thoughts of terror were without significance. But he recognised that the illusions of the child only differed from those of the man in that they were more picturesque; belief in fairies and belief in the Stock Exchange as bestowers of happiness were equally vain, but the latter form of faith was ugly as well as inept. (pp. 139-40)

The word ‘disillusion’, juxtaposed as it is alongside ‘illusion’ and ‘illusions’, acts in a sort of antithetical sense which Freud emphasised in ‘The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words’.\textsuperscript{46} For ‘disillusion’ here means not merely ‘stripping of illusions’ or ‘disenchantment’; the ‘dis-’ prefix is here made to work against itself, not only


‘indicating removal of a thing or quality’ but also ‘expressing negation’. Thus ‘disillusion’ works in the usual sense of a removal of one’s illusions, but also in a simple sense of negation, where the illusions themselves remain (the word is used twice in the above paragraph) but are turned into negative illusions, no longer spiritual visions but merely delusions and hallucinations. The ‘dis-’ in ‘disillusion’ refuses to mean in merely the traditional sense, instead becoming mired in the ambiguity surrounding the issue of Lucian’s visions.

Reality and illusion become largely indistinguishable in *The Hill of Dreams*. David Vessey has thoughtfully written that, in this novel, ‘Machen pioneered a technique of integrated psychological narrative’ and ‘gives us a devastating picture of madness and alienation’; in Lucian Taylor, we glimpse ‘the characteristic symptoms of schizophrenia’. For Vessey, ‘Everything in the book if seen solely in subjective relation to Lucian’s mental state; he is a cosmos with its own fantastic scale of values; the world of nature and of man is interpreted entirely through him.’ Moreover, ‘It is a frightening and savage universe, in which reality and illusion are scarcely differentiated.’ However, it is not a simple enough matter to say that madness or supernatural obsession are frightening and bad, and have done with it; both Paul Oleron and Lucian Taylor spend much of their time finding a true spiritual, quasi-sexual ecstasy through their respective visionary experiences. It may be frightening for us to read, but only wholly so if we read unimaginatively.

Since Lucian is also an aspiring writer (another parallel with Onions’s Oleron), there are obvious parallels between Lucian’s moment of realisation and Freud’s theory—first published in 1908, only a year after *The Hill of Dreams*—concerning the creative writer as a day-dreamer, whose childhood play of imagination develops into the grown-up job of writing fiction: ‘the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now phantasies [sic]. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-
Yet Lucian is different from the daydreamers of the Stock Exchange, or even his fellow writers; his daydreams seem to go beyond his control, starting off as idle imaginings but developing into something more subliminal. Machen had probably read Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘A Note on Realism’, from the collection Essays in the Art of Writing:

A work of art is first cloudily conceived in the mind; during the period of gestation it stands more clearly forward from these swaddling mists, puts on expressive lineaments, and becomes at length that most faultless, but also, alas! that incommunicable product of the human mind, a perfected design. On the approach to execution all is changed. The artist must now step down, don his working clothes, and become the artisan. He now resolutely commits his airy conception, his delicate Ariel, to the touch of matter; he must decide, almost in a breath, the scale, the style, the spirit, and the particularity of execution of his whole design.

Like Lucian’s striving for perfection in art, this passage is Romantic in spirit but workmanlike in terms of practical approach (it is perhaps apt that Stevenson coined the phrase ‘the sedulous ape’ to denote an aspiring writer’s habit of mimicking those writers he admires). But Stevenson is contrasting the airy, Romantic moment of inspiration with the pragmatic business of writing—something he succeeds in suggesting through the plethora of airy-sounding words, such as ‘cloudily’, ‘mists’, ‘airy’, ‘breath’, and ‘spirit’, but also the way ‘airy’ resonates in the name of that most airy of literary spirits, Shakespeare’s Ariel. Stevenson would elsewhere foreshadow Freud in ‘A Gossip on Romance’, where he writes: ‘Fiction is to the grown man what play is to the child; it is there that he changes the atmosphere and tenor of his life: and when the game so chimes with his fancy that he can join in it with all his heart, when it pleases him with every turn, when he loves to recall it and dwells upon its recollection with entire delight, fiction is called romance.’

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Machen and Stevenson both knew there was a part of childhood, that facility for day-dreaming, which the writer never lost. For Lucian, and for us, the realisation that it has been subconscious dreaming at work, and not some supernatural force, is a powerful one:

It was in reality the subconscious fancies of many years that had rebuilt the golden city, and had shown him the vine-trellis and the marbles and the sunlight in the garden of Avallaunius. And the rapture of love had made it all so vivid and warm with life, that even now, when he let his pen drop, the rich noise of the tavern and the chant of the theatre sounded above the murmur of the streets. (p. 147)

‘Even now, when he let his pen drop’: the dropping of the pen is caused not merely by the fixated nature of Lucian’s consciousness, but by an unconscious desire to abandon writing, since the spiritual inspiration he has convinced himself that he has been experiencing has been revealed as nothing more than the product of a rich imagination. We forgive even the slight tautology of such a phrase as ‘vivid and warm with life’, since it is in perfect keeping with the slightly excessive language being used to convey ‘the rich noise of the tavern and the chant of the theatre’, sounds which were above and beyond that of everyday sounds heard in London streets.

Indeed: ‘He knew that he deluded himself with imagination, that he had been walking through London suburbs and not through Pandemonium’ (p. 181). Andrew Smith has written with insight of De Quincey’s opium-induced experiences of the capital: ‘It is because De Quincey experiences London in this visceral way that it forms (if somewhat paradoxically) a strange romantic vision, one in which the disorder of the self (his apparent mental and emotional disorientation) is matched by the city’s own Gothic complexities.’

Machen, such an admirer of De Quincey, is similarly concerned with the Gothic potential of London, an interest that was probably heightened by his enthusiastic reading of Stevenson’s New Arabian Nights (1882) and Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886). Freud remarked that ‘hallucination brings belief in reality with it’, and indeed the experience of hallucination and the

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53 Andrew Smith, *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 120.
experience of what is really, physically there are not distinct or heterogeneous in *The Hill of Dreams*. As Machen remarked in 1913, ‘there is no such thing as London, there are only houses. No man has seen London at any time […] and] it is clear that this “London” is as mythical and monstrous and irrational a concept as many others of the same class.’

It was down to him, Lucian decides. All ‘apparitions’ have been down to his own barely conscious mind: ‘His mind dwelt on confused and terrible recollections, and with a mad ingenuity gave form and substance to phantoms; and even now he drew a long breath, almost imagining that the air in his room was heavy and noisome, that it entered his nostrils with some taint of the crypt’ (p. 235). The word ‘phantoms’ functions much in the same way as ‘ghost’, as a shorthand for a vision dreamt up by the imagination. ‘Truth and the dream were so mingled that now he could not divide one from the other’ (p. 243): this is what we have suspected all along.

‘…rare drugs…’

Scientists and psychologists of the period were attuned to the fact that between hallucination and ‘normal’ vision there was a broad spectrum of differing states of perception. A book reviewer in the journal *Mind* wrote in 1886 of the different stages involved in the perception of hallucinated images:

This has been found in the study of illusions and hallucinations, especially the artificially produced hallucinations of hypnotism. Between these hallucinations and normal perception there is a whole series of intermediate states. Ordinary illusion, hypnotic illusion, and hypnotic hallucination are more and more accentuated distortions of perception. As in perception there

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is always an element of imagery, so in the most exaggerated forms of hallucination there is always an element of sensation.56

This ‘element of sensation’ is one of the most important facets of Lucian’s own visions, and when we read of his hilltop experiences, or the of Roman tavern, or, later, of the girl who appears calling him to the Black Sabbath, it is the heightened state of his senses that comes across: ‘The soft entreaty of the flute and the swelling rapture of the boy’s voice beat on the air together, and Lucian wondered whether there were in the nature of things any true distinction between the impressions of sound and scent and colour’ (p. 116).

Linda Dowling has written that ‘Lucian’s initiation into the cult of style leads in its next stage to the “vale of Avallaunius,” an imaginary Roman world he enters through the power of imaginative projection so intense it borders on hallucination’.57 That hedging ‘borders on’ is perhaps judicious, since it is a continual feature of Machen’s prose that he never reveals the true origin or cause of Lucian’s visions. However, the matter turns on the question of where consciously imagining something ends and hallucinating something begins, and if we take ‘hallucination’ to signify something that is dreamt up but taken as real by the spectator, then Lucian’s experiences in the ‘vale of Avallaunius’ may be said to be in the realm of hallucinatory fantasy:

He found himself curiously strengthened by the change from the hills to the streets. There could be no doubt, he thought, that living a lonely life, interested only in himself and his own thoughts, he had become in a measure inhuman. The form of external things, black depths in woods, pools on lonely places, those still valleys curtained by hills on every side, sounding always with the ripple of their brooks, had become to him an influence like that of a drug, giving a certain peculiar colour and outline to his thoughts. (p. 147)

The subtle repetition of ‘lonely’ in two consecutive sentences gently pushes home Lucian’s sense of self-alienation to us. A drug is generally reckoned to be something that one not only becomes addicted to but, in turn, comes to rely on, to be a slave to

56 La Psychologie du Raisonnement (anonymous review), in Mind XI (1886), 289.
(this is even carried in the history of the word ‘addict’, which started life in Latin as a word roughly meaning ‘slave’ or ‘one assigned to someone’). Thus one loses all control over the drug, and the drug becomes the master: such is the relationship between Lucian and his visions. Lucian’s self-imposed isolation is all the more marked because he is estranged from himself: indeed, even as a boy, ‘the wild domed hills and darkling woods [had] seemed symbols of some terrible secret in the inner life of that stranger—himself’ (p. 38). Even the punctuation seems to be against him, as ‘stranger’ becomes separated (or estranged) from ‘himself’ by the divisive dash—as opposed to, say, the comma, which merely cuts or snips away. With Lucian, the loneliness even encompasses himself: he is always unknown to a part of himself.

Moreover, the simile of the drug is no throwaway fin de siècle trope but an analogy with close ties to Lucian’s physical state: although the ‘drug’ at this stage is metaphorical, it is soon, we later infer, real enough. At least, that is the implication. For once again Machen carefully places the drug references in the novel between metaphor and direct statement, between the figurative and the literal. When we are given some hint that Lucian has become addicted to some drug such as opium, even this is left ambiguous, as in the final scene of the novel:

‘Come in, Joe,’ she said. ‘It’s just as I thought it would be. “Death by misadventure”; and she held up a little empty bottle of dark blue glass that was standing on the desk. ‘He would take it, and I always knew he would take a drop too much one of these days.’ (pp. 246-7)

In fact, we are never told directly that Lucian has been taking drugs. His addiction is left always ambiguous, as with other facets of the novel, preventing us from drawing any definite conclusions. An easy way of dismissing such indirectness is to argue that the time at which Machen was writing precluded him from openly stating that Lucian was taking drugs; but this will not do, when we consider Conan Doyle’s references (albeit with the moral rectitude of Dr Watson to speak for the responsible member of
society) to Sherlock Holmes’s cocaine use in the stories which first appeared in the 1890s. But drugs also found their way into the stories in other ways.58

Besides, it is not simply that drugs are not mentioned, for they are, and frequently—not only when we are told that ‘external things’ had become to him ‘an influence like that of a drug’ (p. 147), but also when we read that certain poetry ‘had for Lucian more than the potency of a drug’ (p. 151). Or there is the strange moment, caught between these two drug references, when we are told that Lucian ‘could now survey those splendid and lovely visions from without, as if he read of opium dreams’ (pp. 147-8): again the reference to drugs occurs in the form of a simile, as if that is all drugs can be in Lucian’s life, metaphorical, figurative. After all, if certain lines of poetry truly do have ‘more than the potency of a drug’, then what is the point in taking drugs at all? Again, it is not that Lucian does not take drugs, merely that it is only ever implied that he has been taking laudanum or a similar substance.

This is undoubtedly very deliberate, since Machen wishes to keep the source of Lucian’s visions and illusions shrouded in mystery, and, indeed, in a sort of mysticism:

In the curious labour of the bureau he found refreshment that was continually renewed. He experienced again, and with a far more violent impulse, the enthusiasm that had attended the writing of his book a year or two before, and so, perhaps, passed from one drug to another. It was, indeed, with something of rapture that he imagined the great procession of years all to be devoted to the intimate analysis of words, to the construction of the sentence, as if it were a piece of jewellery or mosaic. (p. 148)

That ‘rapture’ is a nice touch, since historically the word meant ‘the act of transporting a person from one place to another’ (from the Latin rapere, ‘seize’). By this stage, Machen has, of course, transported Lucian from Caermaen to London, and Lucian has ‘passed from one drug’, the drug of the visions on the hill, to the ‘drug’ of ‘words’ and ‘the intimate analysis of words’. We know full well that Lucian’s sense

58 In ‘The Yellow Face’, for instance, which appeared in The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes in 1893, Watson tells us of Holmes that apart from ‘the occasional use of cocaine he had no vices, and he only turned to the drug as a protest against the monotony of existence when cases were scanty and the papers uninteresting.’ See Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes (London: Penguin, 1981), 120.
of language, of imagination, is close to the effect of a powerful drug: ‘Lucian […] had desired to take these simple emotions as an opiate’ (p. 190).

Elsewhere, too, drugs surface in the narrative only to be swathed in mystery:

He had thought when he closed his ears to the wood whisper and changed the fauns’ singing for the murmur of the streets, the black pools for the shadows and amber light of London, that he had put off the old life, and had turned his soul to healthy activities, but the truth was that he had merely exchanged one drug for another. (p. 170)

Indeed, ‘he had rushed to the dark words as to an anodyne’ (p. 166). That ‘as’ points up the way the drug is acting figuratively as an analogy for Machen’s slavish, addictive devotion to literature and language. This distances Machen’s narrative from Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), where Jekyll’s transformation into Hyde comes in the form of a ‘tincture’ on which he comes to rely: as Machen himself puts it, summarising the trend for the chemical and the scientific rationale behind modern horror stories, ‘In 1886 Dr Jekyll sends to the Bond Street chemists for some rare drugs.’ In 1907 and The Hill of Dreams, when the novel is finally published, the drugs are not so tangible or literal.

Even when the word ‘anodyne’ returns to the narrative, it is working within a complex network of possible meanings:

It was only by the intensest strain of resolution that he did not yield utterly to the poisonous anodyne which was always at his hand. It had been a difficult struggle to escape from the mesh of the hills, from the music of the fauns, and even now he was drawn by the memory of these old allurements. (pp. 187-8)

‘Anodyne’ seems synonymous with drugs. True, the OED offers this for the noun: ‘A medicine or drug which alleviates pain.’ But it also offers this figurative sense: ‘Anything that soothes wounded or excited feelings, or that lessens the sense of a misfortune.’ These two senses seemed to have emerged within a decade of each other, in the mid-sixteenth century. So, although the expression ‘at his hand’ suggests the anodyne is physical, the sentence which follows it suggests that it may still be

functioning at a metaphorical level, referring to the intoxicating influence the ‘memory’ of ‘the mesh of the hills’ exerted over him. Soon after this, however, we are tempted into believing Lucian has become a slave to a very real drug: ‘But there was a strange thing. There was a little bottle on the mantelpiece, a bottle of dark blue glass, and he trembled and shuddered before it, as if it were a fetish’ (p. 200).

