

Introduction

The Goal

My main purpose in this book is to examine ghost stories, chiefly those by Montague Rhodes James (b. 1862–d. 1936), with help of the insights and tools of narrative theory. By focusing specifically on mystery and terror, I hope to identify and describe the narrative mechanics of a well-made ghost story. I have chosen the concept of distance to help me unify this study but also to justify its division into two parts. In Part I, my focus is on the ideological sense of distance: that which animated the rise and future development of Gothic fiction. In Part II, I examine M. R. James's use of a wide range of distancing devices deployed with the purpose of turning readers into ghost-seers.

One of my aims in this book is to create a venue for an encounter and a dialogue between narrative theory and the ghost story. Desirable and productive as such encounters might be, they have been rare, reflecting a situation that caused Srdjan Smajić recently to comment on the “dearth of scholarship on the ghost story.”¹ The scholar explains: “Despite the immense popularity of ghost stories in the nineteenth century, evidenced by their most widely circulating periodicals of the time, it appears that we are as unlikely to see new critical assessments of the genre as we are to see an actual ghost.”² This diagnosis is true also of narrative theory, which, for a considerable period in the history of its development, remained firmly focused on realist fiction, this bias being arguably a result of the scientific aspirations at the origin of “narratology.”³

1 Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists. Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

2 Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 11.

3 Tzvetan Todorov, who coined the term “narratology” in 1969 (in his book *Grammaire du Décaméron*), seems to have been inspired by the idea of a scientific study of narrative texts (he defines *narratologie* as *la science du récit*). See David Herman, “Histories of Narrative Theory (I): A Genealogy of Early Developments,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James

Even though Smajić's statement was made in a book published in 2010, his diagnosis was repeated in a more recent publication. In their introduction to *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* (2018), Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston refer (like Smajić a few years earlier!) to George Eliot's 1851 preface to her "bestseller" realistic novel, *Adam Bede*, to explain the prevalent binarism. This "old opposition between 'sober' realism and 'frivolous' fantasy" – they argue – has been perpetuated in contemporary theory and criticism, which tends to "privilege longer, supposedly more serious and politically engaged, literary forms."⁴ At the same time, as this *Handbook* demonstrates, theory-informed ("speculative") approaches to ghostly matters in fiction tend to be privileged over strictly narratological, that is, form/structure/*techne*-oriented ones.

The realist ascendancy has been repeatedly questioned by narratologists themselves.⁵ In the 1983 "Afterword" to the second edition of his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth noted a shift (apparent in both theory and literary practice) away from an unreserved praise of realism: "Today the rules are a bit different: 'All good novels should be unrealistic' [...]"⁶ Illustrative and instructive in this context is the idea of the fantastic, which seems to straddle, somewhat uneasily, the fence (rickety as it may be) that separates narrative theory and approaches which, for lack of a better word, I will call speculative, underpinned by philosophies which dominated twentieth-century thinking about culture and literature: Marxism, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and post-structuralism.⁷

Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 19.

- 4 Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 4. As Smajić puts it, according to this paradigm, literature's task is "to speak the truth and avoid falsehood," its "strongest claim [being] to socially responsible and politically consequential modes of artistic expression" (*Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 12).
- 5 As a very recent example, see Thomas L. Martin's "As Many Worlds as Original Artists: Possible Worlds Theory and the Literature of Fantasy," in Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, ed. *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 201–224.
- 6 "The Rhetoric in Fiction and Fiction as Rhetoric: Twenty-One Years Later" (1983), in Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 403.
- 7 The section headings of *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019) cover the following

Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic (defined as a specific literary genre and developed in his 1970 *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, published in an English translation five years later⁸) turned out to be inspirational in studies of narrative terrors and horrors, ghostly and otherwise. Regardless of the vehement criticism it provoked on account of its purported myopic scientism,⁹ Todorov's concept and its future developments (*vide* the books by Terry Heller and Noël Carroll) have demonstrated the fruitfulness of analysis which zooms in on the narrative dynamic of a specific fictional genre, in particular on plots whose "frivolousness" defies the rules of realist "sobriety." The present task is to examine how these insights can be applied to Gothic and mystery plots, and to the ghost story as a genre in which these different narrative strategies converge.

