

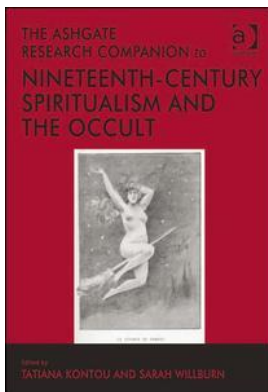
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'The Dear Old Sacred Terror': Spiritualism and the Supernatural from *The Bostonians* to *The Turn of the Screw*

Bridget Bennett

Introduction

Henry James wrote a number of ghost stories.¹ But he also produced what J. Hillis Miller has dubbed 'quasi-ghost stories' in which the ghostly is invoked figuratively.² This second kind of use of the ghostly has an important aesthetic dimension for James. Instead of representing actual ghosts or apparitions he uses ghostly metaphors to represent characters who behave as if they are ghosts. Terry Castle has brilliantly explored the way in which James represents Olive Chancellor in ghostly terms, but other examples of this might be given.³ Miller extends his analysis of the ghostliness of James's work to make a further, more radical claim:

My double hypothesis about James's ghost stories: (1) All James's stories and novels are ghost stories; (2) The ghost stories 'proper' are really, obliquely, about the act of literature. They bring into the open the way all works of fiction that are 'believed in' by the reader work their magic by using language to 'raise the ghosts' of the characters.⁴

¹ A good deal of work has been done on this; see, for instance, T.J. Lustig, *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 3–4. See also Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Bloomington, 1972).

² J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York, 2005), p. 299.

³ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York, 1995).

⁴ *Ibid.*

This observation helps to make sense of James's extraordinarily detailed and teasing comments in the 1908 Preface to the New York edition of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in which he draws attention to the way in which the tone and impression of his tale is carefully constructed to create the possibility of calamitous evil. He writes in detail about how to produce the effect of evil, and how to make his readers believe in his ghosts and in the haunting power of the literary. In this interpretation *The Turn of the Screw* is both a tale about haunting and one which itself haunts, as the best literature always does. If readers believe in James's tale, then they will be enchanted by it – possessed by it. The issue of how to make readers believe is what preoccupies him, and is crucial to his meditation on the tale. In making his ghosts mysterious, James expresses nostalgia for a period in which the ghostly was terrifying, as well as a desire to create literary texts which are able to produce, provoke and sustain complex emotional and moral responses. To do this he redresses what he perceives as an increasing dilution of the supernatural which took place during the nineteenth century.

Here I use two texts by Henry James to chart, first, the increasing secularization and popularization of the ghostly in the nineteenth century and then, its increasing return into a defamiliarized realm at the turn into the twentieth century in which it once again became frightening. There was a massive popular interest in the supernatural, notably spiritualism, from the late 1840s onwards, which corresponded to a diminution of the dominance of Puritanism within the United States. The typology of the ghostly and its relation to realms of good and evil shifted emphatically in this period. Subsequently a developing fascination for psychical research and psychoanalytic thought later in the century suggested that the mind – especially the unconscious – rather than the soul was the appropriate focus for introspection. From the 1840s onwards spirits had been contacted in séances both in private domestic circles and in public displays. They were documented, photographed, catalogued. Spiritualism became an increasingly popular subject for writers to explore in their literary texts and lives. Some found this rewarding while others felt that the nineteenth-century supernatural fell short of what the supernatural had once been in the past. Now its exposure to public scrutiny meant that it had lost its mystery and its power to frighten. The supernatural seemed increasingly prosaic, as James recognized. This changed status was the outcome of a long period of shifting attitudes both to the supernatural and to literary texts. It marks a moment in the construction of readership in which readers were envisaged increasingly as active constructors and investigators of meaning and decipherers of codes.

James envisaged his ambition for the genre of the ghost story and for *The Turn of the Screw* in aesthetic terms. Writing in the Preface he reflected on the processes of composing what he calls his 'perfectly independent and irresponsible little fiction'.⁵ The origin of his first encounter with the story which formed the inspiration for his work took place, like the opening of the tale, within 'the circle,

⁵ Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston and New York, 2004), p. 117. The relevant parts of the Preface are reprinted on pp. 179–86.

one winter afternoon, round the hall-fire of a grave old country-house'. He writes that the fireside scenario was already in the position 'to resolve itself promptly and obligingly into convertible, into "literary" stuff'.⁶ It has aesthetic dimensions which contain the elements of fiction. He had been the guest of the Archbishop of Canterbury E.W. Benson, at his country residence, Addington Park. While there he was told, by Benson himself, a half-recollected story of haunting which would become the basis for *The Turn of the Screw*. In a celebrated commentary on the subject of ghost stories he notes that:

*... the talk turned, on I forget what homely pretext, to apparitions and night-fears, to the marked and sad drop in the general supply, and still more in the general quality of such commodities. The good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost-stories (roughly so to term them) appeared all to have been told, and neither new crop nor new type in any quarter awaited us. 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

He situates the problem confronting him within the context of supply and demand, using (and mixing) metaphors of commodity, horticulture and psychical investigations modelled on science. The Archbishop and his guests were indulging themselves in an established and ancient form of collective self-frightening which roused 'the dear old sacred terror': telling ghost stories around a fire. Yet they were aware that this seemed to be a dying art. James was, of course, one of the best-known proponents and theorists of what he termed, in a celebrated 1884 essay, the 'art' of fiction, arguing that fiction deserved to be thought of with absolute seriousness. In his Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* his language suggests nostalgia both for a particular art-form and also for an emotion – that of a familiar and recognizable kind of terror produced by the very best (that is, believable) ghostly fictions. This is implicitly contrasted with the increasingly commodified practices of spiritualism in which public mediums who advertised in newspapers effectively performed spiritualism, often sensationally, to enthusiastic audiences and the demands of a growing literary marketplace. The private domestic circle of storytellers in front of the fire, participating in an established art-form was a long way from that kind of popular spiritualism which aimed at creating and titillating mass audiences. The discussion of 'apparitions and night-fears' leads to his reflection that the 'good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost-stories ... appeared all to have been told' and with this the supply is exhausted. He regrets that there is no 'new crop' or 'new type' of ghost story. He adds to this that there is, however, a 'new type' of ghost: anodyne, rationalized and 'washed clean of all queerness'. The ghosts he alludes to are those subject to the intense scrutiny of investigators, the kinds catalogued,

⁶ Ibid., p. 179.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 179–80.

photographed and written about in numbers by members of the Society of Psychical Research (hereafter SPR) with which he had a personal relation.