The problem with reading these drug references as indissolubly real and literal within the framework of the rest of the novel is well highlighted by Nicholas Freeman: ‘Despite the attempts by Arthur Symons to reclassify decadence as symbolism, reviewers agreed that the book was profoundly unwholesome, with Lucian Taylor’s visionary sensibility dismissed as madness, morbidity, or disease.’ ‘Dismissed’ is a good word, because to set Lucian’s experiences and ‘dreams’ (in all the various ways we might choose to read that word from the novel’s title) too closely alongside contemporary medical studies into the morbid and unwholesome—Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, published in 1892, for instance—is to neglect the sense of symbol and metaphor that surrounds what appears solidly and tangibly scientific and chemical, the bottle of blue glass, the drug references, the talk of opiates. Indeed, encoded subtly and cryptically within that ‘bottle of dark blue glass’ is the bluebottle, the fly that, in an analogy, Lucian had earlier imagined: ‘the buzzing of a fly caught in a spider’s web’ (p. 109). Both the perceived sounds and sights around him, and the physical objects around him, are swathed in metaphor, like a spider’s web, a complex and intricate network of senses and extrasensory stimuli, none of which is or can be reducible to the single or homogeneous. One of the few things we do know Lucian takes is green tea, in ‘huge draughts’ (p. 159); and, as Sheridan Le Fanu’s tale of that name had testified, we all know what happens when somebody takes too much green tea.


61 This is not to suggest that Le Fanu’s tale displays a simple cause-and-effect relationship between drinking green tea and experiencing something horrific, and Jack Sullivan is right, I think, to remark of ‘Green Tea’ that the ‘title of the tale registers the fundamental irony’ and ‘awful disjunction between cause and effect’—namely that the protagonist, Jennings, ‘has done nothing but drink green tea.’ The same, I suggest, might be said of Lucian; he is experiencing visions long before we learn he has taken to drinking green tea. See Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978; repr. 1980), p. 18.
This is the one note of caution to be sounded concerning Linda Dowling’s otherwise wonderfully nuanced reading of *The Hill of Dreams*:

*The Hill of Dreams* ends in a sexual Black Sabbath, the apocalypse of a waking nightmare, as that sensuousness of language that Lucian had earlier repressed with the help of gorse boughs, or had imaginatively sublimed away into a supersensuous parallel realm of ineffable suggestion, now rises up to claim him as its victim. He dies a miserable, Chattertonian death. Only then, in a sort of trick ending, do we learn that Lucian’s writing—the few pages that with their elusive exquisite chanting quality have ever satisfied him—are in fact gibberish: Lucian has all the while been under the spell of laudanum taken from a small blue-black bottle.62

Even while acknowledging the ‘trick ending’ to the novel, Dowling seems in danger almost of falling victim to the trick, and her ultimate conclusion concerning the novel’s denouement refuses to take into account the deliberate ambiguity surrounding Lucian’s death, as with his life. This was also a problem for original reviewers of the novel: one reviewer, writing in the *Manchester Guardian*, declared that Lucian ‘drifts up to London and laudanum and an untimely end’, and the reviewer’s own alliterative drifting from ‘London’ to ‘laudanum’ seems a little too gliding and smooth to do the novel any real justice.63 We never witness his drinking from the bottle; for all we know, it may have been empty originally, when he ‘trembled and shuddered before it, as if it were a fetish’ (p. 200). We may choose to accept the landlady’s statement that ‘He would take it, and I always knew he would take a drop too much one of these days’ (p. 247) as undeniable fact, but knowing nothing more about her or about her companion, Joe, such unequivocal conclusion-drawing would be imprudent. This is not to reject the idea or reading that Lucian has become an addict to laudanum, but merely to reject the idea that the novel presents this as the irrefutable truth, much as a detective writer reveals the identity of the murderer at the close of the story. *The Hill of Dreams* is more heterogeneous, more rich and polyvalent than this. Its narrative, and its narrator, denies us any clear answers or solutions.

63 As cited in Machen’s *Precious Balms* (Horam: Friends of Arthur Machen and Tartarus Press, 1999), p. 59. Even good criticism of the novel falls into this snare. See, for instance, David Vessey, ‘Arthur Machen’s “The Hill of Dreams”’: ‘escape from [Lucian’s] predicament can be found only in fantasy […] or in a solitary, unlamented death through an overdose of drugs’ (p. 125).
The same is true of the writing that the landlady and Joe discover on the desk over which the lifeless body of Lucian is slumped:

She spread the neat pile of manuscript broadcast over the desk, and took a sheet at haphazard. It was all covered with illegible hopeless scribblings; only here and there it was possible to recognise a word.

‘Why, nobody could read it, if they wanted to.’ (p. 247)

So might a person respond who had been confronted with Pepys’ diaries, before the cipher in which they had been written was finally decoded in 1825; and so might a person ignorant of shorthand respond when faced with a page of stenographic notation. Indeed, the fact that she chooses a sheet ‘at haphazard’ from the pile ought to alert us to the ‘hazard’ of doing such a thing: read out of context, it could be argued, any piece of writing is gibberish. And because Lucian becomes so involved in his vision of language and the power of literature, we have no way of knowing the full extreme of the lengths to which he went in order to find ‘words mystical, symbolic’ (p. 150) and ‘the great secret of language’ (p. 38). Might he have taken up automatic writing, a concept that interested many artists and thinkers of the time? Janet Oppenheim has remarked of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research that ‘virtually every volume, right down to World War I, contained papers on […] automatic writing’. Given Machen’s knowledge of the Society and its experiments, Lucian’s ‘scribblings’ where ‘only here and there’ was it ‘possible to recognise a word’ might be the product of such an experiment. Other sheets, if she had looked, might, after all, have made more sense. ‘It’s all like that’, she tells Joe. But does she really search the other sheets? We are never told.

One of the recurring aspects of Machen’s work that has received little attention is the way in which he ‘uses’ drugs: that is, the way his fiction metaphorically represents various experiences as similar to being under the influence of drugs. As with The Hill of Dreams and the 1894 letter to his publisher, the presence of this drug-trope is marginal, but it is important because it strikes us not as being in any way tokenistic (of, say, Decadent writing), nor is it lazily employed.

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Machen is a casual user of the analogy, rather than an addict; but when he does use it, he does so carefully. In his 1902 book *Hieroglyphics*, he propounds his theory that ‘fine literature’ (a phrase used throughout) contains the quality which he calls ‘Ecstasy’. Machen’s persona in the book, known simply as the Hermit, states that Ecstasy is ‘the infallible instrument, as I think, by which fine literature may be discerned from reading-matter, by which art may be known from artifice, and style from intelligent expression.’\(^6^5\) As if ‘ecstasy’ for Machen’s Hermit is already carrying a flavour of its later meaning (first recorded in 1985, according to a 1993 addition to the *OED*), namely that of the drug also known as MDMA, *Hieroglyphics* toys with the drug as a symbol for the effects that ‘fine literature’ can produce on the reader. Machen quotes Rabelais’ comment that there are ‘certain little boxes such as we see nowadays in apothecaries’ shops [… which] within hold rare drugs’ (‘rare drugs’ again), and in many ways Machen’s explication upon ‘ecstasy in literature’ (to quote from the book’s subtitle) is closely linked with drugs, and with chemical stimulation.\(^6^6\)

Alcohol, that most ubiquitous of drugs, is invoked too: ‘as *Pickwick* has been said to “reek with brandy and water,” so does Rabelais assuredly reek of wine’;\(^6^7\) for Machen’s Hermit, both *The Pickwick Papers* and the work of Rabelais contain ‘Ecstasy’. ‘All truth and every philosophy is contained in wine,’ wrote Rabelais, and Machen’s Hermit quotes this.\(^6^8\) He also reminds us of the Rabelaisian dictum, ‘By wine […] is man made divine’, as if trying to bring out a faint pun on ‘vine’; indeed, ‘if you have not got the key to these Rabelaisian riddles much of the value—the highest value—of the book is lost to you.’\(^6^9\) This issue of ‘drunkenness’ and ‘intoxication’\(^7^0\) is closely connected to the quality of Ecstasy, as the Hermit explains, by way, indeed, of the divine Vine:

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\(^6^6\) Ibid., p. 116.
\(^6^7\) Ibid., p. 112.
\(^6^8\) Ibid., pp. 142-3.
\(^6^9\) Ibid., p. 113.
\(^7^0\) Ibid., p. 114.
We are not to conclude that the Greeks were a race of drunkards, or that Rabelais and Dickens preached habitual excess in drink as the highest virtue; we are to conclude that both the ancient people and the modern writers recognised Ecstasy as the supreme gift and state of man, and that they chose the Vine and the juice of the Vine as the most beautiful and significant symbol of that Power which withdraws man from the common life and the common consciousness, and taking him from the dust of the earth, sets him in high places, in the eternal world of ideas.71

The key word here is ‘symbol’. For we are presumably also not to conclude that Machen himself was extolling drink or drugs as a means of attaining a higher state of consciousness (especially since, in his narratives, such chemical indulgence tends to have dire repercussions), but merely using them as a symbol or simile for this ‘Power which withdraws man from […] the common consciousness.’ In Machen’s fiction, the ‘powder’ is a symbol for the Power.

Machen may have lamented in his 1894 letter that in the present time ‘Dr Jekyll sends to the Bond Street chemists for some rare drugs’; but in Hieroglyphics he has his authorised spokesperson, the Hermit, lament the necessity of the drug to the plot of Jekyll and Hyde in terms that seem almost to rebuke Stevenson himself: ‘The plot, in itself, strikes me as mechanical—this actual physical transformation, produced by a drug, linked certainly with a theory of ethical change, but not linked at all with the really mysterious, the really psychical—all this affects me, I say, as ingenious mechanism and nothing more.’72 Machen himself is somewhat mysterious about what he means by ‘the really mysterious, the really psychical’, and it is as if we as readers must possess psychic abilities in order to divine his meaning. ‘You mustn’t imagine, you know, that I condemn the powder business as bad in itself,’ Machen goes on to write.73 And well he might, for he had himself borrowed Stevenson’s idea and used it in ‘The Novel of the White Powder.’ The Hermit goes on:

I do not know whether there is, or has been, or will be a salt in existence which can turn a man into another person; that is not of the slightest consequence to the argument. The result of the powder, as it is described in

71 Ibid., pp. 115-6.
72 Ibid., p. 89.
73 Ibid., p. 90.
the book, is an incident, and it makes no difference to the critical judgment whether the incident is true or false, probable or improbable. The only point, absolutely the only point is this: Is the incident significant or insignificant, is it related for its own sake, or is it posited because it is a sign, a symbol, a word which veils and reveals the artist’s ecstasy and inspiration?74

The lulling back-and-forth of this, of ‘true or false’, ‘probable or improbable’, ‘The only point, absolutely the only point’, ‘significant or insignificant’, ‘veils and reveals’, suggests that the Hermit is not so sure of what he is claiming than he would have us believe. In short, Dr Jekyll ‘took the powder and became another man; it is probably untrue. But it is also insignificant; and to the critic of art in literature the one incident stands precisely on the same footing as the other.’75 Finally, it is deeply difficult to divine exactly what Machen thinks Stevenson should have done to make Jekyll and Hyde more ecstatic. The only thing we can safely infer is that the drug produced a change in Jekyll’s physical appearance, but there was not a correspondingly ‘really psychical’ alteration. Whatever that might be remains unsaid.

The untimely end which Lucian meets in The Hill of Dreams is in keeping with the death of Machen, ‘who died still writing’, as Mark Valentine tells us, ‘even though he must have thought there would be no one to see his work.’76 Well, at least these words refer to a Machen. They refer not to Machen the real-life author but Machen the fictional poet, who features in the 1901 novel The Purple Cloud, written by Arthur Machen’s neighbour at the time—and fellow author of weird fiction—M. P. Shiel. In many ways, Shiel was right, since the real Arthur Machen and the fictional Lucian Taylor share many traits. ‘The book had taken a year and a half in the making,’ we read of Lucian’s earliest finished manuscript; ‘it was a pious attempt to translate into English prose the form and mystery of the domed hills, the magic of occult valleys, the sound of the red swollen brook swirling through leafless woods.’77 Here, too, the parallels with Machen’s own struggle in writing the novel are obvious,

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74 Ibid., pp. 95-6.
75 Ibid., p. 96.
76 Valentine, Arthur Machen, p. 48.
77 Machen, Hill of Dreams, p. 44.
since in his 1922 introduction to the novel Machen had told us that it ‘had occupied from first to last the labour of eighteen months.’

This introduction is illuminating, especially since Machen once more returns to the trope of the drug in order to explain the genesis and execution of the novel. He tells us that the ‘notion’ of the story ‘went with me on my dim Bloomsbury walks on grey mornings and wintry darkening afternoons, and when occasionally I went out and dined with a friend, the notion was in my pocket.’ Moreover, ‘I put a few drops of the notion in the wine and sprinkled it lightly on the meat and found that it improved the aroma and flavour of both enormously; and whenever I was a little bored or down in the mouth and out of sorts, I took a couple of spoonfuls of the notion and felt better at once.’ The medicinal qualities of this ‘notion’—we almost want to read ‘potion’ for its rhyming word, especially alongside ‘spoonfuls’—demonstrate how fond Machen was of discussing literary and artistic ideas using the figurative language of drugs.

In *Far Off Things*, Machen recorded how, as a boy, he found De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* on a bookstall at Pontypool Road Station and ‘instantly bought and as instantly loved’ it. In *The Hill of Dreams*, the young Lucian buys this very book from the railway station, and talks to his father soon after of ‘the beautiful bits he had already found.’ Perhaps this is the most illustrative example of the way in which drugs inform Machen’s writing, in a literary but seldom literal way. In both cases, De Quincey’s book is admired for its ‘beautiful bits’, not necessarily because it is about drugs. (Again, contrast Isa Whitney from Conan Doyle’s story.) The drug is a far-reaching metaphor, or simile, being capable of signifying addiction, desire, healing, poison, and a whole raft of other qualities. In *Far Off Things*, Machen also recounts the joy he felt at discovering the world of literature, and curiously returns to De Quincey and to opium in order to explain this joy. If any two words here are more important than the rest, they are surely the ‘more truly’ that override the
comparison with drugs, along with the semi-colon which halts the mail-coach containing them:

Happiness, said De Quincey, on his discovery of the paradise that he thought he had found in opium, could be sent down by the mail-coach; more truly I could announce my discovery that delight could be contained in small octavos and small type, in a bookshelf three feet long.83

The hallucinatory visions in *The Hill of Dreams*, then, act like a drug—a hallucinogen, in particular, but any mind-altering drug would have a comparable effect—because they change Lucian’s perception of the world around him, they confuse his notions of the conventional senses, as William James noted when he wrote that ‘It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call “something there,” more deep and more general than any of the special and particular “senses” by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.’84 Lucian Taylor determines to escape his state of conventional sentience through a form of self-hypnotism.