To return to the encounter metaphor, the situation that I envision at the outset of this study is then as follows: There is a collection of stories by a classic ghostly author, M. R. James. In separate box, as it were, there are concepts developed by narrative theory, for example, that of the fantastic. It is time, one should think, for a dialogue between the two, and so I see my task here in terms of arranging and unobtrusively monitoring it, the goal being to estimate the extent to which narrative theory can open for us the inner workings of ghost stories and, more generally, stories of mystery and terror. The fact that M. R. James turned the ghost story into a genre that productively occupied him for more than twenty years should be regarded as a hint that – like the detective story in the hands of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – it is indeed a genre in its own right, an art with its own rules, which allows us to speak of something along the lines of a narrative rhetoric of the supernatural or a poetics of the ghostly.

M. R. James placed himself, consciously and firmly, in the tradition of short fiction, and his admiration for the stories Sheridan Le Fanu, whom he regarded as second-to-none in the ghostly (or "weird") genre, is telling.¹⁰ Similarly

theoretical angles: post-colonial Gothic (race theory), psychoanalysis (abjection), gender and sexuality, modern media, poststructuralism (otherness).

8 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

9 I have decided to discuss aspects of Todorov's theory in a separate section of this book; see the Appendix "Narrativity, the Fantastic and the Ghost."

10 M. R. James's theory of the ghost story will be discussed at length in Part II of this book.

significant is M. R. James's recognition of the detective story as a genre with which the ghost story shares distinctive formal features. Conan Doyle's remark about the amount of effort needed to devise a detective plot as comparable to that expended in the composition of an entire novel should give us a sense of how complex the structure of a short story can be and typically is.¹¹ Reading experience gives ample testimony to this proposition. Anyone familiar with a Sherlock Holmes story will agree that, pleasurable and indeed brief as it may be, the experience of reading one is a complex and even a demanding process.

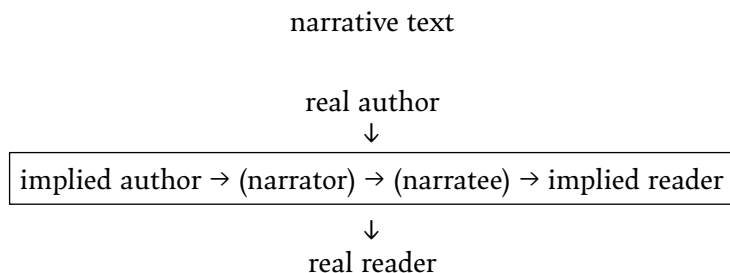
Admittedly, it is highly problematic to speak about progress in the history of fiction. Why and in what sense should *David Copperfield* (1850) be more "developed" or "mature" than, say, *Moll Flanders* (1722), or *Heart of Darkness* (1899) than *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)? The variety of the early English novels notwithstanding, we may hazard here a statement that, as we go from the early period in the history of English fiction to a later one, we do observe development in terms of formal (if not thematic) complexity, as authors become increasingly aware of the range of devices and methods of telling they have at their disposal and as the audience develops the required readerly sophistication. Inevitably then, M. R. James, a self-conscious author at the beginning of the twentieth century, and an admirer of Charles Dickens at that, found himself an inheritor (and a grateful one) of a tradition.¹² The short story can be seen as a distilment of what we might call a heritage of narrativity, which accounts for the great variety of narrative devices, the rich *techné*, employed by the masters of the craft. This inspires me with the hope that the scope of this study will be appropriately broad.

11 I am refereeing here to Conan Doyle's remark in chapter X of his *Memoirs and Adventures* (1923–1924): "The difficulty of the Holmes work was that every story really needed as clear-cut and original a plot as a longish book would do," https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/Memories_and_Adventures, accessed December 28, 2021. In my view, this statement suggestively indicates the complexity of a well-devised short story at the turn of the twentieth century.

12 On the origin of the short story in the second half of the nineteenth century see Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story. An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1 (chapter I). One of the dates cited for the coinage of the term "short story" is 1877, and one of its earliest occurrences in Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* (1883). Trollope uses this term in reference to his *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* (1861), which is what we could call now a novella, and also to stories published in periodicals; The Project Gutenberg eBook of *An Autobiography*, by Anthony Trollope, accessed March 25, 2023.