He described the freedom he experienced when, on first hearing the germ of the tale and then being commissioned to write a Christmas piece for *Collier's Weekly*, he realized he had 'no "outside" control involved, no pattern of the usual or the true or the terrible "pleasant" ... to consort with'.⁸ Being liberated from the 'charming story' – that is to say, not having to produce something to appeal to an audience who wish to be simply charmed – means that he could instead produce whatever he chose. In the absence of an 'outside control' he could represent an uncontrolled kind of haunting in which relationships between both realms were less predictable and more frightening. He could base his narrative on old-fashioned apparitions which come back to haunt and to wreak terror on those they visit. He could refuse the possibility of a happy ending, or explanation. Nothing is certain, and that uncertainty – narrative and otherwise – is profoundly unsettling and powerful to readers. The term 'outside control' refers both to the interference of controlling literary outsiders (such as editors or publishers) but is also familiar from spiritualist séances. A control was a figure who managed the interactions between the living and the spirit world and protected the medium from interruptions by séance-goers. By borrowing such a term James acknowledges his ability to manage his own ghosts and present his own supernatural performances. He becomes his own control, determining how to produce and create his own writing effects regardless of the possible demands of others.

In what he later described as his 'sinister romance', he returns to a period in which supernatural events were not subject to systematic rational scrutiny and study, but were accepted in their own terms as portents of much larger mysteries. *The Turn of the Screw* is set in the England of the 1890s; it recounts events that take place several decades before the point at which the tale is narrated, probably in the 1840s.⁹ The ambiguity pervading this tale suggests its location in a lost past, many of whose protagonists (for example, the governess, Miles, presumably the housekeeper Mrs Grose and the children's uncle) are now dead like the figures that have died before the narrative starts – the children's parents, and Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. James revives older traditions of the ghostly and adds psychological depth to his representations. He reverses the ways in which the supernatural was increasingly seen as capable of being explained and rationalized as the nineteenth century progressed and takes it into a decisively different and more complex direction, in one sense returning it to a realm in which the supernatural was both mysterious and terrifying. In this manner the supernatural was well suited to explain the complexities of inhabiting a contemporary moment in which, as Robert Weisbuch notes, the evil James is engaged with exploring in his tale is 'about the terms for living in a modern world where all comforting authority has been lost –

⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

⁹ See Hazel Hutchinson, *Seeing and Believing: Henry James and the Spiritual World* (New York and Basingstoke, 2005), p. 33; and Lustig, *Henry James*, p. 117.

even, in *Turn*, the authority of the author herself – and where the utter freedom of the subjective self obtains'.¹⁰

The sense that in the modern age the ghostly no longer had the power it once did was the result, in part, of the effects of spiritualism and psychical research. While many psychical investigators still maintained the integrity of ghosts and apparitions, they subjected them to the kinds of scrutiny which revealed that they no longer necessarily inspired awe. Instead they could be taxonomized and made the objects of record. Oscar Wilde would satirize this in his comical tale 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887) in which, faced with the disbelief and mocking of the highly practical and rational Americans he is trying to haunt, the ghost is reduced to a state of exhaustion and despair. Mrs Otis decides to join the SPR and her son writes to Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore, key psychical investigators. But none of the family is in the slightest bit scared of the ghost – instead it is he who becomes frightened of them. Wilde shows that it is literally dispiriting for a ghost to have to prove that he is a ghost and worse still to have to try to frighten people who no longer find the ghostly terrifying. His ghost has lost the power to frighten modern subjects, epitomized by Wilde's practical Americans, in which the possibility of rationalizing all experience has diminished fear. This is precisely the subject James also addressed in his Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* in which he argued that the processes of taxonomizing ghosts diminished them, especially as for the focus of fiction. He writes: '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.'¹¹ Wilde simply turns this into writerly fun. But James probes the way in which the writer could revitalize 'a beautiful lost form'.¹² He asks how could the kinds of delightful terror associated with the really successful examples of the ghost story be produced once more?

His answer to these questions is found in *The Turn of the Screw*, in which he brilliantly revitalizes the ghost story and revives 'the dear old sacred terror'. He does this by shifting emphasis in two main ways. First, he moves away from contemporary understandings of the supernatural and reaches back into an older tradition of haunting, evil and possession, using as his source a ghost story recounted to him in outline by Benson himself but also alluding to an American tradition of colonial witchcraft persecution: the Salem witch trials. Writing of the malign servants who seem to have possession of Miles and Flora, he says:

Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are not 'ghosts' at all, as we now know the ghost, but goblins, elves, imps, demons as loosely constructed as those of the old

¹⁰ Robert Weisbuch, 'Henry James and the Idea of Evil', in Jonathan Freedman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 102–19, p. 111.

¹¹ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Beidler, p. 184.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

*trials for witchcraft; if not, more pleasingly, fairies of the legendary order, wooing their victims forth to see them dance under the moon.*¹³

Second, he moves away from traditional, religious frameworks for thinking about the supernatural. He argues that emphasizing consciousness and the problem of evil are the keys to the effective ghost story: 'Make him [the reader] *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications.'¹⁴ In order to produce the most profound impact James allows the reader's own imagination to create terrifying effects, relying on the reader to frighten him- or herself.

The problem he articulates raises important larger questions about how what he dismisses as the respectable certification of the ghostly became one outcome of a re-evaluation of the supernatural on both sides of the Atlantic from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. His reflections upon the inherent difficulties of writing effective ghost stories at the end of the nineteenth century relate to important cultural and social transformations that had been taking place. Critical work has firmly established the extent to which spiritualism, psychical research and investigations into the occult were subjects of profound engagement to a wide range of figures on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Such scholarship has paid close attention to biographical and textual evidence – using a variety of cultural sources – to develop a rich context for understanding why and how spiritualism, occultism and psychical investigation developed the prominence they once had, and what their meanings were.¹⁶ Spiritualism gradually normalized relationships between the living and the spirit world, or it certainly aimed to. The communications which went on between spirits and the living, usually within séances, could be of a highly domestic or practical kind: sometimes spirits gave advice on the hiring of servants or on the best form of action in a crisis. The spirit world was made to seem very much like that inhabited by those who sought to communicate with spirits and through this process of familiarization it lost many of its associations with terror. The boundaries between the two worlds became

¹³ Ibid., p. 184.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 185, emphasis in original. See also Weisbuch, 'Henry James and the Idea of Evil'.