Vast Questions

The effects of drugs and the experience of trance-like hallucinations were close enough to each other for Machen to use one as a metaphor for the other. John Addington Symonds, correspondent of Stevenson and enthusiast of psychical research,85 wrote in detail about the doubts left in his mind concerning reality and the world after experiencing seemingly extra-sensory trancelike states:

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84 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 58.
It served to impress upon my growing nature the phantasmal unreality of all the circumstances which contribute to a merely phenomenal consciousness. Often have I asked myself with anguish, on waking from that formless state of denuded, keenly sentient being, Which is the unreality?—the trance of fiery, vacant, apprehensive, sceptical Self from which I issue, or these surrounding phenomena and habits which veil that inner Self and build a self of flesh-and-blood conventionality? Again, are men the factors of some dream, the dream-like unsubstantiality of which they comprehend at such eventful moments? What would happen if the final stage of the trance were reached?86

In many ways, The Hill of Dreams constitutes an answer to that final question. Lucian’s search for a ‘sixth sense’ is something he manages to achieve, but not through a magical or supernatural agency:

The adept, it was alleged, could transfer the sense of consciousness from the brain to the foot or hand, he could annihilate the world around him and pass into another sphere. Lucian wondered whether he could not perform some such operation for his own benefit. Human beings were constantly annoying him and getting in his way; was it not possible to annihilate the race, or at all events to reduce them to wholly insignificant forms? A certain progress suggested itself to his mind, a work partly mental and partly physical, and after two or three experiments he found to his astonishment and delight that it was successful. The adept could, in truth, change those who were obnoxious to him into harmless and unimportant shapes, not as in the letter of the old stories, by transforming the enemy, but by transforming himself. (p. 108)

Indeed, another ‘operation’, namely the one in his novella The Great God Pan (1894), had given Machen cause to make a telling observation. In March 1894, before he had begun writing The Hill of Dreams, he wrote a letter to his publisher explaining the scientific aspect of the narrative of The Great God Pan:

If I were writing in the Middle Ages I should need no scientific basis[. …] In these days the supernatural per se is entirely incredible; to believe, we must link our wonders to some scientific or pseudo-scientific fact, or basis, or method. Thus we do not believe in ‘ghosts’ but in telepathy, not in ‘witch-craft’ but in hypnotism. If Mr Stevenson had written his great masterpiece about 1590-1650, Dr Jekyll would have made a compact with

the devil. In 1886 Dr Jekyll sends to the Bond Street chemists for some rare

drugs.87

The clippers placed around ‘ghosts’ make a gently sardonic point about the way in

which ghosts as supernatural entities had lost some of their meaning, in fiction of the
time. There must at the very least be some show of scientific reasoning behind any

such phenomena, for the modern reader to take such things seriously. Ghosts, Machen

observes, can never be ghosts now: they must be ‘ghosts’, complete with ambiguities

and some semblance of psychological rationale. This would later change with the

writing of M. R. James in the early years of the twentieth century; but during the

1890s, when Machen wrote The Great God Pan and The Hill of Dreams, the

influence on the ghost story of the Society for Psychical Research could still keenly

be felt. M. R. James’s own remark of 1911 that ‘the technical terms of “occultism”, if

they are not very carefully handled, tend to put the mere ghost story […] on a quasi-

scientific plane, and to call into play faculties quite other than the imaginative’ was,
as Julia Briggs puts it, ‘only half right.’88 Science could lend the ghost story a modern

air of authenticity and realism, but such scientific flourishes, as Briggs goes on to

note, always ‘leave a gap, an area which cannot be explained in strictly scientific
terms.’89

Part of this is all to do with creating a good story, of course. As well as

offering a new, ‘fashionable’ angle from which writers could approach the writing of

a ghost story, psychical research and scientific inquiry also created suspense and

mystery as to exactly what has caused a ‘ghostly’ occurrence, nature or something

beyond nature. Henry James’s remark that ‘so long as the events are veiled, the

imagination will run riot and depict all sorts of horrors, but as soon as the veil is

lifted, all mystery disappears’ may also be applied to Machen’s fiction.90 For, unlike

creators of the new phenomenon of the psychical detective, such as William Hope

Hodgson and Algernon Blackwood, whose stories would appear shortly after the

89 Ibid., p. 54.
publication of *The Hill of Dreams*, Machen’s writing displays a disinclination to tear away the veil, and to show definitively the cause of any potentially supernatural events. As Susan Navarette writes,

Machen’s strategy is employed in order to hide the fact that the horror confronted in his stories is only a trope for something (the fear of sexuality, the fear of degeneration, the fear of dissolution) that he could not himself express, much less discuss openly in the 1890s, and that he felt compelled, therefore, to mask occult, and repress in his fictions. The emphasis on symbolism made it obvious that something was being encoded and must therefore be decoded.\(^91\)

He could not express them—but that presumes that he wanted to. Weird fiction relies on mystery, and S. T. Joshi, though rather strident, is undoubtedly right to observe of Algernon Blackwood’s ‘experimental’ volume *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary* (1908) that ‘it is just as well that Blackwood never repeated this particular experiment’ because ‘a prosy explanation of the phenomena […] introduces a fatal element of rationalism into something that should not be rationalized.’\(^92\)

Janet Oppenheim has written of the clash between the scientific and the spiritual in the nineteenth century:

Many psychical researchers were deeply committed to probing the operations of the human mind and hoped that their inquiries into hypnosis, automatic writing, trance speech, hallucinations, and the like would further the endeavor. Sadly for them, the majority of professional psychologists in the years before World War I held them suspect, believing that psychical research still reeked of the discredited practices of mediums, the pseudomagic of the occult, and the naïve enthusiasm of the amateur. After the war, furthermore, the vogue for Freudian psychoanalysis rendered the SPR line of inquiry largely irrelevant.\(^93\)

Thus Machen’s own ambivalent approach to psychical research—and to such occult groups as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which he left soon after having joined—places him curiously at odds with the attitudes of his generation. In many

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\(^91\) Ibid., p. 270, n. 80.
\(^92\) Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 115.
\(^93\) Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 266.
ways he is a Janus figure, looking back towards the spirit of De Quincey and Wordsworth and such works as *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, but also looking forward to a more sophisticated understanding of the human mind than the Society could offer. ‘Occultists were often interested in the intellectual rationales of psychical researchers,’ Alex Owen has observed, ‘but felt them to be limited.’94 What makes Machen and his work so intriguing is that he was interested in both occultism and the pseudo-scientific rationalism of the SPR, and yet his active involvement in both camps seems not to have gone beyond flirtation, as his fleeting membership of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and his wariness of the findings of the SPR, testify. As he wrote in his second autobiographical work, *Things Far and Near*, ‘It will be seen that I am not exactly a fanatical Spiritualist: but I had rather be of the straightest sect of Rappers and Banjo Wielders than of that company which understands all the whole frame and scheme of the universe.’95 Weighing up the two approaches to unexplained phenomena, namely ‘the semi-religious, semi-occult, semi-philosophical sects and schools’ against ‘the modern throng of Diviners and Star-gazers and Psychometrists and Animal Magnetists and Mesmerists and Spiritualists and Psychic Researchers’, he declares: ‘It seems to me a vast question, and I am sure it is utterly insoluble.’96

Julia Briggs sees Machen as standing ‘halfway between belief and disbelief, desiring to be convinced, but too much of a rationalist and a realist to be uncritical for long.’97 Yet his occult interests undoubtedly pervade his work. Susan Navarette has written thoughtfully of this ambivalence: ‘In Machen we find an intermingling of the very old—Christian legend—and the very new—nineteenth-century scientific speculations about what is older still, the organic processes of evolution, decay, and recapitulation.’98 This merging of old and new, of ancient and modern, is seen throughout his fiction, not just in the novels of the 1890s. Here it is worth noting that, among other things, Machen is credited with originating the idea of the Holy Grail

96 Ibid., pp. 165-6.
surviving into the modern world, and that his writing on the deep past of Christianity inspired John Betjeman to convert to Anglicanism.⁹⁹ And yet not only Christian, but pagan, legend is to be found in the experiences of Lucian Taylor in *The Hill of Dreams*.

This is in evidence, for instance, when Machen decides that Lucian’s altered state of consciousness must be effected through ‘a work partly mental and partly physical’ (p. 108), through a natural rather than supernatural agency. Work psychical as well as physical, we might almost say. The metaphor Machen offers here, that of ‘the buzzing of a fly caught in a spider’s web’ (p. 109), is enlightening:

> The talk of the men and women might be wearisome and inept and often malignant; but he could not imagine an alchemist at the moment of success, a general in the hour of victory, or a financier with a gigantic scheme of swindling well on the market being annoyed by the buzz of insects. (p. 109)

One is reminded here of Oleron’s unsettling awareness of ‘the crepitation of a myriad insects’ in Oliver Onions’ ‘The Beckoning Fair One’.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this likening of human voices and sounds to the buzzing of a trapped insect is not too far removed from a passage from *The Lifted Veil* (1859), the supernatural novella written by Machen’s *bête noire*, George Eliot:

> This was the obtrusion on my mind of the mental process going forward in first one person, and then another, with whom I happened to be in contact: the vagrant, frivolous ideas and emotions of some uninteresting acquaintance [...] would force themselves on my consciousness like an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect.¹⁰¹

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Whether Machen was aware of this passage from *The Lifted Veil* or not, there is anyway one crucial difference between Eliot’s insect and Machen’s: where Eliot uses the entomological analogy to highlight Latimer’s ‘abnormal sensibility’ (that is, telepathy), Machen seizes upon the buzz of the insect to convey an unwanted exterior noise which Lucian is successfully desensitising himself to. Indeed, shortly after this moment of self-hypnotism, where Lucian finds he is able to shut out all sensations around him, ‘he saw […] a swarm of flies clustering and buzzing about a lump of tainted meat that lay on the grass’, but this spectacle ‘in no way interrupted the harmony of his thoughts’ (p. 112). Thus the metaphorical fly becomes material and literal, but it has the same effect (or lack of effect) as before, when it had appeared in analogy.

Flies in *The Hill of Dreams* could almost warrant a study of their own. As Nicholas Royle has remarked, there is ‘the need for an entomology of literature.’ The fly trapped in the spider’s web also symbolises Lucian himself, being trapped in the web or mesh of nightmare. When he meets the mysterious tall and lovely woman in London, we read that Lucian ‘felt the mesh of her net about him’ (p. 193). Just prior to this, we learn that Lucian ‘had succeeded one day in escaping from the mesh of the streets’ (p. 186), just as it ‘had been a difficult struggle to escape from the mesh of the hills’ (pp. 187-88). Earlier in the novel, Machen had used the fly as a microcosm for mankind: ‘Little boys sometimes […] deprive a fly of its wings and legs. The odd gyrations and queer thin buzzings of the creature as it spins comically round and round never fail to provide a fund of harmless amusement’ (p. 91). But that’s just the point, as Machen well knows: such amusement is’t harmless, at least for the fly. This subtle allusion to *King Lear* (‘As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods: / They kill us for their sport’) or Blake’s ‘The Fly’ (‘Am not I / A fly like thee? / Or art not thou / A man like me?’) hides a deeper symbolism: in *The Hill of Dreams*, it is enough that man, notwithstanding the gods, should use or mistreat his fellow men. David Vessey, such an acute reader of this novel, has pointed out that the

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102 Ibid.
phrase ‘harmless amusement’, here used ironically about the fly, had earlier been used in the review of *Millicent’s Marriage*, one of the fictional titles among the catalogue that Messrs. Beit (the publishers who rejected Lucian’s novel) send to him: ‘Harmless amusement’ like *Millicent’s Marriage*, Lucian reads, ‘will always find a welcome in our homes, which remains bolted and barred against the abandoned artist and the scrofulous stylist’ (p. 43).

But it will not do to say that the fly represents Lucian, and leave it there; for insects have an ambiguous role in *The Hill of Dreams*, as exemplified by the fact that Lucian finds himself ‘annoyed by the buzz of insects’ (p. 109)—this entomological reference occurring in a simile, with the insects representing people. Although something as small and put-upon as a fly can be said to symbolise Lucian, caught in the great web or maze of London (or his own mind), insects in general signify the swarming crowds of people who surround Lucian in the city, and from whom he feels so alienated. Insect can also, for Machen, be a term of abuse, something annoying to be put down and disregarded much as he sees Lucian being put down by his fellow men. Here we cannot help feeling as though Machen wants to eat his cake and have it too; but the force of the analogy remains, because he is refusing to draw the simple line in this metaphor and is instead opening it up to the complexities of human understanding. The book review that Lucian reads exemplifies this. It is quite fitting, then, that when Vincent Starrett published a short pamphlet in praise of Machen in 1918, he should have seen fit to use an entomological metaphor to do so, inventing a new adjective, ‘insectial’, in the process, a word so rare it is still not recognised by the *OED*: ‘The insectial fame of the “popular” novelist,’ he wrote, ‘is immediate; it is born at dawn and dies at sunset. The enduring fame of the artist too often is born at sunset, but it is immortal.’

Tellingly, Machen described George Eliot, whom he loathed, as ‘a superior insect’.

Lucian finds he is more closely attuned to the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest, until all of the conventional senses seem to blend into one another in a kind of hyper-synæsthesia: ‘The soft entreaty of the flute and the swelling rapture of the

106 Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 64.
boy’s voice beat on the air together, and Lucian wondered whether there were in the
nature of things any true distinction between the impressions of sound and scent and
colour’ (p. 116). But the nature of the boy’s voice, and indeed the boy himself, is
swathed in the unsubstantial and the hallucinatory, and ‘people who saw him [i.e.,
Lucian] at this period wondered what was amiss’ (p. 113). He even starts to daydream
of the Roman fort when he is away from it, while talking to the vicar, Mr Dixon, for
instance:

‘There can be no doubt that the temple of Diana stood there in pagan times,’
he concluded, and Lucian assented to the opinion, and asked a few questions
which seemed pertinent enough. But all the time the flute notes were
sounding in his ears, and the ilex threw a purple shadow on the white
pavement before his villa. A boy came forward from the garden; he had
been walking amongst the vines and plucking the ripe grapes, and the juice
had trickled down over his breast. Standing beside the girl, unashamed in
the sunlight, he began to sing one of Sappho’s love songs. [...] Lucian
looked at him steadily; the white perfect body shone against the roses and
the blue of the sky, clear and gleaming as marble in the glare of the sun. The
words he sang burned and flamed with passion, and he was as unconscious
of their meaning as the twin pipes of the flute. And the girl was smiling. The
vicar shook hands and went on, well pleased with his remarks on the temple
of Diana, and also with Lucian’s polite interest. (pp. 113-14)

It would be easy to surmise from this passage that all of Lucian’s experiences at the
hillfort and the Roman amphitheatre are the product of his mind, a luculent
hallucinatory scene born of his imagination. It would be easy, but foolish. Just
because someone daydreams about a scene taking place elsewhere does not mean that
the scene imagined has not ever physically taken place; indeed, Lucian here seems to
be remembering his physical experiences of the fort, the memories having been
freshly evoked by the vicar’s remarks. Some initial reviewers of the novel (even those
who found much to criticise in it) were attuned to this layering of sensory experience:
one writer for the Birmingham Post noted that ‘Echolalia (in his attempts at
authorship), melancholia, visual and auditory hallucinations—all these familiar
phenomena of an unbalanced mind does [Lucian] exhibit; and doubtless the specialist
in such diseases might trace more.’ 107 While the loaded ‘diseases’ places the review firmly on the side of those critics who found the novel ‘unwholesome’, the reference to the manifold psychological effects Lucian is prone to at least acknowledges that this reviewer saw that Lucian’s condition is irreducible to one cause or symptom.