The Material, the Approach, and the Tools

This study, however, is not limited to purely “technical” issues that ghostly fiction raises. My concern is not solely with the applicability of the existing concepts and tools to ghost stories. What I have in mind is also a comprehensive outlook, one which places the narrative *techne* in a larger cultural context,¹³ as posited in the model of narrative communication (“narrative-communication situation”) represented by Seymour Chatman in the form of a box diagram.¹⁴



When approaching stories and genres, one simply must recognise the fact that both inside and outside that textual box, along with the reader and the author, there is also culture, history, and “ideology.” Indeed, this fact seems to be so obvious that the diagram makes is conspicuously invisible. And yet, just like there are no culture-free authors and readers, real or otherwise, there are no culture-free narrators or narratees. For a reader of M. R. James’s stories, it is immediately obvious that to ignore the larger historical and cultural context would be to ignore the fabric these stories are made of.

The wider context for the emergence of Gothic fiction, with the dramatic transition from what Horace Walpole called the “ancient” to the “modern”

13 I refer here somewhat obliquely to a remark – critical in its intention – by S. T. Joshi, who described M. R. James’s “tales” as “all technique” and a “coldly intellectual exercise”; *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), 140.

14 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 151. The essentials are these: “The box indicates that only the implied author and implied reader are immanent to a narrative, the narrator and narratee are optional (parentheses). The real author and real reader are outside the narrative transaction as such, though, of course, indispensable to it in an ultimate practical sense.”

worlds is now common knowledge. To bring this knowledge into play, I avail myself here of a convenient summary found in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*:

Great cathedrals that have changed little since the middle ages still dot Continental Europe. In Great Britain, however, once Henry VIII decided that allegiance to the Pope in Rome was no longer necessary and, as a concomitant, that much in the way of cathedrals, abbeys, monasteries, convents, and, often, churches of far lesser status, would contribute substantially to the wealth of the Crown, many Gothic buildings fell into ruins because they were no longer maintained. In addition to the symbolism in the ruined architecture, the British mind came to associate a downright immorality with some of the thinking and practices in Roman Catholicism. For example, once Henry's decrees for creating the Anglican Church became operable, ties between Roman Catholicism and Continental European political class structures seemed dangerous. Moreover, celibate clergy, especially monks and nuns, eventually came to be anathema in British eyes. The clergy contributed in another way to Gothic tradition. The hooded, flowing robes worn by many members of ecclesiastical orders dovetailed precisely with stereotypical conceptions of ghosts in bed-sheets, and, amidst the strange visionary responses otherwise created by Gothic architecture's combination of vastness and obscurities, they offered plausible models for supernatural beings.¹⁵

As we shall see in our analysis of the stories, this context is as persistently present as the ghosts themselves, despite the varying degrees of visibility.

According to the widely accepted narrative, the ghost story makes its first appearance, in Walpole's 1764/1765 novella *The Castle of Otranto*. The cultural context of the Enlightenment allowed – indeed, compelled – Walpole to represent the pre-Reformation world which his “Gothic story” revived as a world of “dark Christianity.” The thus awakened spectres of that world were subsequently impossible to lay to rest, and the nineteenth century saw a vigorous blossoming of the ghost story with a culmination in the fictions of M. R. James. One is tempted to indulge in speculations about the thirst for the supernatural in

15 Benjamin Franklin Fisher, “Poe and the Gothic Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

an age of arid scientism and vigorous mercantilism, the standard departure for an interpretation of Scrooge's recovery of spirituality in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (December 1843) and his other Christmas stories. Yet even if we resist this temptation, it is difficult to ignore the ideological energies and cultural tensions that animate modern ghost stories.

As the lengthy passage above makes obvious, we can speak here of types of distance, historical and cultural, which, though they may lie outside the literary texts themselves, yet permeate them all the same. As we shall see in the course of these considerations, effects of distance – its deployment and its overcoming – can be found at the foundation of the early Gothic tales, or, to shift the metaphor, are found at the genre's fountainhead. In this respect, the typical ghost story tells a tale similar to the large-scale narrative about the rise of the Gothic: spectres of the past return to disturb the present. Historically, the warfare between the ancient and the modern, between forces of superstition and prerogatives of reason, between oppression and liberation impelled the genre to grow vigorously in the nineteenth century by making its attractions irresistible also to such great realists as Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins. Conceived as a significant component of the otherwise technically oriented analyses of chosen ghost stories, this cultural context will occupy us in several sections of the first part of this book.