¹⁵ I am thinking, particularly, of the pioneering work of four critics: Howard Kerr, *Mediums, Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850–1900* (Urbana, IL, 1972); R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture* (New York, 1977); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, 1989). More recent work has added to this: for instance, Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, 1997); Susan Gillman, *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult* (Chicago, 2003); and Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2008.)

¹⁶ The focus of that scholarship has been largely on white subjects and their involvement, notably with visiting séances and engaging with mediums, though this is gradually changing.

increasingly blurred, adding to that sense of familiarity. To many, the idea of a kind of continuum between the living and dead (for spiritualists claimed, too, that there was no death) was very comforting. The kinds of mysteries that the supernatural seemed once to represent appeared increasingly to have dissipated, then, in a modern era in which it seemed that everything could be explained rationally.

The changing attitudes to death, which the emergence of spiritualism both contributed to and marked, reflected a larger shift in attitudes. Within spiritualist discourse, the favouring of the word 'spirit' over words like 'ghost', 'apparition' or 'spectre' for instance, reveals elements of this shift. While a spirit might or might not be malevolent, or frightening, the appearance of a ghost, apparition or spectre seemed more likely to be an event associated with portent – possibly of the unwelcome kind – which made fear an appropriate or probable response. When spirits communicated through mediums though, their interventions were not represented as being frightening or as producing fear. They were welcomed – and indeed often longed for, reassuring and invited. Communication with spirits generally produced joy rather than terror. Spiritualism denied death and transformed those who had died into figures inhabiting changed but still recognizable existences in what was sometimes called the Summerland. Ghosts, on the other hand, are usually associated with unquiet lives or deaths. They are unable or unwilling to break their connection to places or people they have left behind, especially houses, and remain as a constant reminder of how the present and past are linked together, sometimes uneasily. So whereas spirits connoted newness, modernity and the future, ghosts represented connections to fixity and the past. When James showed that ghosts were haunting Bly in *The Turn of the Screw* therefore, he articulated a longing for a loss of a long period in which the supernatural was primarily associated with the ghostly, with a sense of place and previous histories which have not yet been satisfactorily resolved.

A growing body of critical work has speculated about James's engagement with spiritualism and psychical investigation. Yet critics have rightly held back on any definitive claims about his beliefs.¹⁷ Certain facts are well documented. It is well known that his father, Henry James Sr, was a believer in Swedenborgianism and that his interest stemmed from a traumatic encounter with what he called a 'vastation' (using Swedenborgian terminology) in England in 1844. Sitting alone one evening in front of a fire he was terrified by experiencing the sense of something which was both invisible and nearby. He did not, could not, identify it but was nonetheless filled with fear. This experience had a profound effect on him, leading him to reflect deeply upon the nature and power of the supernatural. But he was not the only James to do this. A number of members of the family had a connection with the SPR, founded in 1882 with the aim of investigating sightings of ghosts, spirits or other related supernatural occurrences. Henry James Sr, William James and Henry James himself were all members. From 1894 to 1895 William James was its president. On one occasion, when he was unable to deliver

¹⁷ See, especially, Peter G. Beidler's edition of the tale which contains useful source material (James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Beidler, pp. 139–71).

an address to the society in person, his brother Henry did it on his behalf.¹⁸ Alice James, like many other men and women of the period (including Henry James Sr), had an active interest in the kinds of alternative health treatments which were sometimes espoused by spiritualists and others who looked for possibilities beyond that offered by allopathic medicine.¹⁹ These facts together provide some context for James's engagement with psychical investigation, spiritualism and the supernatural. His father's experience of his terrifying encounter with the supernatural emerged from a tradition of the ghostly which, for many educated Americans, belonged increasingly to the past. His brother William's involvement with psychical research and with attempts to document and understand ghostly and spiritual phenomena belonged to a newer amalgamation of encounter and investigation mixed with scientific rationalism which seemed to look towards the future and to enhanced understandings of the seen and unseen, and linked these to theories of the unconscious

These two moments – his father's vastation incident in the 1840s and his brother's presidency of the SPR fifty years later – represent in microcosm a change to the ways in which the supernatural and ghostly were conceived of between those decades. It is possible to trace a huge growth of interest in the supernatural and the spirit world and its expression in popular forms in that period. Since many spiritualists denied the reality of death, and many séances borrowed strongly from show culture, the supernatural seemed increasingly harnessed to modes of entertainment. His vastation experience had filled Henry James Sr with terror precisely because it was inexplicable. The ghosts or spirits investigated by the SPR, on the other hand, were subjected to rational explanation by investigators and through such processes lost much of their mystery and their ability to frighten. This transformation of thinking about the supernatural coincided with a gradual but discernible diminution in religious beliefs and authority, the development of scientific advances which promised new ways of knowing the visible and invisible world, and the emergence of psychoanalytic theory as a way of understanding the mind. These developments, I argue here, can be traced within Henry James's writings in which there is a notable engagement with the spiritual and ghostly. Most particularly, however, there are two works in which it is possible to trace, on the one hand the gradual demystification of the ghostly in that period and, on the other, James's determination to make the ghostly enjoyably terrifying once again. These are *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

¹⁸ For more on connections between the James family and the psychic and spiritual, see *ibid.*, p. 146; and Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 233–51.

¹⁹ Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, pp. 235 and 239.

Writing Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

In *The Bostonians*, spiritualism is largely part of the *mise en scène* of postbellum Boston. To this degree, the invocation of spiritualism in this novel belongs to a wider pattern of writing the American supernatural. In *The Bostonians* James is entirely uninterested in producing a gothic novel as such (in creating the ghostly effects of *The Turn of the Screw*, for instance) but is profoundly engaged by the possibility of using spiritualism to define a particular moment in the nineteenth-century history of the United States (and especially New England). He is, in other words, interested in the meanings of nineteenth-century spiritualism. This broad term incorporates early forms of the diverse continuum within which spiritualism belongs, including mesmerism and table-rapping, and the use of devices such as the planchette, writing slates and Ouija boards.²⁰ The continuum extends to developments including séances featuring the full-body materialization of spirits who walked around and interacted with visitors, trance lectures and spiritual manifestations such as the production of ectoplasm. It also encompasses the development of spirit photography.²¹ The moment usually seen as spiritualism's inception, the 'Rochester Rappings' of 1848, drew on a composite of existing beliefs, folk memories and superstitions, and also relied on the obvious appeal of young and attractive women. Contemporary modes of communication and the development of print culture led to Maggie and Kate Fox, managed by their sister Leah, generating an unprecedented level of publicity which made their claims filter into the wider domain very rapidly. One consequence of this was that, early on in its history, modern spiritualism, as it was sometimes called, became so topical that writers incorporated references to it into their works, either as central parts of plots or of characterization or on the peripheries as a form of context. It helped them sell their work, it reflected on contemporary events and, for some, it allowed them to explore an area which they personally found very compelling. Others took the chance of exposing something they considered fraudulent. Just as spiritualism itself evolved rapidly, so did the ways in which writers wrote about it. Few depicted it as frightening, however.