The auditory nature of some of Lucian’s experiences are not so far removed from the haunting voice of Zaffirino in ‘A Wicked Voice’ or the footsteps and scraps of music that Markheim hears after he has committed his crime; Onions, too, would use music to such haunting effect in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, four years after the publication of *The Hill of Dreams*. But in 1907, following the eventual appearance of Machen’s novel in book form, also saw its first review, from Lord Alfred Douglas:

> Mr. Machen fashions prose out of the writhings of Lucian, who is dear to him: and his prose has the rhythmic beat of some dreadful Oriental instrument, insistent, monotonous, haunting; and still the soft tone of one careful flute sounds on, and keeps the nerves alive to the slow and growing pain of the rhythmic beat.108

This indirectly points up the haunting nature of music to Lucian himself. Lucian, earlier, had been preoccupied with words: ‘Language, he understood, was chiefly important for the beauty of its sounds […] and] by its capacity […] of suggesting wonderful and indefinable impressions, perhaps more ravishing and farther removed from the domain of strict thought than the impressions excited by music itself’ (p. 126). Ironic, then, that the ‘pain of the rhythmic beat’ is Lucian’s legacy in the novel: it is the *writhings* of Lucian, not writings, which we remember once we have finished reading.

Finally, however, comes the unknowable, tormenting question: ‘Dimly he remembered Dr Burrows coming to see him in London, but had he not imagined all the rest?’ (p. 243). Such an ending or almost-ending—Lucian will, shortly after this, die in his room but somehow imagining that he is going up the top of the hill to die in the Black Sabbath—acts like a dark recasting of the ending of *Through the Looking-

Glass, which poses the unanswerable question, ‘Which dreamed it?’ The unanswerable nature of Machen’s question explains that any crude or reductive statements regarding Lucian’s experiences are necessarily inadequate and unsatisfactory. The same true of the trope of the furnace which both begins and ends the novel, returning in the final sentence:

The flaring light shone through the dead eyes into the dying brain, and there was a glow within, as if great furnace doors were opened. (p. 248)

How should we read that? The ‘furnace’ that was once perceived as physical and external has become internalised, its light becoming ‘a glow within’. How we choose to read that is up to us as readers, as our own beliefs can find both affirmation or negation, or, indeed, neither as we choose. It is enough, perhaps, to acknowledge the sense of continuity created in this image by the opening words of the novel and to quote from Lucian’s experiences in mid flow:

Clear and distinct, as if he were standing now in the lane, he saw the steep slopes surging from the valley, and the black crown of the oaks set against the flaming sky, against a blaze and glow of light as if great furnace doors were opened. (p. 209)

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Ghostly Credos

But for some other compulsion such a ghost perhaps should I be, such a ghost you. Precariously we move among perils we do not know, saved only by a sanity stronger than our own. And when, either in ourselves or in another, such an osmosis takes place before our very eyes, does not a ghost write his own story? Who are The Real People?

(Oliver Onions, ‘Credo’)¹

‘The Beckoning Fair One’ troubles readers. One of the immediate problems with it is the difficulty it poses in terms of categorisation. To what genre (if ‘genre’ can even be said to be a useful term here) does Oliver Onions’s 1911 ‘story’ belong? (For ‘story’ here we might substitute the word ‘novella’, which it has also been called: further evidence of the problems of categorisation.)² S. T. Joshi is adamant that Onions’s tales cannot be called ‘ghost stories’ in any rigid sense: ‘The ghost story as such does not allow very much room for expansion or originality; when some writers attempt to do so, they either fail ([M. R.] James’s followers) or, in succeeding, produce tales that can no longer be called ghost stories (Oliver Onions).’³ That ‘as such’ does not follow any particular qualification of the ghost story: it is hard to know exactly what Joshi means by that ‘as such’. These words come at the end of a study of M. R. James’s ghost stories, and, therefore (or ‘as such’), in coming at the close of a particular authorial study, they appear to beckon towards a new analysis, one that would take as its focus the work of a writer who moves the ghost story into new and original territory. The example he gives, Oliver Onions, is a particularly interesting choice.

² There is very little extant criticism of Onions’s work. Most critics who have discussed ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, such as S. T. Joshi and Peter Penzoldt, have called it a ‘tale’ or ‘story’, or rendered its title in quotation marks rather than italics, thus implying indirectly that they view it as a long short story rather than a short novel or novella. I am following this convention, although I am aware that the story has been published as a standalone volume before, where it has been referred to as a novella.
But Onions’s stories are not strictly ‘ghost stories’. For Joshi, they are no longer tightly focused enough on the ghostly or supernatural to be labelled with that conventional generic sticker:

The ghost story (in the proper narrow sense) is conceptually only a subset of the supernatural horror story, but it has had a virtually independent history. I also hope to show that it is really a very rigid and inflexible form; if this is so, it is no surprise that M. R. James—with his flippant attitude toward weird writing—simultaneously perfected and exhausted it. He had no inclination to make significant changes in the traditional ghost story, and those who did (principally Walter de la Mare and Oliver Onions) on the whole transformed it into the psychological ghost story, philosophically a very different form.4

In 1894, Andrew Lang could set out the primary appeal of ghost stories, as well as the interest in ‘telepathic hallucination’, by remarking that ‘it is so natural to wish for a terra incognita, “the land not yet meted out” by science—the free space where Romance may still try an unimpeded flight’.5 However, by the time ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ appeared, such a view had become somewhat outmoded. As Roger Luckhurst frames it, ‘By 1911, M. R. James prefaced his tales with a by-then conventional rejection of any “scheme of ‘psychical’ theory”, because “technical terms […] tend to put the mere ghost story […] upon a quasi-scientific plane, and to call into play faculties quite other than the imaginative”’.6 By 1911: the year of the publication of Widdershins, the Onions volume which contained ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. It was also the year that could be said to represent the beginning of the end for the golden age of the ghost story and its relationship with psychical phenomena, as old gave way to new: in this year, Freud was made an honorary member of the Society for Psychical Research.7 But if, as the growing popularity of Freudian theory

4 Ibid., p. 7.
6 Ibid., p. 187.
7 See Peter Keating, The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 124. After 1911, and after the First World War, ghost stories which drew on psychological ideas would be principally influenced, not by the SPR, but by Freudian psychoanalysis, such as in the tales of May Sinclair which were collected in the 1923 volume Uncanny Stories.
testified, Onions and many of his contemporaries had moved away from the idea of veridical hallucinations and the categories of apparitions set out by the Society for Psychical Research in the last century, then they had to seek out new earth, new heaven, in terms of the language employed to discuss the ‘ghost’.

Onions is keenly aware of the problems surrounding the term ‘ghost’, and makes some stimulating remarks about ghostliness in the ‘Credo’ to his ghost stories. The ‘realm’ of the ghost writer, he explains,

is no narrow one. True its Central Province is of strictly limited extent, but, as this provides only the class of story so plainly labelled ‘ghost’ that it cannot be mistaken for anything else, the spectre is apt to be swamped by the traditional apparatus that makes the stock illustration for the Christmas Number, and there is little to be said about this region except that here the ghostly texture is found at its coarsest.  

This is a ‘Credo’, after all, and Onions is clearly and unambiguously setting out his rationale for his brand of ghost story: his ghosts, unlike those of other writers (the failed imitators of M. R. James that Joshi references come to mind), can easily be mistaken for something else, and Onions hopes that they will be. ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is a prime example of this. In that story, a crackling noise may be just the landlady of the house brushing her hair, or it may be the protagonist’s imagination, or it may be some unseen presence in the house. No easy ‘ghost’ there, only several possibilities, none of them taking particular precedence over the others.

It is difficult to judge Onions’s work by aligning him as a writer with other authors of the time, or with those who preceded him such as Stevenson and James, or to know his thoughts on, or involvement with, such disparate groups as occult societies or the SPR. In one respect, this is not important: one need not know one’s Onions in order to understand his role and significance in the history of the ghost story. Perhaps the most significant detail among the scant biographical information concerning Onions is this excerpt from his entry in the Dictionary of Literary Biography:

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8 Onions, ‘Credo’, p. ix.
In fact, with more stories such as those in *Widdershins* he might have equaled Algernon Blackwood, and occasionally he did so. Most feel, however, that Onions’s ghost stories, while well written and still deserving of an audience, simply have not earned him a place among the masters of supernatural fiction.9

This is the only mention of Onions’s ghost stories in the whole article, and it is a fleeting one at that. Onions’s stories are well written, and often far more effective than Blackwood’s, making the comparison here with Blackwood (designed to make Onions come off as the inferior artist) almost specious. Does Onions fail to equal Blackwood in terms of art, or success, or both? The entry fails to specify which, but is broadly typical of the attitude to Onions’s neglected supernatural fiction. The article typifies this neglect most pointedly through ignoring the stories altogether, aside from these few breezy sentences.

‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is the most popular among Onions’s stories, and more or less the only one—if any—that the casual reader of ghost stories ever knows. It is the lead story in the volume pointedly titled *Widdershins* (1911). Again, there is a link with Walter de la Mare: as Julia Briggs points out, ‘widdershins’ was ‘a favourite word in de la Mare’s poetry’ and his 1910 novel *The Return* had contained a character named Widderstone.10 ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ tells the story of Paul Oleron, an aspiring writer in his forties, who rents part of an old house and transforms it into a flat, taking some time to furnish the house and set out his possessions to an almost obsessively detailed degree. His long-term girlfriend, a journalist named Elsie Bengough, dislikes his choice of dwelling from the moment she sees it; it is clear that Oleron is taken with it, and gradually he becomes more and more obsessed with the house, and with the strange noises he starts to hear, chief of which are the dripping of a tap and the sound of a woman supposedly brushing her hair. As Julian Thompson frames it, from that moment ‘the duel is on between heavy, florid Elsie Bengough and her wispy supernatural rival, who may be no more than the shadow of Oleron’s

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solipsistic decline.’¹¹ One of the great triumphs of the story comes in its ending, and
the way Onions, like Machen charting Lucian’s decline in *The Hill of Dreams*,
succeeds in suggesting what has happened rather than openly stating it. There is no
great revelation, rather a gradual dropping away of the veil, to reveal only partly what
has occurred. The final scene is of Oleron being led away from the house by the
police, while the remains of Elsie’s body are brought out of the house on a hooded
stretcher. How she met such a grisly fate, we are never told.

Parts of the story can be aligned with descriptions of catatonic trances and
pathological obsession which had appeared in journals during the late nineteenth
century; but the word ‘catatonia’ is never mentioned, nor is there ever any explicit
statement of Oleron’s abnormal psychological condition. The third-person narrator
and the protagonist have almost become one. We witness Oleron’s fall into madness
with the same sense of confusion and ambivalence as Oleron himself is evidently
feeling: the narrative becomes a maddening welter of obsessive detail that draws a
veil over the bigger picture, over what the sounds really are, and over what happens
to Elsie Bengough in those final pages. But if Onions steers his story clear of any
quasi-scientific terminology, he also uses supernatural language sparingly. Like ‘The
Friends of the Friends’ fifteen years before it, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ contains just
two instances of the word ‘ghost’. The narrative eschews such terminology that might
be associated with the conventional ghost story, and which might lead to the story
being viewed as such. It is highly suggestive that, at odds with the ancient and
antiquarian nature of many of M. R. James’s ghosts, the only two appearances of the
word ‘ghost’ into the narrative of ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ both involve the future
as much as the past:

> It would be rather a joke if he, a perfectly harmless author, with nothing on
> his mind worse than a novel he had discovered he must begin again, should
> turn out to be laying the foundation of a future ghost! … (p. 24)

> Formerly, Oleron had smiled at the fantastic thought that, by a merging and
> interplay of identities between himself and his beautiful room, he might be

¹¹ Julian Thompson, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Great English Ghost Story’, in *Writing and Fantasy*,
preparing a ghost for the future; it had not occurred to him that there might have been a similar merging and coalescence in the past. (p. 33)

Both of these occurrences display an amusement about the very idea of the ghostly: contemplation of ghosts is ‘a joke’ which causes Oleron to ‘smile’. There is nothing particularly earth-shattering about this in itself: people had been laughing at the idea of ghosts and the supernatural in ghost stories for a long time, as it had become established practice for creating a shortcut to reader identification (this character thinks the idea of ghosts is faintly absurd, therefore he’s rational like me) and for making the eventual ghostly revelation all the more uncanny and frightening. But Onions displaces this, since there is no great moment of supernatural revelation: although there is a shock to come later on, the word ‘ghost’ itself will remain buried, along with any firm-rooted ideas of the supernatural. As Julia Briggs thoughtfully puts it, ‘Oleron himself remains in utter confusion as to how much of his experience has been real, how much imaginary.’

Even before protagonist Paul Oleron’s experiences begin to take a sinister turn, Onions is out to unsettle us, to confuse us through a sort of narratorial sleight-of-hand. His chief weapon here is that of the conventional ‘omniscient narrator’, a strange (one might almost, almost say ‘ghostly’: indeed, one might almost as well say ‘telepathic’)

13 Nicholas Royle, for instance, has written in his chapter ‘The “Telepathy Effect”: Notes Toward a Reconsideration of Narrative Fiction’: ‘What J. Hillis Miller once charted as “the disappearance of God”, looking back to Hölderlin and the late eighteenth century, might be rephrased here as the disappearance of omniscience; ghostly, like any thinking of disappearance, it would perhaps be legible in this hyperbolic appropriation of the “omniscient”’. See Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 258.
14 Onions, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, in The Collected Ghost Stories of Oliver Onions, p. 3. All subsequent references to this story will be given in parentheses immediately following the quotation.
From the outset, the narrator of the story is out to confuse and question our notions of narration and the so-called ‘omniscience’ of the figure of the narrator. Third-person narrators are traditionally omniscient or all-knowing, yet the narrator of this story immediately troubles this simplistic notion of what it means to be ‘omniscient’ or to ‘narrate’. This is clear from the seemingly casual language of the passage, which belies its actual attention to detail. All is familiar and everyday, and yet twisted and unfamiliar: the ‘To Let’ boards have stood there for as long as the inhabitants can remember, since ‘a very long time ago’, and yet the narrator cannot recall whether there are three or four boards. Surely he would, or should, be able to do so? It doesn’t seem to matter to the narrator, there could be three or four boards, just as a ‘Square’ can apparently have three or four sides, ‘Square’ ceasing to be a fixed two-dimensional shape and instead signifying a space that is, in fact, triangular. Within that ‘three or four’ there is also lurking the suggestion that there are sometimes three boards and sometimes four; as if one of the four is in the process of mysteriously appearing and then reappearing.