The significance of history and culture for the genre of the ghost story tends to be accompanied, somewhat oddly, by assumptions of the genre's negligible artistic status. M. R. James himself sounds typically dismissive when he refuses to attach any special import to his Christmas-time diversions. This attitude corresponds to the preference – as already mentioned – among theorists for realism and verisimilitude, the recent turn to the supernatural, the horrific, and the weird notwithstanding. On the example of Gérard Genette, one of the founders of narrative theory, we can also observe interest in modernist innovations in fiction encouraged by introspective philosophies. Theoretic interest has gravitated towards authors who, like Henry James or Marcel Proust, seem to have treated literary authorship with appropriate gravity and who are duly appreciated for bold formal experiments. Faithful to one genre and working within a formula which he polished into a precious dark jewel, M. R. James did not intend to compete against such celebrities, and rated his literary ambitions as modest. Little wonder that even some of those who have studied his life and work tend to sound diffident around the fact that a man of his

standing dabbled in scary stories. Do mere diversions, apparently so trivial as to make their author hesitate whether or not he should get them into print, merit theoretical attention? Will they sustain and repay academic scrutiny?

What makes ghost stories problematic in the eyes of a literary scholar is the supernatural. If it should sound logical that a rationalist would recoil at a fictional ghost, then a classic M. R. James story thrives on precisely this kind of response. It strikes me as ironic that, while the fictionality of historical narratives (imputed in the notion that all narratives are essentially and inevitably rhetorical) has been universally accepted, fictions which deliver the pedestrian sense of the fantastic and the weird tend to be dismissed as mere spine-chilling diversions or as realistic in an oblique sense. Ghost stories proper are stories about real ghosts and real hauntings; they blatantly parade their fictionality in the shape of the supernatural, which is asserted as real. If there is a paradox here, then it has to do with the fact that scepticism (in both the protagonists and the reader, perhaps also in the author¹⁶) is a prerequisite for a genuinely horrific ghost story. M. R. James was reluctant to admit that he actually believed in ghosts and his protagonists typically display a degree of incredulity at the outset of the stories and before the onset of the supernatural. Even though the contemporary reader does not need to be convinced that a “real author” sits outside Chatman’s box of narrative communication, they may need to be reminded that an “implied author” and an “implied reader” may – and usually do – share a number of beliefs as to what constitutes reality and what violates the boundary that separates the real from the imaginary and the supernatural.

On what grounds should we object to fictions that are on principle unrealistic? Is their undying popularity a strong enough reason to justify scholarly attention and academic treatment? Without addressing the problem directly, we might want to transfer it to a different territory, and inquire about the

16 On this point, there is a difference of opinion. Unlike M. R. James, Montagu Summers boldly confessed a belief in the reality of the supernatural. A ghostly author, according to Summers’s metaphor, is a conjurer who calls up spirits “from the vasty deep.” An author may try to dupe the reader with displays of fake spirits, but in such cases failure is inevitable due to “insincerity and untruth” (30); Montague Summers, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Supernatural Omnibus. Being a Collection of Stories of Apparitions, Witchcraft, Werewolves, Diabolism, Necromancy, Satanism, Divination, Sorcery, Goetry, Voodoo, Possession, Occult, Doom and Destiny* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 7.

context in which such questions emerge. Seen from this angle, the “need for justification” seems to share the context of modernity as exclusive of whatever the enlightened reason finds suspect and dubious. To return to the issue already addressed, in his study of ghost-seeing, Smajić comments on the realistic paradigm as testifying to the pertinacity of Samuel Johnson’s rule of “realism’s mimetic mirror” (in Smajić’s words), which takes us back to Plato’s attack on poetry as falsehood.¹⁷ Indirectly, the anti-realism of ghostly fiction raises a fundamental problem, that of the justifiable area for humanistic inquiry. There is, besides, little justice in the supposition that a ghost story must be devoid of a social or political agenda. The familiar socio-political context for the rise of the Gothic does not support this assumption. Indeed, our re-examination of that context will yield arguments for its refutation. Besides, if a ghost story can only produce the desired horrific effect due to a plausibly realistic setting for scenes of haunting and ghostly persecution (which sums up M. R. James’s artistic creed), the ghost story becomes a battlefield of sorts for conflicting visions of reality.