Scholars have established the profound debt James owed to the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the nineteenth-century writer whose work best engages with the transition being traced here between different ways of representing the supernatural. In this manner (as well as others) his work anticipates James's own writing.²² James's important 1879 critical biography of Hawthorne makes his sense of the earlier writer's significance clear. In the opening pages he writes that Hawthorne was 'the most valuable example of the American genius. He is the writer to whom his countrymen most confidently point when they wish to make a claim to have enriched the mother-tongue, and, judging from present appearances,

²⁰ See Bridget Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York, 2007), pp. 70–82 and 140–42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–7.

²² Notably Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York, 1986).

he will long occupy this honourable position.²³ James's Hawthorne is critically important but also (personally and in terms of his writing) subtle, ethereal and delicate. Yet he is also deeply rooted in the past of New England and the United States which continues to haunt his writing. His ancestors' involvement in the Salem witch trials, which he alludes to in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), gave him a sense of the sins of a violent colonial past which his characters continually try to expiate and escape in the present period. Yet this past constantly haunts them as it does Hawthorne, giving his work a dimension of fear, evil and sinfulness which is at odds with that of his transcendentalist contemporaries.

James undoubtedly experienced a strong draw to Hawthorne's work: it might not be too strong a claim to suggest that he was haunted by the earlier novelist's achievements for American literature. His 1879 book expresses not only his admiration but also his own profound ambition as a writer. Much of Hawthorne's work is permeated with metaphors of the ghostly, the supernatural, occult and other-worldly, which frequently have their origins in colonial New England. In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne invokes a Puritan past in which the belief in witches, in Satan and in a highly symbolic, spiritual and allegorical realm is crucial to interpreting the text and its location in a colonial past which continues to influence the present. In *The House of the Seven Gables* he again links colonial religious beliefs in magic and witchcraft with nineteenth-century counterparts. Holgrave inherits the magical abilities of his ancestor, the reputed wizard Matthew Maule. Like Maule, he is a skilled mesmerist, but he is also a practitioner of a new form of 'magic': he is a daguerreotypist who captures individuals' secrets when he takes their images. Hawthorne repeatedly links emerging technology with the supernatural: a procession of ghosts troops past the dead body of Judge Pyncheon in the manner of a phantasmagoria; Maule's well throws up a series of images like a kaleidoscope; when the highly sensitive and spiritual Clifford, himself virtually a ghost after his long imprisonment on false charges, escapes from his ancestral house on a train, Hawthorne uses this moment of flight and mobility for a long and unexpected meditation on spirit-rapping. By the end of the novel, the associations between ancestral magic and malevolent repercussions have been replaced by an optimistic representation of a benevolent and happy future in which magic transforms the everyday in an environment in which contented domestic bliss seems set to predominate. As the protagonists leave the haunted and cursed house they move into a realm in which the well continues to make its kaleidoscopic images, the elm tree makes prophecies, Holgrave has captivated Phoebe and the pair live in a spell of bliss, and Alice Pyncheon finally 'had given one farewell touch of a spirit's joy upon her harpsichord, as she floated heavenward from the HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES!'²⁴ While Hawthorne's novel starts in a sombre world of hereditary evil and the gloomy haunting of the present (represented by the house itself) by an inescapable past and its ghostly aftermath, it ends in a world which

²³ Henry James, *Hawthorne* (London, 1879), p. 2.

²⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 319.

is less haunted than magical and enchanted. The house and all that it represents is left behind as the novel's surviving protagonists end the novel living in and for the present and the future, not the past.

Hawthorne's next novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1851) demonstrates a further diminution of the terrifying ghostly. It bears a strong thematic connection to *The Bostonians*.²⁵ Both investigate the relationship between political and social activism and reform, mesmerism and spiritualism. Hawthorne's mesmerist Westervelt and James's mesmerist and former spiritualist Selah Tarrant both engage in experiments in social reform and communal living. Each is involved in a complex relationship with a younger woman who has powers that they attribute to forces outside themselves – Priscilla and Verena. Finally, both novels end with an unhappy love plot: Miles Coverdale,²⁶ now middle-aged and still a bachelor, reveals that he was in love with the youthful Priscilla; and Basil Ransom whisks Verena Tarrant off into a marriage in which she is destined to suffer tearfulness. There are other links between them too, not least the tension between the (mostly) progressive politics of Xenobia and Olive Chancellor and their differently forbidding exteriors. Hawthorne and James both used the spiritual and mesmeric activities of their characters to comment on contemporary social events and political activism, not to create ghostly or gothic atmospheres.

Other American writers also dabbled in supernatural fictions in this period. One short story illustrates the difficulties James debated in his Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* of how to merge or understand different ideas of the supernatural. Herman Melville's 'The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations', which appeared in the May 1856 issue of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, uses its quasi-factual title to play upon knowledge of the Fox sisters and popular interest in spiritualism as well as the history of the witchcraft trials in Salem. The word 'original' in the title simultaneously suggests historical precedence, authenticity and quirkiness. Many of the tropes of a classic gothic tale are in place: the rumour of a room being haunted in an old house; a locked door and the discovery of a rusted key which opens it; the encounter with the abandoned room, an act which disturbs its contents and allows an engagement with the supernatural to begin. These established motifs are augmented by the addition of a newer element: table-rapping.

Briefly, the plot is as follows. The unnamed narrator discovers an old table with legs that end in cloven hoofs in a locked garret in a house he has bought. On the dusty table is a copy of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702 – its subtitle is *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*). The book is surrounded by paraphernalia which suggests scientific experimentation. The narrator brings the table and book into the main part of the house and spends evenings reading the book at the table, which has now become a central part of the family's life. Through

²⁵ T.J. Lustig provides a convincing account of the relationship between *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Turn of the Screw*, but here I am thinking of the more obvious connections between texts. See Lustig, *Henry James*, pp. 163–9.