The same is true of the quotation marks, which begin by performing the straightforward function of notation or, indeed, quotation (presumably quoting the message, ‘To Let’, to be found printed on the boards themselves), only to shift later in the same sentence towards performing a stranger, less obvious function: ‘the little triangular “Square”’. ‘Square’ may refer to the name of the street or road in which the scene takes place; equally, it may simply be how the area is known to the locals and ‘inhabitants’, or to the casual ‘passer-by’ who is invoked in the following sentence. Just when we have become used to this different employment of the quotation marks so early on, our expectations are troubled yet again by the third sentence that follows:

Not that there was ever any great ‘stream’ through the square; the stream passed a furlong and more away, beyond the intricacy of tenements and alleys and byways that had sprung up since the old house had been built, hemming it in completely; and probably the house itself was only suffered to stand pending the falling-in of a lease or two, when doubtless a clearance would be made of the whole neighbourhood. (p. 3)
This third occasion in as many sentences in which quotation marks have been employed—before any character has been introduced, let alone given the chance to speak—evidently looks back to the narrator’s own words of the previous sentence: ‘the stream of its fellows. Not that there was ever any great “stream” through the square …’ ‘Square’ is already in invisible quotation marks, having been placed in them in that first sentence; within just a few sentences narration has been rendered both familiar and strange to us.

These are ‘scare’ quotes in the truest sense of the verb ‘to scare’. They are out to warn us that everything is acting seemingly at one remove, and the familiar is apt to become unfamiliar. Even those words, ‘To Let’, are charged with intent and portent, a portent that had undoubtedly not been lost on the writer B. M. Croker when she published a haunted house story called ‘To Let’ in 1890.15 The closing words of that story almost seem to act as a prequel to Onions’s story, leaving a vacancy which his story would later fill: ‘Briarwood appears to have resigned itself to emptiness, neglect and decay, although outside the gate there still hangs a battered board on which, if you look very closely you can decipher the words “To Let”.’16

In Onions’s story, the words take on a sinister meaning as they are repeated throughout the story, as though ‘let’ here is being unleashed, or let loose, upon us in all its possible senses: ‘grant the use of’ but also ‘leave alone’, ‘allow’, ‘cause to’.17 The phrase seems to foreshadow the painfully desperate words of Elsie, ‘No, let me go quickly—let me go quickly … let me get away quickly’ (p. 29), later on in the story. Shortly after this, she will repeat the word by saying, ‘Let me go—I’m not wanted—let me take away what’s left of me—’ (p. 29), before leaving: ‘And Oleron watched her until she was past the hatchet-like “To Let” boards, as if he feared that even they might fall upon her and maim her’ (p. 30). The word keeps coming back. ‘No: let the miserable wrestle with his own shadows; let him, if indeed he be so mad, clip and strain and enfold and couch the succubus’ (p. 60). ‘And if all else was falling

16 Ibid., p. 38.
17 In total, the word ‘let’ (including ‘letting’) appears forty-eight times in this short 25,000-word novella; the ‘To Let’ boards themselves are repeatedly referred to, on pp. 3, 7, 30, 34, 46, and 70.
away from Oleron, gladly he was letting it go’ (p. 56). ‘Let’, it would seem, will never let be.

The signs on which these words, ‘To Let’, are written seem to be performing an impossible act: ‘They […] resembled nothing so much as a row of wooden choppers, ever in the act of falling upon some passer-by’. For them to be ‘ever in the act of falling’ is strictly an impossibility, for in order to repeat the fall they must first render themselves upright again. This action is inferred, but the wording makes the hatchet-like signs sound even more gruesome. That ‘ever’, as well as imparting a gruesome sense of eternal butchery upon the imagined passers-by, also acts as a signpost or carrier for the word ‘sever’ which hides suspiciously between the words ‘choppers’ and ‘ever’, appropriately cut or severed from each other by the comma (which, need we remind ourselves, stems from the Greek for ‘cut’). Rachel Jackson has pointed out that the ‘To Let’ signs ‘remain […] throughout the duration of Oleron’s time in the house, a reminder of the ephemerality of his possession.’ ¹十八 ‘Possession’, as we shall see, is a particularly apt word.

The irregularities continue. Take the strange bag that Oleron finds in the house while exploring it shortly after he has moved in:

It was some sort of a large bag, of an ancient frieze-like material, and when unfolded it occupied the greater part of the small kitchen floor. In shape it was an irregular, a very irregular, triangle, and it had a couple of wide flaps, with the remains of straps and buckles. The patch that had been uppermost in the folding was of a faded yellowish brown; but the rest of it was of shades of crimson that varied according to the exposure of the parts of it. (p. 12)

Given the ‘small triangular square’ (p. 7) that has by this stage been rendered familiar and commonplace to us (‘Square’ has been demoted to ‘square’, and the quotation marks have disappeared), we know that ‘an irregular, a very irregular, triangle’ could resemble just about anything. The triangle is an important shape for this story for two reasons. First, there is the obvious symbolism of the bizarre love triangle that exists between Oleron, Elsie, and the mysterious other woman, that ghostly presence with

which Oleron becomes obsessed. Second, there is the (perhaps equally obvious) sexual symbolism, the idea of the triangle as representing a woman’s vagina.

The suggestiveness of the triangle is most prominent in the story when Oleron discovers the strange ‘large bag’. Unlike Lucian Taylor’s (possibly) sexual awakening on the hillside of Caermaen, Oleron’s sexual discovery is symbolised by something small and (at least seemingly) commonplace, a bag (that is to say, a receptacle in which to put something), triangular in shape, with ‘a couple of wide flaps’ and ‘shades of crimson’. Here, at least, there is little doubt about how we should respond to this. But we are approaching the story a hundred years on, after Freudian psychoanalysis has saturated popular thought. Is the bag really a sexual symbol? Perhaps Susan Navarette’s words about Machen can also be applied to Onions: that is, ‘the fear of sexuality’ is something ‘he could not himself express, much less discuss openly’ and which ‘he felt compelled, therefore, to [...] repress in his fictions.’

A Haunted House

This notion of detailed description that succeeds in making things less comprehensible to us, not more, is part of Onions’s plan to unsettle us the way the house unsettles its new inhabitant, the writer Oleron. As with Machen’s deliberately indistinct use of ‘awakening’ in relation to Lucian Taylor’s ambiguous hillfort experience in *The Hill of Dreams*, Onions plants the word ‘awaken’ (less ambiguously than Machen, it must be said) amid his description of Oleron’s ‘abnormal sensitiveness’ to strange sounds within the old house:

> Even more curious than that the commonplace dripping of an ordinary water-tap should have tallied so closely with an actually existing air was another result it had, namely, that it awakened, or seemed to awaken, in Oleron an abnormal sensitiveness to other noises of the old house. It has been remarked that silence obtains its fullest and most impressive quality

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when it is broken by some minute sound; and, truth to tell, the place was never still. Perhaps the mildness of the spring air operated on its torpid old timbers; perhaps Oleron’s fires caused it to stretch its old anatomy; and certainly a whole world of insect life bored and burrowed in its baulks and joists. At any rate Oleron had only to sit quiet in his chair and to wait for a minute or two in order to become aware of such a change in the auditory scale as comes upon a man who, conceiving the mid-summer woods to be motionless and still, all at once finds his ear sharpened to the crepitation of a myriad insects. (p. 23)

The word ‘anatomy’ casts the ‘haunted house’ in its familiar role as a refiguring of the body; it is as though the house is somehow as alive, as living, as Oleron himself. Furthermore, ‘awaken’ here means neither ‘become conscious’ nor ‘become aware’, but rather ‘activate’ or ‘make aware’: its function as active and transitive verb is to emphasise the power the noises of the house have over Oleron. (Although the resurfacing of the word as a ghostly presence in the phrase ‘become aware’ later in the paragraph only serves to emphasise this strange tuning-in to previously unheard sounds.) Oleron has an ‘abnormal sensitiveness’ to the sounds of the house; in his story ‘Rooum’, which appeared in the 1911 volume Widdershins alongside ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, Onions tells us that the title character is ‘extraordinarily sensitive’ to ‘ordinary echoes’; the phrase ‘extraordinarily sensitive’ serves as an echo to the phrase the governess uses of Miles in The Turn of the Screw.20

Like Rooum’s, Oleron’s ‘abnormal sensitiveness’, reminding us of Latimer’s ‘abnormal sensibility’ in Eliot’s The Lifted Veil, is peculiarly centred on the aural; also, like Latimer’s awareness of voices around him being like ‘the loud activity of an imprisoned insect’, so Onions likens Oleron’s new-found sensitiveness to sounds as being like that of ‘a man who […] finds his ear sharpened to the crepitation of a myriad insects.’21 Like Machen, who states that Lucian’s sensitiveness to the ‘talk of the men and women’ around him is akin to ‘the buzz of insects’, so Onions, too, takes up this entomological analogy, but transforms it,

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rendering it strange and somehow unknowable to us. 22 For while he likens the noises of the house to the sound of insects in the woods, the narrator also remarks that ‘certainly a whole world of insect life bored and burrowed in [the] baulks and joists’ of the old house. Simultaneously, the mysterious noises are merely like the sounds of insects and, somehow, are the sounds of insects.

1911, the year of the publication of both ‘Rooum’ and ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, was also the year in which Freud’s essay, ‘Dreams and Occultism’, appeared. Among other things, Freud’s essay made sense of something that writers had been exploring for years, at least since George Eliot had drawn the connection between telepathy and insects over fifty years before:

it is a familiar fact that we do not know how the common purpose comes about in the great insect communities; possibly it is done by means of direct psychical transference of this kind. One is led to a suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals which are picked up by the sense organs. 23

The fact that ‘a whole world of insect life’ seems to inhabit the same house where Oleron receives the tune to the ‘Beckoning Fair’ without quite knowing how or where from, goes some way towards fictionalising the very ideas that Freud is outlining here.

But the idea of pieces of music being telepathically transferred from one person to another was by no means a new one. It is there in ‘A Wicked Voice’, and is also to be found among the case studies submitted to, and analysed by, the SPR. Twenty-five years before Onions’s story appeared, Phantasms of the Living had drawn attention to a multitude of auditory hallucinations. In particular, there was the case of ‘Colonel Lyttleton Annesley’, written by Sir Lepel Griffin in an account dated ‘February 14th, 1884’:

Colonel A. was at one end of this long room reading, to the best of my recollection, while I opened a box, long forgotten, to see what it contained. I took out a number of papers and old music, which I was turning over in my hand, when I came across a song in which I, years before, had been accustomed to take a part, ‘Dal tuo stellato soglio,’ out of ‘Mosé in Egitto,’ if I remember right. As I looked at this old song, Colonel A., who had been paying no attention whatever to my proceedings, began to hum ‘Dal tuo stellato soglio.’ In much astonishment I asked him why he was singing that particular air. He did not know. He did not remember to have sung it before; indeed I have not ever heard Colonel A. sing, though he is exceedingly fond of music.24

The incident described in this narrative is closely bound up with the question of memory. But while phrases such as ‘to the best of my recollection’, ‘long forgotten’, ‘if I remember right’, and ‘He did not remember’ point up the importance of memory and recollection, they also suggest some of the potential problems that many of these cases evince, the problem of just how reliable memory is. Griffin’s conclusion, namely that this incident ‘is outside all explanation on the theory of coincidence,’ is too restrictive.25 Gurney knows this, and feels it necessary to remark: ‘When the two persons concerned have been in close proximity, it is, of course, difficult to make sure that some incipient sound or movement of the lips, on the part of the supposed agent, did not supply an unconscious suggestion.’26 Onions’s story dramatises this idea of mysterious suggestion, and similarly chooses music as the means with which to demonstrate this ambiguous sensation in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’.

But this was 1911. Gurney was long dead, having died of a chloroform overdose in 1888, just two years after Phantasms of the Living was published. Henry Sidgwick died in 1900 and Frederic Myers followed a year later, while Frank Podmore and William James died within two weeks of each other in August 1910. William Stead, the founder of the Borderland journal, would follow in 1912, being one of the less fortunate passengers on board the Titanic on the fateful night of 14th April 1912. There is a commonly held belief that the Society for Psychical Research

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., pp. 234-5.
and the associated vogue for spiritualism was effectively ‘killed off’ by the horrors of the First World War, but even three years before the outbreak of the conflict the old guard was giving way to the new; Freudian psychoanalysis, though yet to achieve mainstream attention in England, was beginning to receive more interest in Europe.

Onions’s fiction is therefore not so heavily saturated with the ideas found among the pages of the Proceedings and Journal of the SPR, though its influence is certainly detectable in some respects. This ‘change in the auditory scale’ of which Oleron becomes aware is nicely placed between the possibilities of either supernatural or psychological phenomena, and as such fits in with the case studies found in such abundance in Phantasms of the Living. In that work, Gurney had pointed out: ‘Among hallucinations of the insane, the proportion of auditory to visual cases is often given as about 3 to 1’ although others put the figure considerably higher, ‘at about 5 to 1’; indeed, one correspondent, who worked with the mentally ill, told Gurney that ‘auditory hallucinations are very frequent, visual rare.’27 The fact that Oleron experiences more auditory phenomena than visual adds credence to the idea of his possible madness, something suggested more strongly later on in the tale; but for now, at this point in the narrative, as with The Hill of Dreams, we are caught midway between natural and supernatural explanations, the text refusing to favour one over the other. The noise remains ambiguous, and this air of mystery is only heightened by the sparing way in which it is treated. In fact, it remains ambiguous right to the end.

What makes the noise? Onions denies us any straightforward answers. Instead, he continues to build the image of the decrepit old house with its decaying panels, scurrying mice, and crackling fire:

And he smiled to think of man’s arbitrary distinction between that which has life and that which has not. Here, quite apart from such recognisable sounds as the scampering of mice, the falling of plaster behind his panelling, and the popping of purses or coffins from his fire, was a whole house talking to him had he but known its language. Beams settled with a tired sigh into their old mortices; creatures ticked in the walls; joints cracked, boards complained; with no palpable stirring of the air window-sashes changed

27 Gurney, Phantasms of the Living, II, p. 22.
their positions with a soft knock in their frames. And whether the place had life in this sense or not, it had at all events a winsome personality. (pp. 23-24)

The personification of the house through such words as ‘talking’, ‘tired sigh’, and ‘complained’ develops the notion of the house as a somehow living (or perhaps undead) entity, but the discussion of ‘life’ (‘that which has life and that which does not’) is muddied and troubled by the mention of ‘the popping of purses or coffins from his fire’. The suggestion of death and decay carried within ‘coffins’ makes the word at home in the description of the house, but it is not clear why coffins should be in Oleron’s fire at all. However, turning to the *OED*, we find that ‘coffin’, which gives us ‘coffin-spark’, can also mean ‘An oblong piece of live coal starting out of the fire with a report’. This, it would seem, would remove the macabre connotations of the word ‘coffin’; but the dictionary qualifies its definition of this sense of ‘coffin’ with these words: ‘regarded as a prognostic of death.’ Death is an almost spectral presence at this point in the story, and seems to foreshadow (or, indeed, prognosticate) the ‘hooded stretcher’ (p. 70) bearing a dead body from the house up the hill to the ‘mortuary’ (p. 70).