As we have argued in reference to Walpole’s project laid out in his “Prefaces” to *The Castle of Otranto*, fictions of the fantastic or supernatural type emerge in a specific cultural context from which they purposefully seek to distance themselves; namely, they rebel against realism, defined by him as “a strict adherence to common life.”¹⁸ As we shall see upon re-approaching the “Prefaces,” a paradox is difficult to conceal: the “letting loose of invention” (to use Johnson’s phrase¹⁹) is (to be) effected by reanimating a “lost world.” Peopled by knights and monks and energised by vibrant superstitions, a world like that — also when seen from the perspective of the author himself — belongs to a past

17 At the beginning of Book 3 of the *Republic* (386–388), Plato famously condemns the kind of poetry that might arouse fear of death in the guardians of the state (“We must ask the poets to stop giving their present gloomy account of the after-life, which is both untrue and unsuitable to produce a fighting spirit [...]”). Plato refers here to passages in Homer that depict the underworld (among them Odysseus’s descent into Hades; Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XI).

18 “Preface to the Second Edition,” Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

19 Samuel Johnson, essay in *Rambler* no. 4 (March 31, 1750), in Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 174.

that is “buried” in the sense of it having been ideologically rejected, “exploded” in the words of Walpole.²⁰ Walpole may thus be held responsible for the conception of a genre, that of the Gothic story, defined through a readmission and legitimisation of content which was culturally alien and politically suspect.²¹ Even Matthew Gregory Lewis, the genre’s *enfant terrible*, constructed in *The Monk* a world split into two realms, a superstitious and an enlightened one, uncomfortably yoked together. The context for the re-emergence of the ghost story in the nineteenth century, however, and the genre’s purported fruition at the turn of the twentieth century is very different, marked by a blending of realism and the fantastic into an artistically effective and culturally lasting genre. M. R. James’s judgement about *The Castle of Otranto* is symptomatic in this respect: “*The Castle of Otranto* is perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre, and I fear that it is merely amusing in the modern sense.”²²

In this study, I propose to see the history of the Gothic in England as a history of repeated attempts to plant ghosts and ghost-seeing in the native context. This may seem odd in view of the fact that – in the words of the editors of the 2018 *Handbook to the Ghost Story* – Britain “might complacently be deemed the ‘home’ of the ghost story.”²³ And yet despite this purported domesticity, uprooted by the forces of Reformation allied with those of Enlightenment, literary ghosts apparently needed careful replanting. In Part I of this book, I want to show this on the example of two Victorian ghost stories: “The Old Nurse’s Story” by Elizabeth Gaskell and “Mad Monkton” by Wilkie Collins. Despite the native setting, in both these stories we can identify several distancing devices which indirectly justify the overriding purpose: to deliver the thrills of haunting and ghost-seeing. Gaskell’s ghost-seer is an Englishwoman and the ghost is real; in this sense, the story is more unequivocally English in its handling of the supernatural element than what we have in Collins, who opted for the device which makes the reader uncertain as to whether the ghost

20 “Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances.” “Preface to the First Edition,” Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 6.

21 We shall later have a taste of the vehemence of anti-Gothic campaigners when we examine satirical passages in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

22 Montague Rhodes James, “*Casting the Runes*” and *Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Appendix, 343.

23 Brewster and Thurston, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, 8.

is real (delivering a version of the fantastic in Todorov's understanding of the term). In both Gaskell and Collins, there are ghost-seers, illustrating the general assumption that a ghost story must contain *scenes* of ghost-seeing, depictions of some form of sensory contact with the supernatural. The canon of M. R. James's ghost stories, discussed in Part II, supplies numerous examples of similar narrative strategies.