²⁶ The name Miles, of course, reappears in *The Turn of the Screw*.

moving the table the narrator has, by implication, brought unquiet elements of the nation's past into the heart of the present. One night, in a scene reminiscent of Poe, the table starts to make a strange ticking noise. The narrator, already frightened by his late-night reading of Mather (and presumably details of witch trials, apparitions and Puritan typology) first tries to find the source of the noise and then when this fails he rushes upstairs to bed in terror, only to have his wife remonstrate with him about his habit of drinking punch before bedtime. The next day, however, a reassured and rested narrator goes downstairs to find the household in disarray due to the incessant noise coming from the table. The rest of the tale recounts the family's attempts to find out what is causing the noise, a repeated ticking which parodies table-rapping. The household divides over what is causing it. The narrator's two daughters and Catholic servant are convinced that the noises are being produced by spirits; however, his highly rational wife is determined to look for other explanations. The noises turn out to be coming from beetles which have hatched out within the table, and are eating their way out of it. This is confirmed by a naturalist, whom the wife calls in to examine both insects and table. The tale effectively debunks contemporary beliefs in table-rapping. However, Melville does not end his account here. One daughter uses the fact of the beetles' extraordinary survival and appearance to argue that they are spiritual manifestations which prove the glory of human resurrection.

The story invokes the religious history of New England, as documented by its pre-eminent Puritan commentator Cotton Mather, and brings this into the contemporary period with its allusion to the Fox sisters. Yet, in doing this, it entirely removes all the elements of fear that Mather's Puritan text invokes. The naturalist, Professor Johnson, argues that the eggs that hatched out in the table had been laid 170 years earlier in the living tree. Though it is never made explicit, the implication is that the eggs would have been laid about the time of the Salem witch trials, so carefully documented in *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The beetles eventually emerge at a period in which another series of inexplicable supernatural events (once again associated with women) were once more creating substantial public interest. The apple-tree table provides a link between the history of the colonial period and the Salem witch trials and the present and table-rapping. Melville's focus on the spiritual becomes a way of producing a reflection on the relationship between the colonial past and the present using a trope that was likely to have popular appeal. He understood, in other words, that there would be a market for such a story.

This text marks a particular moment in the evolution of a literary engagement with the supernatural in the United States that helps to contextualize the larger cultural and psychological transition I am tracing by using the examples of *The Bostonians* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Seventeenth-century New England was associated with Puritans such as Mather and their beliefs in a symbolic realm in which good and evil were parts of a moral universe in which terror also played a highly active role. By the middle of the nineteenth century such beliefs were largely being challenged. Certainly in Melville's story the 'dear old sacred terror' James would write about later is entirely absent. Its historical existence is attested

to by the allusions to Mather's book. Yet his work (discovered in the dusty room) is relegated to the position of quaint documentary history.

Melville's story was just one of the many texts in this period engaging with spiritualism and the supernatural either as a wider metaphor or even as fact. Harriet Beecher Stowe (whose enthusiastic engagement with spiritualism is well documented) wrote *Old Town Folks* (1869), a novel which included a visionary boy whose spiritual experiences (seeing and hearing spirits) were based on the childhood experiences of her husband Calvin. Her financial difficulties at that point in her life led to her trying to subsidize the novel by writing articles she thought would sell, including one on the planchette.²⁷ In another novel of that period, *My Wife and I* (1871), she produced a more documentary account of the relationship between spiritualism and women's rights. The character Audacia Dangereyes was based on a real-life counterpart, Victoria Woodhull, a notorious advocate of women's rights and, for a period, a spiritualist too. In this novel spiritualism is just one example of the kinds of reform movement characterizing the period, rather than any real kind of encounter between the living and dead. The way in which Stowe represents the links between spiritualism and reform anticipates James's novel and also epitomizes the way other contemporary writers reflected on spiritualism and the supernatural.

Many other examples of similar fictional engagements with spiritualism might be given, showing the extent to which more popular and performative aspects of the supernatural drew writers in. John Hay's *The Bread-Winners* (1883) is closest to *The Bostonians*, both chronologically and in the way in which it captures the appeal that spiritualism, spiritualist lectures and performances had to diverse audiences who paid to listen to what trance-speakers had to say on a variety of topics. Hay is especially scathing about a fraudulent spiritualist lecturer whose audience was largely made up of artisans. He represents him as introducing one of his lectures as follows:

*Bott stepped inside the railing by the closet, and placing his hands upon it, addressed the assembly. He did not know what peculiar shape the manifestations of the evening might take. They were in search of truth; all truth was good. They hoped for visitors from the unseen speers [sic]; he could promise nothing. In this very room the spirits of the departed had walked and talked with their friends; perhaps they might do it again; he knew not. How they mingled in the earth-life, he did not pretend to say; perhaps they materialized through the mejum [sic]; perhaps they dematerialized material from the audience which they rematerialized in visible forms; as to that, the opinion of another – he said with a specious magnanimity – was as good as his.*²⁸

Hay represents Bott's speech verbatim elsewhere in the novel. Here, though, he is content to give a sense of the vague and unconvincing rhetoric which brought

²⁷ For details of her engagement with spiritualism and plans for a piece on the planchette, see Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism*, pp. 118–20.

²⁸ John Hay, *The Bread-Winners: A Social Study* (Ridgewood, NJ, 1967), pp. 104–5.

crowds to hear him and hope to see or hear from spirits. Bott is a lively precursor to Selah Tarrant another showman and fraud, keen to make money from the credulous who want to believe that spirits can speak through him.