Onions continues to build a picture of the house as a living body, but now with a twist. We get a sudden piercing insight into Oleron’s psychological processes, and the result is slightly unexpected:

It needed but an hour of musing for Oleron to conceive the idea that, as his own body stood in friendly relation to his soul, so, by extension and an attenuation, his habitation might fantastically be supposed to stand in some relation to himself. He even amused himself with the far-fetched fancy that he might so identify himself with the place that some future tenant, taking possession, might regard it as in a sense haunted. It would be rather a joke if he, a perfectly harmless author, with nothing on his mind worse than a novel he had discovered he must begin again, should turn out to be laying the foundations of a future ghost! (p. 24)

The phrase ‘taking possession’ is obviously ambiguous, suggesting demonic or ghostly possession as well as legal, financial ownership of the house. Pace Jack Sullivan, this is ironic: the house is taking possession of its inhabitant, rather than the
other way around.28 But the sudden and perhaps unexpected interjection of a ‘joke’ (albeit a subjunctive one: ‘It would be rather a joke’) amid this building of suspense and sense of hauntedness. Why Onions should do this is obvious if we read his ‘Credo’:

But this place of shrouds and moans and bony fingers is surrounded by territory no less haunted than itself, and with far subtler terrors. This is the ghost-belt that never asserts its spectre, but leaves you in no doubt about his presence. Above all, only rarely is he seen, and I myself have never been able to understand why the unvarying question should be, ‘Have you ever seen a ghost?’ when, if a ghost cannot exist apart from visibility, his being rests solely on the testimony of one sense, and that in some respects the most fallible one of all.29

These words are as accurate a description of the ‘ghost’ in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ as one is likely to get, although ‘ghost’ here is, as with Lucian Taylor’s experiences, a somewhat inaccurate term to use. Although he does not suggest this in the ‘Credo’, it is clear from reading his fiction that Onions wished to create effects that might be taken as evidence of a supernatural presence, but might equally be viewed as evidence of some psychological disturbance. His penchant for ‘far subtler terrors’ than the ‘place of shrouds and moans and bony fingers’ nods towards this, but in fact the best credo of all for this aspect of Onions’ fiction is found within the fiction itself, and especially in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’.

Oleron himself initially imputes a rational explanation to all of the noises in the house. All except one, that is:

Only half conscious that he did so, he had been sitting for some time identifying these noises, attributing to each crack or creak or knock its material cause; but there was one noise which, again not fully conscious of the omission, he had not sought to account for. It had last come some minutes ago; it came again now—a sort of soft sweeping rustle that seemed to hold an almost inaudible minute crackling. For half a minute or so it had

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Oleron’s attention; then his heavy thoughts were of Elsie Bengough again. (p. 32)

Crack, creak, crackling…. Here the language, while evocatively onomatopoeic, is somewhat vague and indistinct: ‘some minutes ago’, ‘sort of soft’, ‘seemed to hold’, ‘almost inaudible’. This is, of course, in keeping with the casual ‘three or four’ with which the story opened; but now its effect is even more pronounced because we and the narrator almost join Oleron in his state of semi-consciousness. If he is ‘Only half conscious’ of what he does, then we, too, can only be half conscious or half certain of what we read.

Consider the moment shortly after Oleron has sent away his girlfriend, Elsie Bengough, because the house has started to take possession of him:

To the man who pays heed to that voice within him which warns him that twilight and danger are settling over his soul, terror is apt to appear an absolute thing, against which his heart must be safeguarded in a twink unless there is to take place an alteration in the whole range and scale of his nature. (p. 38)

That ‘voice within him’ may be merely the conventional inner voice of reason, but it may also here—slightly more sinisterly—gesture towards some sort of aural hallucination, the voice which takes hold of Oleron without his knowledge and impels him to hum the tune known as ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. The narrator here is keen to stress the urgency of such a quasi-epiphanic moment, and this is echoed ingeniously through the use of the rare word ‘twink’—not ‘twinkle’, we must note, but ‘twink’, a brisk curtailing or conjoining of a twinkle and a wink which, in its monosyllabic state, echoes the necessity of immediate action. One must act in a twink, Onions reminds us, in order to stave off madness.

Peter Penzoldt has written of ‘The Beckoning Fair One’:

Mr. Onions’ tale is about a young man, who, living alone in the haunted house, falls in love with the invisible presence of a woman. This unnatural love first leads him to forsake his living girl friend, and then, by degrees, to
give up work, lose all interest in life, and finally almost to die of starvation, without noticing he was doing so.\textsuperscript{30}

Indeed, ‘without noticing he was doing so’ might very well be a watchword for all of Oleron’s weird actions and experiences in the story. Penzoldt goes on to make a bold claim:

The symbolism is obvious. The true motif of the story is the symptom psychoanalysts know under the name of ‘the ghostly lover’, the imaginary love nearly every teen-age boy or girl has had, and which is replaced later by affection for a living human. If the idea of the ‘ghostly lover’ remains and gains in intensity until it becomes an obsession, this usually shows that the patient is losing contact with reality. The ‘ghostly lover’ may then be considered as a dangerous symptom of a certain type of neurosis. ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is merely a tale based on this type of neurosis. Only the ‘ghostly lover’ is not described as a symptom, but as the real being for which the patient takes her. Thus the story becomes a ghost story.\textsuperscript{31}

Most careful readers of Onions’s story would probably not go in for such iron certainties as Penzoldt displays in his use of words such as ‘obvious’, ‘true’, and ‘merely’. His categorical assertion comes in the middle of a discussion of numerous other ghost stories, and Penzoldt does not follow up his idea with any exploration or analysis of Onions’ story. This present chapter might, then, be viewed as a response to Penzoldt’s claim, one which seeks to challenge its over-simplicity and also to suggest further, more fully detailed ways in which ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ can be read as a psychological tale. For Penzoldt is right to stress this aspect of the story. Indeed, any reading of the story which would fail to take into consideration the possibility of hallucination would miss the subtlety of the story and the clever tricks Onions plays on his readers regarding his delineation of Oleron’s experience.

After all, Onions’ description of his protagonist’s growing confusion and mental uncertainty subtly fuses the possibilities of supernatural presence and psychological disturbance:

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp. 240-1.
Two months before, the words ‘a haunted house,’ applied to his lovely bemusing dwelling, would have chilled his marrow; now, his scale of sensation becoming depressed, he could ask ‘Haunted by what?’ and remain unconscious that horror, when it can be proved to be relative, by so much loses its proper quality. He was setting aside the landmarks. Mists and confusion had begun to enwrap him. (p. 39)

These metaphorical ‘Mists’—at least we assume they are metaphorical—might well put us in mind of Lucian Taylor’s London experiences among ‘the phantasmagoria of the mist’. But the phrase ‘a haunted house’ draws attention to one of the key facets of Onions’s story: to what extent is Lucian’s house a ‘haunted’ house? As Julian Thompson has framed it, the ‘wispy’ and ‘supernatural’ presence in the story ‘may be no more than the shadow of Oleron’s solipsistic decline.’

When the Society for Psychical Research divided itself into six semi-discrete committees, at its foundation in 1882, one of the committees was engaged to investigate cases of ‘apparitions’; tellingly, it was also to investigate supposed cases of ‘haunted houses’. The sound of ‘the scampering of mice’ (p. 23) in Onions’s story recalls a common trope in Gothic fiction and ghost stories: that of the scurrying of rodents in the supposedly ‘haunted’ house. We might compare Markheim’s ‘brute terrors’ which were, Stevenson tells us, ‘like the scurrying of rats in a deserted attic’, or, indeed, the rat in the ceiling-cloth in Kipling’s ‘My Own True Ghost Story’. It is telling that in all three of these tales, the ‘ghost’ is at best a *possible* cause of the sounds heard, and, in the case of Kipling’s story, is even revealed to have been nothing more than the scampering of a rat. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the sound of scampering rodents became almost a symbol for rational explanation in the face of cases of supposed ghostly noises, as one correspondent of the SPR testified when he observed that, in many such cases, ‘there is the resource in such cases of rats. Well! I have a great respect for the capabilities of rats in the way of

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nocturnal clamour. If, however, they really achieved all that came under my own observation, then I must say that their abilities are wonderful.36

Oleron sets about considering the problem of the house’s strange presence:

And the first thing he must do, of course, was to define the problem. He defined it in terms of mathematics. Granted that he had not the place to himself; granted that the old house had inexpressibly caught and engaged his spirit; granted that, by virtue of the common denominator of the place, this unknown co-tenant stood in some relation to himself: what next? Clearly, the nature of the other numerator must be ascertained. (p. 39)

But of course ‘spirit’ here is already resounding with ghostly connotations, albeit in only the subtlest of ways. The phrase ‘in some relation to himself’ is typical of Onions in this story: suitably vague (‘some relation’ rather than, say, ‘specific relation’ or simply ‘in relation to’) and yet formal-sounding enough for us to allow it to pass. It is a phrase that, wittingly or unwittingly, Onions uses twice in the story: earlier he had told us that Oleron’s ‘habitation might fantastically be supposed to stand in some relation to himself’ (p. 24). But now all talk of ‘might’ or ‘supposed’—or, indeed, ‘fantastically’—has disappeared. Oleron knows that ‘this unknown co-tenant’ is somehow bound up with himself, whether as Penzoldt’s ‘ghostly lover’ or as some other manifestation of Oleron’s own unconscious. Like The Hill of Dreams, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is the story of a writer who is more sensitive to the world around him than most people. This is a central factor in the reader’s decision—one that s/he need not definitively make—concerning Oleron’s experiences in the old house. It pushes these experiences closer towards the idea of hallucination than mere ghostly presences.

The mysterious sound of hair being brushed, which had earlier driven Oleron out of the house, returns later on in a strange moment. Convinced that ‘the manifestation that for two days had been withheld was close at hand’ (p. 50), Oleron moves into the bedroom and awaits the return of the strange ‘manifestation’: ‘Startling or surprising it might be; he was prepared for that; but that was all; his scale

of sensation had become depressed’ (p. 50). The terse, clipped nature of the syntax at this point, and the plethora of semi-colons, invites suspension and, to a degree, suspense. Something is about to happen. Compare the semi-colons of ‘Markheim’ that mirror the drawing-in of breath that the reader is encouraged to take, the sense of suspense. Indeed, Onions had already used that same phrase (‘his scale of sensation had become depressed’) earlier in the story: ‘Two months before, the words “a haunted house,” applied to his lovely bemusing dwelling, would have chilled his marrow; now, his scale of sensation becoming depressed, he could ask “Haunted by what?”’ (p. 39). It is tempting to proclaim that the narrator doth protest too much, since Onions has no intention of depressing our own scales of sensation, and indeed as the tale gathers pace so it gathers suspense and becomes, in the words of Jack Sullivan, ‘Gruesome and horrifying in an abrupt modulation at the end’.37

In his nerviness, Oleron almost drops his watch, but then, ‘before the watch had ceased its little oscillation, he was himself again’ (p. 50). This moment of glimmering Jekyll-and-Hydeism is masked in an everyday expression for feeling briefly off-colour (‘he was himself again’) that we may easily flick over, and the narrator continues:

In the middle of his mantelpiece there stood a picture, a portrait of his grandmother; he placed himself before this picture, so that he could see in the glass of it the steady flame of the candle that burned behind him on the chest of drawers. He could see also in the picture-glass the little glancings of light from the bevels and facets of the objects about the mirror and candle. But he could see more. These twinklings and re-reflections did not change their position; but there was one gleam that had motion. It was fainter than the rest, and it moved up and down through the air. It was the reflection of the candle on Oleron’s black vulcanite comb, and each of its downward movements was accompanied by a silky and crackling rustle. (pp. 50-51)

‘So that he could see in the glass of it the steady flame of the candle’: we cannot help recalling the title of Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 collection of ghostly tales, In a Glass Darkly. Here the weird reflection of the room is provided not by a mirror but by the glass covering of a picture; this is charged with symbolism, since the surface

37 Sullivan, Elegant Nightmares, p. 115.
reflection in the glass of the candle and the comb render the picture itself (of Oleron’s grandmother) worthless. Instead, the picture or image that matters is the reflection (or ‘re-reflections’) of the room, the here and now, rather than a static capturing of the past. Moreover, the genuine mirror in the room, standing on top of the chest of drawers, is itself reflected in the makeshift mirror of the ‘picture-glass’—hence ‘re-reflections’. And shortly before this, the window had acted as a form of mirror reflecting back Oleron’s own countenance: ‘The window was uncurtained, and he could see the reflection of the candle, and, faintly, that of his own face, as he moved about’ (p. 49).

Those ‘twinklings and re-reflections’ are static, and the only movement is in fact that of Oleron’s comb, moving by itself. The word ‘twinklings’ sets off a reflection or echo of the earlier neologism ‘twink’, which is tinged with irony, since the time for safeguarding the heart against terror is now long past. Furthermore, the repeated ‘downward movements’ of Oleron’s comb echo the wooden hatchet-like ‘“To Let” boards’ that were ‘ever in the act of falling’ (p. 3) at the start of the story.

Aural Sex

‘The Beckoning Fair One’, if it can be said to be a tale of hallucination, is a tale of aural hallucination, of the mysterious effects of sound on a disturbed mind. ‘Music, when soft voices die, / Vibrates in the memory—’:\(^{38}\) Shelley’s words about music, so fitting to the Romantic movement in so many ways, find a resonance in both *The Hill of Dreams* and ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. Music can have a captivating and even hypnotising power over us, one that is perhaps stronger and somehow more natural and more instinctive to us than the other arts. It is a sentiment that would be echoed by Walter Pater in his statement that ‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.’\(^ {39} \) Music: the word, derived as it is from the idea of musing and muses


(contrast the homely craftsmanship echoed in the origins of ‘poetry’, from the Greek for ‘to make’, or the humdrum prosiness of ‘prose’, for instance), has been bound up with inspiration and deep reflection ever since it was first given a name. Not only this, but as Edmund Gurney noted in 1886: ‘The kinds of non-vocal impression which are least likely to be due to a real but undiscoverable cause in the vicinity are those which are distinctly musical—the sound being produced not in the gliding random fashion of an Æolian harp, but in a series of well-defined tones.’