In the course of the development of narrative theory, a question concerning the choice of the literary material has been of some significance. My limited selection in this respect can plead justification from the fact that theorists have tended to prioritise particular texts and authors in search of pertinent example and gratifying illustration: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a case in point, as are Henry James's novels and stories (*What Maisie Knew* and *The Turn of the Screw*). Reasons for these two preferences are obvious, considering the status of Flaubert as a great innovator in the history of fiction, with considerable "stylistic achievements"²⁴; and that of James, due to the bulk of his theoretical and critical writing, as a legitimate forebear of narrative theory.²⁵ In his ground-breaking *Narrative Discourse* (*Discours du récit*, 1972), Gérard Genette examines Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, stating in the Preface that he is not going to be greatly bothered if in the course of his analysis he blurs the distinction between theory and interpretation. It is, says Genette, "the paradox of every poetics" as a science, to be "torn" between criticism and theory. This is an unavoidable predicament because "there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general."²⁶ In his pre-Genette *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth is more systematic in that his selection of illustrative material significantly broadens the scope of his theory and allows him to hope for "universal applicability" of his "rhetorical inquiry" into fiction.²⁷ Unlike Genette, Booth attempts to deliver a comprehensive theory

24 The allusion here is to the title of Alison Finch's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, ed. Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

25 See Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937). The book (almost 400 pages long) contains eighteen prefaces to James's novels.

26 "Preface," in Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 23.

27 From "Extensions," appended to the second edition of the book; Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.), 405.

of fiction. However, ultimately the insights of Genette have determined the direction of narratological research.

The desire to systematise and the scientific aspirations have inspired a conspicuous trend in narrative theory: to encapsulate the existing knowledge in the form of “introductions,” “handbooks,” dictionaries and encyclopaedias, with examples such as Gerald Prince’s *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987) and the more recent *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2007). Worthy of special notice is the *living handbook of narratology* (LHN), published online by the University of Hamburg’s Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology (at <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/11.html>). This readily available wealth of knowledge has created an environment favourable to non-realist fictions. Booth himself supplies an example of a theorist peeping beyond the confines of realism and into the fuzzy realms of the fantastic and the weird. A section of his *Rhetoric* is devoted to Henry James’s most famous ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898),²⁸ now a recognised classic of the genre. Booth’s decision may have been motivated by the renown of the author, despite the fact that James himself regarded this story as a mere potboiler.²⁹ A simple but pertinent argument for the inclusion of non-realist fiction in narratological research goes like this: the existing tools of narrative theory must apply to it, and if they do not, they must be adjusted or refashioned, which may be this book’s modest contribution.

It might be advisable to approach our chosen literary material by naming the essential elements of narrative, those which make up the core of narrative theory. The list of contents in Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* names five such elements: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, the first three having to do with temporality while the remaining two with perspective. A narrative text can be examined with regard to how its author executes these elements. In the present study, however, I have decided to give preference to the idea of *distance*. Although the term does not appear in Genette’s list, distance is a basic concept and – in my opinion – no comprehensive theory of narrative and

28 Another example is Roland Barthes’s study of a “weird” story by Edgar Allan Poe (Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”): “Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe” (from 1973), published in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

29 In a letter to H. G. Wells (dated Dec. 9, 1898), James describes it as “essentially a potboiler and a *jeu d’esprit*.” Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Jonathan Warren (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2021; 3rd Norton Critical Edition), 120.

no exhaustive interpretation of a particular narrative text or a genre of fiction can ignore or omit effects of distance.

Distance: Aesthetic and Ideology

The idea of distance, indispensable as it is in any comprehensive theory of narrative, seems to be too broad to admit a definition. This may account for the lack of an extensive discussion of it in narrative studies. In this introductory treatment of distance, we might set off by availing ourselves of the entry in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary*. Following Gérard Genette, Prince places distance side by side with perspective and defines it as a major factor that regulates narrative information. Prince goes on to explain: "The more covert the narratorial mediation and the more numerous the details provided about the narrated situations and events, the smaller the distance that is said to obtain between them and their narration."³⁰ According to this approach, distance is relative to the conspicuousness of the narrative situation, or the act of narrating; the more conspicuous the narrating, the less realistic or verisimilar (*vraisemblable*) – to use the term proposed by Seymour Chatman – the portrayed world.³¹ The immediacy of the epistolary mode in *Pamela* – precisely that feature of Samuel Richardson's narrative mode that Henry Fielding found preposterous – would occupy one end of a continuum, the other end being the province of narrative experiments of the *Tristram Shandy* type, with the authorial narrator celebrating the act of telling to the point of actually preventing the story from unfolding.

The term "distance" as it is used by narratologists has – unavoidably and naturally – acquired a number of meanings. We speak about distance in the sense of the temporal arrangement of the narrative (the relation between the *fabula* and its "expression,"³² the *sjuzet*)³³: the "then" of the narrated events

30 Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003; rvd. edition), 23 (entry "Distance").