These fictional examples reveal what James saw, when he came to write *The Turn of the Screw*, as the debased coinage of the possibilities offered by the supernatural in a post-Puritan era in which fewer certainties about the supernatural existed. Yet what he was recognizing in *The Bostonians*, as the other writers cited above also saw, was that engagements with spiritualism might connote something especially timely, though not very ghostly. His *Notebook* entry of 8 April 1883 transcribes part of his letter to the publisher J.R. Osgood outlining what would become *The Bostonians*. Here it is clear, as it is in the subsequent novel, that his interest in spiritualism chiefly concerns the extent to which it has a role in the kind of ‘agitation’ he regards as being characteristically associated with what he refers to as ‘the so-called “woman’s movement”’.²⁹ His description of Verena Tarrant makes this point plainly: ‘The heroine is a very clever and “gifted” young woman, associated by birth and circumstances with a circle immersed in those views and in every sort of new agitation, daughter of old abolitionists, spiritualists, transcendentalists, etc.’ Spiritualism is alluded to as a kind of fad or agitation, characteristic of the period and associated with other kinds of radical and/or reform movements. The somewhat dismissive lumping together of such ‘agitators’ implies what the novel also seems to suggest, that James’s interest is primarily in what he calls ‘the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf’. But he also notes that ‘there are to be several other characters whom I have not mentioned – types of radical agitators – and as many little pictures as I can introduce of the woman’s rights agitation’. It seems that when James came to write *The Bostonians* his interest in spiritualism was primarily focused on its social and political context rather than on its claims for a privileged connection with the supernatural. In a sense, then, what spiritualism offered was something of a disappointment, and this is what James depicts in his novel. His spiritualists are evidently frauds – Selah Tarrant and his wife fake their supernatural effects, and Verena’s inspired speaking is vapid, though fluent. It is artful fiction but it is not art. The supernatural is depicted as a sideshow complete with a showman and performers. Yet James retains a sense that the ghostly – unmediated and unshowy – might still contain power, when he uses ghostly metaphors to depict Olive Chancellor. When she first appears to Ransom, for instance, James writes that ‘she glided into the room’ (*Bostonians* 5) like a ghost or spirit and then offers him a ‘slender white hand ... at once cold and limp’ (6), suggesting an absence of full human existence – or a ghostliness. She sits with eyes turned from him ‘as if there had been a spell upon her which forbade her to raise them’ (7). James announces that he ‘shall be under the necessity of imparting much occult information’ (7) about Olive throughout the novel. Here the word primarily indicates secret information which James will make known to the reader, but it also carries the implication of magical thinking: the reader is the uninitiated

²⁹ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York, Oxford, 1987), p. 18. The following quotes from the notebooks are all from this page.

to whom James will make his revelations. While performances of spiritualism are represented as being frequently meretricious, metaphors of the ghostly still have possibilities for him. When he wrote *The Turn of the Screw* just over a decade later he returned to the pleasures afforded by 'the dear old sacred terror'. His tale allows his ghostly figures to be malevolent and mysterious once more.

The Bostonians and The Turn of the Screw

Spiritualism is mentioned within the very first pages of *The Bostonians* less to invoke the ghostly and more to indicate the intellectual, social and political environment in which the postbellum Bostonians move. Adeline Luna tells Ransom, in a famous scene, that Olive is due to go to a 'weird meeting' that evening. The exchange is as follows:

'What kind of meeting do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the Brocken.'

'Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums and spirit-rappers and roaring radicals.'

Basil Ransom stared; the yellow light in his brown eyes deepened. 'Do you mean to say your sister's a roaring radical?'

'A radical? She's a female Jacobin – she's a nihilist.' (*Bostonians* 3)

While it is obviously the word 'weird' that leads Ransom to talk of the Brocken and witches (presumably the German-speaking Ransom is alluding to Goethe's *Faust*) it is less clear why it is Olive's apparent political radicalism, mentioned at the end of the list Adeline trots out, that he immediately picks up on, rather than what precedes it. Adeline is indiscriminate, and dismissive, in the way in which she lumps the meeting's membership together. At this stage Ransom simply passes most of it by, concentrating instead on Olive's status as a 'roaring radical'. When Olive enters the room shortly after this, Adeline is quick to tell her that she described her to Ransom as a 'radical' (6). The effect of this in novelistic terms is to confirm Ransom's status as a reactionary, and to establish one of the novel's central oppositions, that between the progressive Olive and conservative Ransom. When Ransom calls Olive a 'roaring radical' it says less about her purported radicalism, which is never very radical after all, and more about Ransom's political and social conservatism, which is always very conservative. Compared with him she is indeed radical, so her status as a (not very) radical exposes his own politics more than it does hers. When Ransom picks up on one part of what has been said, then, it is because James uses this to develop the ways in which Ransom is represented: he is drawn to what threatens him most – Olive's purported radicalism.

Yet the occult, magical and spiritual, remains within the novel's imaginative framework and Ransom's own purview, as becomes apparent a few pages after this exchange. James makes clear the fact that Ransom is familiar with spiritualism

in some ill-defined way when he has him say in response to Olive's worry that he might be an 'unfavourable element' at the meeting, 'Why, is it going to be a spiritual *séance*?' (18). Olive neither confirms nor denies this, noting, however, that she has heard 'some inspirational speaking' in the past (18–19). While Ransom ignores the way in which Adeline chooses not to differentiate between the categories of witches, wizards and so on, he certainly understands that the term 'unfavourable element' which Olive might justifiably have used to refer to his Southern origins is also understood by spiritualists to refer to a presence that disturbs the atmosphere within a *séance* or similar occasion. Given the detail that so much of their conversation at that point has focused on the fact that he is from Mississippi and that the 'small gathering' (16) she invites him to is at the house of the celebrated Bostonian abolitionist Miss Birdseye, Olive's comments seem surely to refer to this. Ransom's interpretation of the invitation as being to a party, and his reply that it will be the first party he has been to 'since Mississippi seceded' (16) seems still further to point to his being 'an unfavourable element'. He is from a slave-owning family; has fought on the Confederate side; the group who are meeting have strong abolitionist sympathies; Olive has lost two brothers in the war. Any of these things, all of which are imparted to the reader just around this time, might be regarded as 'unfavourable'. All of them combined certainly seem to imply that they are unfavourable to a significant degree. His acute interpretation of Olive's comment as meaning something other than this bears further attention, then.

Why does this lawyer, trained to examine statements carefully, interpret Olive's words like this? The obvious answer is that he has recollected what Adeline comments connected them to the idea of being an 'unfavourable element'. Furthermore, he may have more intimate connections with popular supernaturalism. Shortly after this episode James notes that Ransom 'was conscious of much Bohemianism' (16) including his familiarity with 'a "variety" actress' (16). There was a long-standing and close connection between acting and mediumship in the nineteenth century. A number of women mediums on both sides of the Atlantic had also worked on the stage at some point in their careers and many *séances* were indebted to a variety of theatrical tropes.³⁰ As an unmarried man in New York living in a boarding house and with proximity to the demi-monde, Ransom is very likely to have come into contact with the popular performances of *séances* and lectures that flourished at that time. While nothing in the text explicitly suggests that he has attended such occasions, his conversation with Olive certainly implies that he knows about them. In addition, Ransom's interpretation of an 'unfavourable influence' as something referring to spiritualism also suggests his preference for unintellectual women: 'That was the way he liked them – not to think too much, not to feel any