And it is fitting, then, that music plays such an important part in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, as the dripping of the tap gives way to the mysterious tune which Oleron begins to hum (without even being aware that he is doing so):

He became conscious of the dripping of the tap again. It had a tinkling gamut of four or five notes, on which it rang irregular changes, and it was foolishly sweet and dulcimer-like. In his mind Oleron could see the gathering of each drop, its little tremble on the lip of the tap, and the tiny percussion of its fall ‘Plink—plunk,’ minimised almost to inaudibility. Following the lowest note there seemed to be a brief phrase, irregularly repeated; and presently Oleron found himself waiting for the recurrence of this phrase. It was quite pretty. … (p. 22)

Plink, plunk, twink, tinkling, twinkling…. Sounds, the emergence of sounds and the effect they have on a sensitive mind, are central to ‘The Beckoning Fair One’. The casualness of ‘four or five notes’ acts as an echo of the casual ‘three or four’ in that opening sentence of the tale. The ellipsis of ‘…’ with which this and many other paragraphs of the story end is representative of Oleron’s dreamy, semi-conscious state. It is almost a punctuational representation of his drifting levels of consciousness. The sound of the dripping tap is the start of it all. It is from that simple sound that everything else develops. The next morning, as he is putting on his dressing-gown, he starts to hum: ‘He was not conscious that as he did so that morning he hummed an air; but Mrs. Barrett lingered with her hand on the door-knob and her face a little averted and smiling’ (p. 22). She has recognised the tune which he had been humming as ‘a very o-ald tune’ called ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ (p. 22). So, the story’s title surfaces in the story as the title of an old tune, making the obvious

40 Gurney, Phantasms, II, p. 127.
suggestion that the story is itself a literary representation of something musical, a story ‘aspiring towards the condition of music.’

The story develops into an unsettling combination of visual and aural strangeness:

How, in a houseful of shadows, should he know his own Shadow? How, in a houseful of noises, distinguish the summons he felt to be at hand? Ah, trust him! He would know! The place was full of a jugglery of dim lights. The blind at his elbow that allowed the light of a street lamp to struggle vaguely through—the glimpse of greeny blue moonlight seen through the distant kitchen door—the sulky glow of the fire under the black ashes of the burnt manuscript—the glimmering of the tulips and the moon-daisies and narcissi in the bowls and jugs and jars—these did not so trick and bewilder his eyes that he would not know his Own! (p. 58)

And yet he does not know his ‘Own’—whether that refers to his own reflection or some manifestation of his ‘lover’—and this is reflected by the disordered—almost manic—accumulation of clauses connected by dashes. The ‘black ashes of the burnt manuscript’ is an almost Machenian touch, reminding us of Lucian’s abandoned writing.

For Jack Sullivan, Onions is among the breed of writers whose work exhibits ‘an earnestness of tone, an unease with irony, [and] a desire to be taken with intense seriousness.’ Onions does write earnestly and seriously, but Sullivan is not particularly clear about what he means by ‘an unease with irony’. Onions certainly likes ambiguity, and although ambiguity and irony are by no means the same thing, it is true that ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, as with Onions’s other fiction, is fond of playfully suggesting several things simultaneously, leaving the reader to make up her or his own mind about what precisely is meant. It is not at all easy, for instance, to gauge the intended tone of this passage: ‘He had taken the place for himself, not for invisible women to brush their hair in; that lawyer fellow in Lincoln’s Inn should be told so, too, before many hours were out; it was outrageous, letting people in for agreements like that!’ (p. 35). This borders on the desperate, the hysterical; but it also verges on being a parody of conventional middle-class respectability with its

language (‘lawyer fellow’) and matter-of-fact treatment of the ‘ghostly’ (‘not for invisible women to brush their hair in’). Indeed, the fact that the aural hallucination (or ghostly sound) is that of an invisible person brushing her or his hair points up those ‘subtler terrors’ which, in his ‘Credo’, Onions had indicated were the realm of the more sophisticated writer of ghost stories. Instead of a sinister voice, or the sound of weeping or moaning or screaming, Onions selects a commonplace sound and transforms it, rendering it at first intriguing, then laughable, then highly unnerving. But he is far cleverer about this than critics such as Penzoldt have given him credit for. Penzoldt’s conclusion about the story—that Onions presents a psychological notion through the metaphorical form of a ghost story—is much too discrete an analysis:

A shadow, light as fleece, seemed to take shape in the kitchen (the time had been when Oleron would have said that a cloud had passed over the unseen moon). The low illumination on the blind at his elbow grew dimmer (the time had been when Oleron would have concluded that the lamplighter going his rounds had turned low the flame of the lamp). The fire settled, letting down the black and charred papers; a flower fell from the bowl, and lay indistinct upon the floor; all was still; and then a stray draught moved through the old house, passing before Oleron’s face. … (p. 59)

The ‘black and charred papers’ of the discarded manuscript are still burning, and the semi-colons are back to mark the disquieting stillness before the return of the ‘ghost’. The ‘stray draught’ is the first sign of its return, but it is also the only sign, and what follows is not an accumulation of activity but rather a lengthy description of the gradual loss of sanity:

42 I cannot help being reminded of Philip Larkin’s 1947 poem ‘Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair’ whenever I read ‘The Beckoning Fair One’: ‘But, tender visiting […] How would you have me? […] Are you jealous of her? / Will you refuse to come till I have sent / Her terribly away, importantly live / Part invalid, part baby, and part saint?’ See Philip Larkin, Collected Poems, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988; paperback edn. 1990), p. 20. Peter Robinson has recently written of this final stanza that the ‘you’ addressed ‘would seem to be the muse, a visitor with poetic inspiration, while the “her” refers to the girl with whom the speaker has spent the night, an encounter blankly indicated to have been less than satisfactory’. See Peter Robinson, “Readings will grow erratic” in Philip Larkin’s “Deceptions”, The Cambridge Quarterly, 38.3 (2009), 277-305 (p. 286). The connection with the hair-brushing may appear arbitrary, but in seizing on such a recognisably middle-class feminine trait, both Larkin and Onions present the human relationships in their texts as inescapably bound up with social respectability, sex, and, perhaps most importantly, artistic ambition.
A novel? Somebody ought to write a novel about a place like that! There must be lots to write about in a place like that if one could but get to the bottom of it! It had probably already been painted, by a man called Madley who had lived there … but Oleron had not known this Madley—had a strong feeling that he wouldn’t have liked him—would rather he had lived somewhere else—really couldn’t stand the fellow—hated him, Madley, in fact. (Aha! That was a joke!) (p. 61)

The exclamation marks border on the hysterical, and the return of the word ‘joke’ is charged with irony here, especially as it is accompanied by a return, also, of an excessive use of dashes. The inevitable pun on Madley is not a feeble attempt to inject some token humour into this dark point near the culmination of the story, but rather a powerful reminder of just how strange Oleron’s world has become. But the talk of the ‘novel’ is significant for another reason. For Rachel Jackson, the moment when Oleron burns his unfinished novel is a pivotal one:

Authorial voice is obviously muddied by the insurgent ghostliness of both house and text: when Oleron burns the manuscript and takes to his bed, the reader loses sight of who is authorising that which is being enacted within the walls of the house. The powerful dream/hallucinations which visit him provide another narrative, which one can imagine to correspond to that text which he has come to perceive as being ‘sodden’, his now incinerated manuscript. This is the alternate text which remains unwritten: its plot includes the murder of Elsie, the perpetrator of which act is lost in the confused agency of the dream sequence.43

This lends a new significance to Oleron’s status as troubled writer: like Lucian Taylor before him, his life and work have become indistinguishable through the agency of dreamlike states and hallucinations. Our uncertainty and confusion mirror Oleron’s and the narrator’s: nobody, not even the ‘omniscient’ third-person narrator of the story, ends up being sure of what happens to Oleron, and—more poignantly—what happens to Elsie Bengough.

Oleron collapses just as his unseen lover is ‘beckoning, beckoning’ (p. 66) to him, in an almost chantlike echo of the story’s title: ‘He let go the wall and fell

back into bed again as—oh, unthinkable!—the other half of that kiss that a gnash had interrupted was placed (how else convey it?) on his lips, robbing him of very breath’ (p. 66). Then, when the inspector enters the house, we are back to the ‘three or four’ with which the story began, and the shape of the triangle:

To close the hatch again he would have had to thrust that pudding back with his hand; and somehow he did not quite like the idea of touching it. Instead, he turned the handle of the cupboard itself. There was weight behind it, so much weight that, after opening the door three or four inches and peering inside, he had to put his shoulder to it in order to close it again. In closing it he left sticking out, a few inches from the floor, a triangle of black and white check skirt. (p. 69)

Then, to finish the story and bring it full-circle (or full-triangle, perhaps) Oleron gets one final ‘glimpse’ through the doors of the cab into which he is placed by the inspector of ‘the hatchet-like “To Let” boards among the privet-trees’ (p. 70). He has escaped death, unlike the previous tenant, Madley; but he has committed, or been accused of, some terrible crime. How should we read the ending of the story? In choosing not to give us any clear-cut denouement to the tale, Onions suggests that we may read the story as a tale of supernatural possession by an unseen feminine spirit; but we may also read ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ as a powerful story of artistic decay, as Oleron, like Lucian Taylor before him, succumbs to the power of his own imagination and becomes insane. As Onions writes, shortly before Oleron’s final collapse:

On the morrow, he must set about the writing of a novel with a heroine so winsome, capricious, adorable, jealous, wicked, beautiful, inflaming, and altogether evil, that men should stand amazed. She was coming over him now; he knew by the alteration of the very air of the room when she was near him; and that soft thrill of bliss that had begun to stir in him never came unless she was beckoning, beckoning. … (p. 66)

Just before this moment, we had found Oleron ‘picking at his new-found beard’ (p. 65), the beard suggesting his newly awakened masculinity and awareness of himself as a sexual being. This kind of awakening is posited perfectly in the compound
adjective ‘new-found’: as with that phrase’s most famous incarnation, Newfoundland in Canada, it suggests discovery, something newly encountered. It also very poignantly points up Oleron’s own madness and break with reality, even the reality found growing on his own face: not ‘newly grown’, but ‘new-found’. It is as if he has just realised he has grown a beard, for the first time in days. He has forgotten to shave. Such things have ceased to matter.

Again, like Lucian, Oleron’s experience is a sensual one, bordering on the sexual. And, like Lucian’s experience, Oleron’s ‘soft thrill of bliss’ hovers between sexual and spiritual sensation, much like Tennyson’s speaker in ‘The Lover’s Tale’ (1833):

though while I gazed  
My spirit leaped as with those thrills of bliss  
That strike across the soul in prayer, and show us  
That we are surely heard.  

This is crudely put, as the hypermetrical ‘show us’ clashes most unblissfully with the ‘bliss’ that concluded the previous line; but it does capture the sensual undertones of the experience, only made more exciting by their being compared with religion and prayer. And just as such godly words as ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, and ‘prayer’ cannot quite overshadow the physicality of ‘leaped’, ‘thrills’, and ‘strike’ (‘shoot’ in an earlier version) in Tennyson’s poem, so Onions’s ‘thrill of bliss’, along with ‘coming’, ‘came’, and ‘beckoning’, dominate this airy spirit that has bewitched Oleron.

For all its physicality, however, there is still a strong sense of Oleron’s experiences being somehow all in the mind, all generated by his wild imagination. We cannot forget that Lucian Taylor is an aspiring writer in The Hill of Dreams, and this fact colours every visionary experience he has. Similarly, with Oleron the aspiring writer: imagination holds sway. Julian Thompson has written that ‘Oleron is as much a prisoner of the imagination as the “madwoman in the attic” of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), his story’s human agenda and sexual politics just as clear.’ For Thompson, ‘The wraith winding insidiously about

[Oleron’s] soul represents the fatal power of the human imagination to override the practical exigencies of the universe.45 ‘Wraith’ is a curious word to use, as it does not appear anywhere in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’; and yet it seems to capture effectively the spirit (as it were) of Oleron’s experiences, straddling both the natural and supernatural as it does.

Robert Aickman has written of ‘The Beckoning Fair One’:

The masterly characterisation, not by any means only of the bewitched hero (for who can forget the odious Barrett, and ‘I was arsking a blessing on our food’?); the slenderess of the ghostly mechanism, equalled only by its deadliness; the so skilfully kept balance, however fierce the odds, between Miss Bengough and her lethal rival; the author’s disconcerting blend of worldly knowledge with unworldly lyricism: these are among the elements in a story which brings great power to the ninetiesish theme of the quest for perfection and the ruin to which the quest so regularly leads. To break with the common round is so often to find oneself surrounded.46

The ‘lethal rival’: Aickman’s phrase recalls Thompson’s ‘fatal power of the human imagination’, and yet it is curious that the only two appearances of the word ‘fatal’ (‘lethal’ does not appear at all) in the story involve not the dangerous wraith-like ‘rival’ but Elsie Bengough. We read that ‘the mere thought of Elsie was fatal to anything abstract’ (p. 40); later on, as Oleron thinks of Elsie, realisation dawns and ‘he knew that he had done something, something fatal, irreparable, blasting’ (p. 62). Admittedly, the second of these two uses of the word ‘fatal’ does refer obliquely to an action that Oleron had performed while under the influence of ‘this other horrific hand’ (p. 63). The fatality has shifted, because Oleron’s state of mind has shifted. He has moved from annoyance at Elsie for reminding him of the real world to guilt over his treatment of her—‘fatality’ is now literally rather than hyperbolically fatal, as Elsie’s body will be revealed (by not being revealed, by being covered up on a stretcher) at the end of the story.

The physicality and the fatality obviously come together at the end of the story, the bodily and the lethal tragically fused in the body on the stretcher that is

45 Thompson, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Great English Ghost Story’, p. 211.
brought out of the house. The house itself is of course significant. For it seems too
discrete an analysis to state that ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is the tale of a ghostly
presence in the house. To an extent, the ghostly presence becomes the house—and
vice versa. It is the tale of a ‘haunted’ house, although it is equally a ‘haunting house’
story. ‘The ghost-in-the-house terrorising the male owner may be a sublimated means
by which the “angel-in-the-house” terrorises her husband,’ Jarlath Killeen has
recently suggested in an interesting and thoughtful response to this story.47 Indeed,
‘The ghost story may be a means of dealing with and using women’s liminality to
their own advantage’:

The clearest representative of this argument may be in Oliver Onion’s [sic]
‘The Beckoning Fair One’ (1911), where Paul Oleron [sic], the protagonist,
is attacked and possessed by a female ghost who causes him to kill the
woman he loves, the story perhaps expressing the male fear of what a
domestic goddess could really do to her male ‘partner’. However, this is a
story written by a man.48

The angel in the house becomes the ghost in the house, and so Onions’s story
represents a sort of Freudian idea of male neurosis, a fear of the resentment and anger
the ‘kept woman’ has been keeping hidden or repressed for so long. The problem
with such a theory is not, as Killeen seems to imply, that the story was written by a
man; indeed, the fact of male authorship goes some way towards supporting his
theory, since it might be argued that no writer could explore male fear better than a
male writer. The real problem lies in Killeen’s easy assumptions about the story itself,
particularly that Oleron is ‘attacked’ by a ‘ghost’; as we have seen, the word ‘ghost’
is a troubling one for this story, and at no point is Oleron attacked in any conventional
sense. Killeen’s repeated use of hedges at other points (‘may be a sublimated means’,
‘may be a means’, ‘perhaps expressing’) highlights the latent uncertainty surrounding
his certainties. True, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is about fear of women, but it seems
more about fear of female sexuality, about women’s bodies—witness those Freudian
triangles and that squidgy bag—than it is about fear of women’s emotions towards

48 Ibid.
men. To that end, the woman who poses the real threat to Oleron is not the ‘Beckoning Fair One’ but Elsie Bengough; bodily in the extreme, she represents the reality of practical womanhood in its physical form. Her perceived mannishness does not detract from this, since she embodies what the Victorian angel in the house had become: the Edwardian practical woman, who is all too aware that work has to be done. That is why she is ‘fatal’ to him. That Oleron chooses the insubstantial form of the ‘Beckoning Fair One’ over Elsie—regardless of whether the Beckoning Fair exists outside of his mind or not—suggests not a fear of being in the thrall of a woman, but a fear of being in a physical relationship with one. For Oleron, the angel in the house becoming the ghost in the house is not something to fear, but something to embrace—metaphorically speaking, of course, since to replace an angel with a ghost is to substitute one insubstantial figure for another.