31 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 50.

32 Gerard Prince provides the following definition of discourse: "The expression plane of narrative as opposed to its content plane or story; the 'how' of a narrative as opposed to its 'what'; [...]." *Dictionary of Narratology*, 2003. The term "fabula" is used to designate what Prince here calls "content plane" and "story."

33 Throughout this study, I use the term "fabula" for "story" in the narrow sense of "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors." Mieke

is not to be confused with the “now” of the narrating. We can also speak of distance when referring to the author’s choice of the mode of representation: voice and mood; the narrator (“Who speaks?”) is not to be confused with the observer (“Who sees?”). Wayne Booth has proposed a typology of distances (temporal, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral),³⁴ which in turn can be combined with Seymour Chatman’s model of narrative situation (or communication), already presented. This typology enables us to distinguish varieties of closeness and remoteness between the elements that constitute the model³⁵: the narrator and the implied author; the narratee and the reader, implied or real; etc. As I hope to show, the idea of distance will help us to obtain a comprehensive view of the body of fictional material chosen for analysis. Analysis of particular stories confirms this working assumption: ghost stories depend for their effectiveness on the way in which an author handles distance and, in particular, on the way he or she uses its various types and modes.

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette gives a somewhat sketchy treatment to the concept of distance along the lines indicated in Prince’s definition. Rather than attempting a definition, Genette names factors responsible for the regulation of distance. The first of them is that of showing, or mimesis, as opposed to (“mere” or “pure”) telling. The modern prioritising of the mimetic mode (in opposition to Plato, with whom the distinction between narration and imitation originated) is summed up in a celebrated passage in Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction*: “The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself.”³⁶ Showing reduces the distance between the story and its reader, which

Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5. In her book, Bal has decided to avoid using the ambiguous word “story.”

34 Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 156 ff; see below.

35 According to Seymour Chatman’s diagram, inside the box we find the implied author and implied reader, and narrator and narratee; in the most general terms, these four entities are textual. They are either present in the text (e.g., 1st person narrator) or – to use Gerald Prince’s formulation – inferable from the text; the implied author “can be reconstructed” on the basis of the text.

36 Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), 62 (Lubbock’s emphasis); a Project Gutenberg eBook at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18961/18961-h/18961-h.htm>, accessed September 15, 2022.

is to say that the narrating is, as Genette's puts it, unobtrusive.³⁷ There are two basic methods to achieve showing in narrative fiction: dialogue and scene.³⁸ By convention, the representation of a dialogue by means of direct speech constitutes a scene in the narrow sense of a narrative speed (or duration) in which the time of narrating equals the time of reading. In this sense, every dialogue is a scene. This does not mean, of course, that every scene is a dialogue; and indeed, not every non-dialogic scene in that narrow sense will necessarily be mimetic. As Genette points out, the properties that render a scene mimetic have to do with detail, that is, with what creates "a realistic effect."³⁹ Let us examine this more closely.

In an allusion to *Pickwick Papers*, Genette praises Dickens for the frequent use of the "pragmatically afunctional" detail conducive to the realistic effect. I want to look at an example in *Bleak House*. In the "Bell Yard" chapter, the girl called Charlie is introduced in the following manner: "[...] there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face – pretty-faced too – wearing a womanly sort of bonnet much too large for her, and drying her bare arms on a womanly sort of apron. Her fingers were white and wrinkled with washing, and the soap-suds were yet smoking which she wiped off her arms."⁴⁰ In terms of speed, this passage falls somewhere between scene and slow-down. The description is not static; rather, it suggests that time is passing while the girl is standing. She is being examined by the two ladies looking at her: "She was out of breath, and could not speak at first, as she stood panting, and wiping her arms, and looking quietly at us."⁴¹ It is obvious that Dickens devised this passage along the "Lubbock principle," as something to be shown. What I would like to point out, however, is that a passage like this also calls for a development of Genette's reflections on the realistic effect. The idea of realism in fiction (or narrative mimeticity) should

37 Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 45.

38 I discuss this issue in "The Gothic as a Mimetic Challenge in Two Post-Otranto Narratives," *Image [&] Narrative*, vol. 18, 3 (2017): 70–93.