³⁰ Alex Owen gives the examples of Emma Hardinge Britten and the American medium Annie Eva Fay. See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London, 1989), pp. 54–5. Owen writes that 'Some of the best *séances* of the 1870s resembled nothing more than masterpieces of dramatic orchestration with young girls in the starring roles' (p. 54). See also Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC, and London, 2006), esp. pp. 14–16.

responsibility for the government of the world, such as he was sure Miss Chancellor felt' (8). While it is certainly true that some spiritualists were engaged with serious political activism, for others it was the performative element of spiritualism that drew them, as well as the chance to earn a living. These details might initially seem circumstantial, but, placed together, they suggest James's recognition of the fact that spiritualism united individuals from disparate backgrounds, often through transactions governed by financial exchange. Ransom, the impoverished man from Mississippi, has his reflections on his choice of woman described in subtly ethereal terms. Ransom, writes James, 'was not of a mercenary *spirit*'; and though 'he had for a moment a whimsical *vision* of becoming a partner in so flourishing a firm' (both 14, emphasis mine), he realizes that Olive and Charles Street are not for him. Poised, then, between Olive and a variety actress (with Adeline Luna forming a kind of midpoint between the two), Ransom turns his intentions instead to Verena Tarrant who occupies an uneasy place in which she is part variety actress and trance lecturer, and part nascent Charles Street radical.

The spiritualism of *The Bostonians* is chiefly represented through its connection to women performers and reformers, and variety actresses as much as women's rights activists, and the men who are connected with them and involved in highly performative public political activism. One of these men is Selah Tarrant, a former spiritualist but chiefly a figure profoundly engaged by the array of social and political experiments characterizing the mid-nineteenth century. By the period in which the action of the novel takes place, Tarrant has moved into a different sphere of activity. Yet James pays considerable attention to detailing Tarrant's early career in the Cayuga community and then as a spirit medium. An important consequence of this is that it gives a context for Verena's origins and allows James to explain why Verena and Olive meet socially on near equal terms though their backgrounds are very different. James depicts the interactions between trance lecturers, abolitionists, women's rights workers and others who operated within a framework of connectivity that cut across class, gender and even ethnicity at times. Miss Birdseye, the abolitionist, notes that Verena's father Selah 'had effected wonderful cures ... His wife was a daughter of Abraham Greenstreet; she had kept a runaway slave in her house for thirty days' (29). Later in the novel, the Tarrant's history is further excavated as Mrs Tarrant reflects on the fact that:

She had lived with long-haired men and short-haired women, she had contributed a flexible faith and an irremediable want of funds to a dozen social experiments, she had partaken of the comfort of a hundred religions, had followed innumerable dietary reforms, chiefly of the negative order, and had gone of an evening to a séance or a lecture as regularly as she had eaten her supper. Her husband always had tickets for lectures; in moments of irritation at the want of a certain sequence in their career, she had remarked to him that it was the only thing he did have. (67)

The sense of the wide-ranging activities that clustered together within this period, forming a fully developed counterculture, is set out in this passage. Tarrant's

fraudulent mediumship is helped by his long-suffering wife who accompanies him to events, tolerates the affair she suspects him of having with the medium Mrs Ada T.P. Foat who has been 'associated' (67) with him while living in the Cayuga community, 'where there were no wives, or no husbands, or something of that sort (Mrs Tarrant could never remember)' (66). Foat is modelled on the celebrated medium Mrs Cora L.V. Hatch who James had heard lecture in 1863. Mrs Tarrant even helps her husband fake effects within séances 'when the table, sometimes, wouldn't rise from the ground, the sofa wouldn't float through the air, and the soft hand of a lost loved one was not so alert as it might have been to visit the circle' (68).

At the point at which the novel is set, this phase in Selah Tarrant's career is over, and he works as a mesmeric healer. Meanwhile his wife takes comfort in the fact that their daughter seems to have inherited the Greenstreet ability to give public lectures and might extend their fame, and fortune, in this manner. James's recitation of Selah Tarrant's period as a spiritualist evokes a particular moment within United States history. What is depicted in the novel is the possibility for figures from established Boston families and those from very different financial and intellectual backgrounds to encounter each other through their shared interests in progressive reform and counterculture. Miss Birdseye epitomizes the genteel, intellectual and impoverished Bostonian who has committed her life and small financial resources to various political causes and regularly encounters a host of individuals who are on the cusp of those causes and of social respectability. It gives a significant contextualization for the meeting between Olive, Ransom and Verena and its subsequent consequences, including Mrs Burrage's attempt to persuade Olive to get Verena to marry her son despite the social gulf between them. The wealthy New Yorker tells Olive:

'When a girl is as charming, as original, as Miss Tarrant, it doesn't in the least matter who she is; she makes herself the standard by which you measure her ... prejudice, conventionality, every presumption there might be against her, had to fall to the ground.' (296)

Verena's beauty and her abilities as a trance lecturer allow her access to transcend her origins and gain access to wealthy Boston and New York society.

If *The Bostonians* is a tale of at least one city and many public spaces in which all kinds of public performances take place, then *The Turn of the Screw* is instead a tale of houses (and of one house in particular in the manner of most ghost stories), of privacy and of isolation. Instead of depicting a social world of lectures, visits and activities, James's tale takes readers to an isolated house in rural Essex. James focuses on ideas of revenants, visitations, sites of haunting and a sense of brooding malevolence. Its framed narrative has the governess's story read out from a manuscript by a character (Douglas) who knew her while he was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, when she was his sister's governess. He reads her handwritten account of the events that take place in one remote English country house, Bly, in another country house at Christmas time when a group tells ghost

stories around the fire. These details suggest the tale's immersion in contemporary supernaturalism and supernatural investigations, but they also allude back to more frightening antecedents. First, they draw upon the tale's origins in E.W. Benson's recital of a ghost story in January 1895. Second, Trinity College was the college attended not only by Benson, but also by Frederic Myers and Henry Sidgwick (Benson's brother-in-law) – both men who James knew, both fellows of the college and eminent academics, and both founders of the SPR. Third, with the introduction of Bly comes the possibility of sinister happenings: a family of that name was involved in the prosecution of Bridget Bishop, one of the accused in Salem.³¹ Given James's description (cited earlier) of Jessel and Quint as 'demons as loosely constructed as those of the old trials for witchcraft', the choice of the name 'Bly' connotes the colonial past that Hawthorne made his subject. Very subtly, then, the tale alludes to what James's New York Preface will subsequently narrate: the relationship between anodyne and terrifying versions of the supernatural.