Although in ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ the delineation of hallucinatory horror is far more vivid and distinct than in any of his other works, Onions’s fiction is shot through with the idea of the morbidly psychological, with trances, visions, and unusual sensory experiences. Take the hallucination experienced in ‘Phantas’, a story which appeared in the 1911 collection *Widdershins*, alongside ‘The Beckoning Fair One’:

> During that agony of thirst he had seen shapes and heard sounds with other than his mortal eyes and ears, and even in the moments that had alternated with his lightness, when he had known these to be hallucinations, they had come again. He had heard the bells on a Sunday in his own Kentish home, the calling of children at play, the unconcerned singing of men at their daily labour, and the laughter and gossip of the women as they had spread the linen on the hedge or distributed bread upon the platters. These voices had rung in his brain, interrupted now and then by the groans of Bligh and of two other men who had been alive then.49

Like the men who suffer in the blistering Indian heat in Kipling’s ghost story ‘At the End of the Passage’, Onions’s protagonist experiences strange visions as a result of his ‘agony of thirst’. The protagonist acknowledges these ‘voices’ to be aural hallucinations, but the passage starts out by treating these hallucinations as

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supernatural, seen and heard ‘with other than his mortal eyes and ears’. This is because the narrator of ‘Phantas’, like the narrator of ‘The Beckoning Fair One’, is sharing the protagonist’s experience, rationalising it as he rationalises it, but also being confused by it as he is confused by it. Like Oleron, he is plagued by the presence of a woman:

He knew that she did not really exist; only the appearance of her existed; but things had to exist like that before they really existed. Before the *Mary of the Tower* had existed she had been a shape in some man’s imagination; before that, some dreamer had dreamed the form of a ship with oars; and before that, far away in the dawn and infancy of the world, some seer had seen in a vision the raft before man had ventured to push out over the water on his two planks.50

The whole of the volume, *Widdershins*, is preoccupied with the senses, with senses being tested and unsettled. Here it is perhaps significant that the word ‘widdershins’ is cognate with the German *widersinnig* meaning ‘against sense’ and that the first recorded use of the word, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was in 1513 in the phrase *widdersyns start my hair*, meaning ‘my hair stood on end’.

Oliver Onions claimed that his ghost stories ‘range themselves somewhere between the ultra-violet and the infra-red of the ghostly spectrum.’51 But perhaps the key to reading ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is to be found in the triangular square with which the story opens, and the ‘three or four “To Let” boards’. These numbers have significance that goes beyond the everyday, as C. G. Jung is only too aware. This brings things full-circle:

He [Mercury] thus exemplifies that strange dilemma which is posed by the problem of three and four—the well-known axiom of Maria Prophetissa. There is a classical *Hermes tetracephalus* as well as the *Hermes tricephalus*. The ground-plan of the Sabaean temple of Mercurius was a triangle inside a square. In the scholia to the ‘Tractatus aureus’ the sign for Mercurius is a square inside a triangle surrounded by a circle (symbol of totality).52
Afterword

Oh! Hallucinations! I remember.
(Rudyard Kipling, ‘A Madonna of the Trenches’, 1924)\(^1\)

On 29 September 1914, the *Evening News* published a short piece by Arthur Machen titled ‘The Bowmen’. It describes how, at the Battle of Mons a month earlier, an English soldier had prayed to St George; shortly afterwards, the patron saint appeared to the troops, along with the longbowmen who had fought at the Battle of Agincourt, in order to defend the English against the Germans. ‘They were like men who drew the bow,’ the narrator tells us, ‘and with another shout, their cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air towards the German hosts.’\(^2\)

The piece was a work of fiction, but that did not stop many readers from taking the account as true. Ever since, the story has been caught up with the ‘Angel of Mons’ legend, where numerous soldiers reported having experienced visions and hallucinations on the battlefield. Interest in Machen’s earlier fiction was rekindled, and suddenly *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams* had a new readership. But the ghost story was changing in the war years, and its popularity was not, nor would it ever be, as great as it had been before the war.

For many, the Angel of Mons was a ‘real ghost story’ or ‘true ghost story’. W. T. Stead’s 1891 volume *Real Ghost Stories* had been the literary success of the Christmas season, feeding the nation’s hunger for veridical accounts of ghosts at a time when the Society for Psychical Research was growing increasingly popular. Gurney’s theory of telepathically-induced hallucinations was reflected by Stead’s own interest in telepathy, and his hopeful belief that telepathic ability may be scientifically proved, in time, to be ‘another latent force, which may yet be destined to cast into the shade even the marvels of electrical science’.\(^3\) But things changed in the next thirty years, and such strong belief in the power and existence of telepathy

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inevitably waned. So did the inherent truth, for most people, of ‘true’ ghosts. Indeed, when the volume was republished in 1921, Stead’s daughter Estelle W. Stead found it necessary to write in her preface that

I demurred long as to whether I should change the title. The word ‘Ghost’ has to a great extent in modern times lost its true meaning to the majority and is generally associated in many minds with something uncanny—with haunted houses and weird apparitions filling with terror those who come into contact with them.

‘Stories from the Borderland,’ ‘Psychic Experiences,’ were among the titles which suggested themselves to me; but in the end I decided to keep the old title, and in so doing help to bring the word ‘ghost’ back to its proper and true place and meaning.⁴

What this ‘proper and true place and meaning’ might be is obvious, and *Real Ghost Stories* had been keen to distance itself from the cultural impact that fictional ghost stories had had on the collective psyche and reattach the word ‘ghost’ to its former psychical connotations. These are real ghost stories, not the stuff of Christmas Eve entertainments written by authors of fiction. Instead (as it were), they were serious and genuine accounts designed both to entertain and to educate. But Estelle Stead could not turn back the tide; and times had changed. 1921 was a post-war world where the horror fiction of Blackwood, Hodgson, and Onions had given way to the all-too-real horrors of the trenches. Hodgson had been killed at Ypres in April 1918, and although Blackwood would continue to write fiction—some of it, such as the 1921 story ‘Confession’, would even take the war and shell-shocked soldiers as its focus—he would never achieve the readership that he had enjoyed in the decades before.

With the memory of war still fresh, the fictional ghost story, if it was to survive, had to reinvent itself either as modernist fragment (Woolf’s ‘A Haunted House’, for instance, also published in 1921) or as psychoanalytically inspired tale (such as the stories of May Sinclair, collected together in 1923 with the Freud-inspired title *Uncanny Stories*). Indeed, psychoanalysis was beginning to replace psychical research by this time, its popularity increased by the appearance of the

English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1913 and the well-publicised cases of shell-shock and hysteria, treated by Freud during the war. But the new form and the old were nevertheless strongly connected: 1921 was also the year that Freud famously remarked, ‘If I had my life to live over again I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis.’\(^5\) Sinclair herself had joined the SPR in 1914, but by this stage her fiction was already moving, as Suzanne Raitt observes, ‘into psychoanalytic ways of thinking about the psyche and the family’; indeed, had been doing so since the year before.\(^6\)

Julia Briggs has written about what happened to the ghost story in the 1920s, and in doing so she points out one of the central concerns of hallucination in literature after the First World War:

> After the trauma of the First World War and Freud’s compelling expositions of the inner life, inhibitions seemed to develop and the majority of ghost stories written in the 1920s demonstrate fine structure, wit, elegance—everything, that is, except the writer’s serious involvement with his subject. When it degenerated to an exercise in skill and invention, the decadence of the form had set in.\(^7\)

‘It is small wonder, then,’ Briggs goes on to conclude later in her study, ‘that the history of the ghost story tails off rapidly after 1914, examples tending to become more superficial, sensational or conventional, with only a very few writers succeeding in reversing this downward trend.’\(^8\) But hallucination itself suffered no such curtailment. Instead of remaining the principal (though not sole) dominion of the ghost story or horror novel, the phenomenon of hallucination was to spread out and infest literature in far more wide-reaching ways than before the War. Ironically, this realist representation of unusual visionary experience came into its own in literature that was largely devised as a reaction against the realism of nineteenth-century fiction: modernism. Modernist literature and art would become one of the new homes


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 165.
of hallucination, with the novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, and the poetry of T. S. Eliot, all featuring hallucinatory moments, whether as part of Joyce’s ‘epiphanies’, Woolf’s ‘moments of vision’, or elsewhere as symptoms of the skewed perspective and complexity of perception that are such continual themes of modernist fiction. From the mysterious ‘third’ person who ‘walks always beside’ the addressee in *The Waste Land* (1922) to the ‘familiar compound ghost’—the mysterious Dante-inspired figure whom he meets in the pre-dawn following an air-raid in ‘Little Gidding’ (1942)—Eliot’s poetry is suffused with ideas of the ghostly and hallucinatory. Similarly, *Ulysses* (1922) features numerous hallucinatory sequences, notably the lengthy ‘Circe’ episode, which documents a series of drunken hallucinations experienced by Bloom.  

One of the chief writers who helped hallucination to escape the realm of the ghost story, and to show how its status as a literary device had been altered by the War, was one who had written so well of Henry James’s ghost stories only a few years before. Virginia Woolf, in her 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*, gives us a vivid portrait of shell-shock victim Septimus Smith:

> Then there were the visions. He was drowned, he used to say, and lying on a cliff with the gulls screaming over him. He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea. Or he was hearing music. Really it was only a barrel organ or some man crying in the street. But ‘Lovely!’ he used to cry, and the tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying.

The repetition of ‘cry’, with its double meaning so subtly yet poignantly displayed, brings home the quasi-hysterical nature of Septimus’ visions. As Philip Larkin would later put it, never such innocence again.

By the Second World War, the visions of shell-shocked victims such as Septimus had given way to a more general hallucination that everyone, not just the

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soldiers of the Western Front, experienced as part of the war effort. Life had changed, everything turned upside down; this had also altered people’s mental and emotional states in ways that can scarcely be imagined. In the preface to her volume of wartime stories, *The Demon Lover* (1945), Elizabeth Bowen summarised the overall effect of her stories as ‘a rising tide of hallucination’.\(^\text{13}\) She went on to explain:

> The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some other way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams.\(^\text{14}\)

The visionary experiences that writers would portray in the wake of the First World War, and through the Second, were grounded, for the most part, not in mythical pasts or the spirituality of Italian music, but in more immediate—and somehow more real—surroundings.

This is not to say that the ostensible locations and narratives changed all that much. Thomas Mann’s short novel *Death in Venice*, first published in English in 1925, tells the story of an artist—a writer in this case—who travels to Venice, is seduced by a beautiful youth, falls ill, and experiences vivid hallucinations which may be a product of his failing health or a result of his infatuation. If this sounds like Vernon Lee’s supernatural tales of the 1880s, particularly ‘A Wicked Voice’, then this merely highlights how the themes that ghost stories had explored in the later years of the nineteenth century had become subsumed into other types of literature. Hallucination had broken free of the ghost story—its most familiar dwelling-place, before the high moment of modernism—and had become another symptom of post-war life, with the decline in old certainties, the rise in psychoanalysis, and the new spirit of artistic experimentation.

But *Death in Venice* had been written before the war, and published in German in 1912; many writers who would emerge in the next few years would take


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
hallucination even further than Mann did, when he writes, for instance, of Aschenbach’s ‘longing to travel’ coming upon him ‘like a seizure, almost a hallucination.’ For the generation of writers who would dominate the 1920s modernist movement, there would be no ‘almost’. War and political relations had changed everyday life just as they had changed the way soldiers perceived their own role: the speed at which ‘shell shock’ passed into wider linguistic use testifies to how rapidly the new experiences of soldiers at the front had seeped into the national psyche. The *OED* tells us that, from the time when it first appeared in print in 1915, ‘shell shock’ took just ten years before it was ‘officially abolished, in favour of the technical term “Psycho-neurosis”‘; but the phrase would not go away, and ten years later was back, being applied to a drink of cocoa, of all things. War—and the changes that war had brought about—had made powerful the urge to escape from one’s own horrific or unsatisfactory surroundings, as much through drink as through sensual desire, or hypersensitiveness, or madness, or a spiritualist longing for something beyond the veil. ‘Although Joyce stressed the spiritual nature of epiphany,’ Nicholas Freeman has recently remarked, ‘many modernist revelations were essentially personal rather than recognitions of the numinous beyond or outside the individual’. And ‘many’ is the key word here; for hallucination and its related phenomena of epiphany and vision would not be the dominion of one group of authors.

To answer the question, then, of what happened to hallucination after the First World War: one place it did go was *Under the Volcano*, as in Malcolm Lowry’s 1947 novel of that name, a novel that tells the story of one man’s alcoholism and the hallucinations he experienced while under the influence, working as a British consul in Mexico. As Lowry’s novel testifies, the exploration of hallucinatory experience that Kipling had been writing about in the previous century—relating it to the themes of alcohol-use and the Englishman abroad in such stories as ‘The Dream of Duncan

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16 The *OED* tells us it was in the 1935 novel *Spring in Tartarus* by Michael Harrison that this use of ‘shell shock’ first appeared.
Parrenness’ and ‘At the End of the Passage’—was to be taken up by future generations of writers, but expanded in terms of psychological intensity and personal cost. Now hallucinations would be less controlled, less bound by the old nineteenth-century periodicals and the readerly expectations that writers had had to meet in order to sell their stories to those magazines.

Modernist and related literature had seen to it that realism—that old force with which the ghost story had always enjoyed such an uneasy relationship—could be twisted and stretched, showing the subjectivity of psychological and sensory experience. But it had been not so much a revelation as a gradual slipping away of the veil: to read most literature published in the last hundred years that features hallucination is to be in the company of ghosts, the ghosts of the old writers who had shown the way, who had first married the old—the Gothic and supernatural and ancient—with the newer ideas that would become known a few years later as ‘psychoanalysis’, ‘stream of consciousness’, ‘modernism’. Now there could be no easy characterisation, but—as writers such as Machen and Onions had already begun to show at the turn of the century—the human mind would be shown in all its complexity and contradictoriness. As Thomas Gilmore has framed it, ‘Lowry was interested in conveying the awe and wonder, the pity and terror that alcoholism could arouse if its victim was a person otherwise intelligent and noble. The hallucination became one of his chief vehicles for reaching these effects as well as a major expression of his imagination.’ 18

Hallucination, then, did not die even after the heyday of modernism had passed. But it is haunted by its history, from the ghost story to modernist narratives to novels like Under the Volcano. And ‘haunted’ really is the right word.

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