The tale's pre-history is relatively expansive and juxtaposes a set of oppositional sites. Miles and Flora have become the wards of their uncle after, first, the death of their parents and then the death of their grandparents in India. The governess is interviewed for her job in Harley Street, in central London, where the children's uncle lives. She has come there from the Hampshire vicarage in which she has been brought up, the epitome of the rural Home Counties of England. The children have been brought back from the colony to the metropolis and then sent down to Bly, 'the proper place for them being of course the country' (*ToS* 149). Details of the governess's experience beyond Bly are recounted very briefly, making Bly the central focus of the tale. Much of its action takes place within the house and on its peripheries and within its interstices. Events mainly happen on staircases, in rooms, through windows and doorways, in liminal spaces or thresholds leading from one place to another, suggesting the movement between different states of consciousness and knowledge. The second time the governess sees Quint, for instance, is through the dining-room window, and she notes 'The day was grey enough, but the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold ... to become aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in' (169). This scene is restaged at the end of the tale when the governess sees Quint once again staring in through a window as she questions Miles: 'there again, at the glass ... was the hideous author of our woe' (260). Even when events take place outside, they are largely restricted to the environs of the gardens: Quint appears on the tower and is seen from the garden (164–5); Jessel is seen from across the lake (180–81); Miles appears by night in the garden and is seen from a window in the house and from on top of the tower (201). Sometimes the ghosts are outside the house wanting to get in and sometimes the children are inside the house wanting to get out.³²

The isolated setting of *The Turn of the Screw* has far less connection with the historical development of spiritualism or of the kind of broader context that is so

³¹ James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Beidler, p. 27.

³² Lustig, *Henry James*, p. 149. See ch. 1, on 'The Threshold', pp. 1–49.

important to understanding *The Bostonians*. However, James does draw on the evidence-based witnessing and subsequent interpretation used by the SPR towards the end of the nineteenth century, a method which emphasized 'proofs' which were used to demonstrate that the claims of spiritualists were true. The language of proofs was not just used by investigators, however. Spiritualists also often alluded to some of the occurrences which took place during séances as proofs, too. But James, brilliantly, uses this terminology to even more effect, to invoke both contemporary understandings of the word and older ideas of evil. Proof can be used to determine innocence or guilt within a moral or juridical framework: it was invoked during witchcraft trials, for instance, to determine the fate of the accused. He alludes to all these possibilities when he makes the idea of proof an important component of his text. The very question of what might constitute knowledge or evidence is, of course, at the foundation of this tale, as it is in much of James's writing, which makes the word 'proof' profoundly ambiguous. The concept of proof has multiple resonances. It suggests the existence or non-existence of ghosts but also (and crucially) the question of what the children do or do not know. By using a word that crosses the thresholds of spiritualism and jurisprudence James make its full resonances highly portentous.

The governess recounts her gradual transition from a state of 'stifled suspense' (*ToS* 179) in which she argues that her job was to keep herself between Quint, Jessel and the children, to one in which she decides that the children have full knowledge of the ghosts. Her earlier position was rapidly 'superseded by horrible proofs. Proofs, I say, yes' (179, emphasis mine) when she sees Jessel on the other side of the lake. Later she experiences 'a thrill of joy at having brought on a proof' (238, emphasis mine) when she once again sees Jessel across the lake. Jessel herself becomes then a kind of proof, a piece of spectral evidence that the governess uses to convince herself of the existence of some kind of evil at the heart of Bly. Yet, notoriously, the governess is the only person in the text who sees these 'proofs' – the ghosts. Though she tells Mrs Grose that the children are aware of the presence of Quint and Jessel (whom she never calls ghosts³³) – 'They know – it's too monstrous: they know, they know!' (182, emphasis in original) – there is in fact no evidence, or proof, that they do know anything. The governess's use of the word moves between conventional uses, where 'proofs' are forms of evidence, to another formulation, used by spiritualists, 'having brought on a proof'.

Other aspects of the tale also suggest that spiritualism and psychic investigation were sources for James. Indeed, given the tale's complexity, it might be possible either to read the governess (as many have) as a kind of ghost herself, or even as a psychical investigator or searcher, desperate to find evidence of a spirit world. Her powerful desire to see the ghosts is evident throughout. Just before the governess sees Peter Quint for the first time she finds herself longing (as if she was a character in a 'charming story') to see 'some one' – a figure usually interpreted as being her employer (163). As she describes it, 'Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve' (163). On the one hand,

³³ This point is also made in Lustig, *Henry James*, p. 126.

it seems that the governess wishes herself to be the heroine of a romance, in which a benevolent figure approves of her; on the other hand, this is a scenario familiar to spiritualists who visited séances in the hope of encountering 'some one'. But the governess's fantasy is shattered quickly when the figure she takes to be her employer turns out to be Quint, a malevolent ghost. A few pages later, the governess analyses her situation, asking 'Was there a "secret" at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?' (166). The sense of unanswered – and unanswerable – questions remains a constant, and even at the end of the tale the possibilities of multiple interpretations abound. This is what gives it such a powerful hold over the reader's imagination, keeping him or her believing in it as a piece of fiction.

The Bostonians and *The Turn of the Screw* mark James's recognition of a cultural turn in which attitudes towards the ghostly and supernatural were transformed. This change, which I narrate here using his texts as exemplars, has much wider implications. It suggests a newly invigorated and recognizably modern interest in the mind and an increasingly rationalist interpretation of the visible and invisible world. At the same time it registers a sense of diminution of experience which accompanies this and nostalgia for the past. James recognizes that for all that might be gained from the transition into modernity – even into Modernism – there is also a good deal that has been lost. In aiming 'to rouse the dear old sacred terror' he attests to the importance of the imagination and to spellbinding narratives which maintain their hold over readers long after they have been put down. He acknowledges the power of the best kind of literature which does not aim simply to provide explanations – to give obvious answers or self-evident proofs – but instead, brilliantly, raises complexities, doubts and the desire to return and re-enact encounters time and time again. He uses his supernatural tale, then, both to evoke terrifying ghosts and to show the power of literature and the way it can haunt its readers. The literary texts which have this potential maintain their grip on readers of the present day, just as they have on readers in the past. In this way literature speaks across generations. Such texts come from the past into the present and future and 'work their magic' upon new generations.

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