39 Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 49. In this Genette is indebted to Roland Barthes and his essay "The Reality Effect" ("L'effet du réel" [1968]); *The French Literary Theory Today. A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1982).

40 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 262.

41 Dickens, *Bleak House*, 262.

be complemented with Roman Ingarden's conception of "schematised aspects" as a distinct layer of the literary work. Aspects are conventionalised sensory-imaginative associations evoked in the mind of the reader by particular words and phrases.⁴² Charlie stands in person before "our eyes," "dressed" in abundant sensory detail of different varieties: not only ocular ("bonnet too large for her," "white and wrinkled fingers," "smoking soap-suds," "panting"), but also olfactory ("smoking soap-suds," again), and even auricular ("panting," again).

A careful analysis of the Dickens passage cannot ignore the presence of a consciousness that observes and judges what it perceives.⁴³ Indeed, the idea of observation informs the whole passage: "We were looking at one another [...] when there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face [...]"⁴⁴ But this presence of the observer becomes obvious in the judgments: not only as conveyed by the epithets "childish," "shrewd," and "pretty," but also by "womanly" and "too large for her." What this means for our immediate concern is that we have to distinguish between two types of distance, which do not seem to work in unison: the narrative distance, which Dickens diminishes by means of the wealth of realistic detail, and the personal distance (for lack of a better word), which Dickens at the same time makes conspicuous, that between the narrator (Esther) and the character (Charlie). Neither of these two distances is fixed or stable; both are liable to the author's manipulation, especially in such a sprawling narrative as a Dickens novel. The latter one brings us to the typology developed by Wayne Booth.

In a well-known section of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, "Variations of Distance," Booth proposes the term "aesthetic distance" to designate relations between the four players in the "reading experience": the author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader.⁴⁵ Booth proceeds to describe and illustrate five types of such relations (narrator–implied author; narrator–character; narrator–reader;

42 This reformulation of Ingarden's conception (presented in *The Literary Work of Art; Das literarische Kunstwerk* [1931]) is mine. Narratologists have so far evinced no interest in this element of Ingarden's theory. See Mydla, "The Gothic as a Mimetic Challenge," 83. I propose to use the term "mimetic" for Ingarden's dual layer that comprises schematised aspects and portrayed objects.

43 This aspect is almost entirely omitted in Barthes's discussion of the reality effect.

44 Dickens, *Bleak House*, 262.

45 Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 155.

implied author–reader; implied author–characters).⁴⁶ The types of distance occurring here are: physical, temporal, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral. The distance deployed in the Dickens passage represents the narrator–character relation and is chiefly of physical and social nature⁴⁷; this is to say, the narrator (Esther) is not only older than Charlie but also her social superior, while the two may be regarded as equal in emotional and moral terms. The fact that in *Bleak House* large portions of the narrative are carried out by a young and relatively inexperienced woman complicates matters in that it introduces aesthetic effects that have to do with the distance between Esther and the implied author. Dickens’s desire to establish a degree of amiability between himself as author (authorial narrator) and his readers adds a further complication. Most importantly, we realise how misleading the idea of the aesthetic would be, were it to conceal the fact that an author’s technical or artistic decisions concerning the use of different types of distance are precisely what they are, *decisions*. As far as such decisions determine and regulate relations between the two major participants in narrative communication, the author and the reader, they are *pragmatic*. To this extent, we can treat them as decisions and choices informed by and indicative of ideology.⁴⁸ They are, in other words, expressive of the author’s preconceptions and assumptions, moral, cultural, social, political.

Seen like that, distance cannot be used in isolation from concepts essential to narrative theory in any extensive study of a text, an author, or a genre. In fact, what makes distance special is its relevance to all the basic areas of the theory. Different types of focalization, for instance, can be defined in terms of distance, as in that between the focalizing character and other characters and objects in the fictive world. This suggests that when studying distance we

46 For the observer/actor distinction and the different “variations” of distance, see Chap. 6. in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

47 Booth mentions “differences of social class or conventions of speech or dress” (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 156), but then abandons the social category.

48 My understanding of the term “ideology” is admittedly a rudimentary one and refers to expressions of collective or personal concerns with power. In the realm of literary pragmatics (the production and reception of literary works), we can say that we detect ideology when we see that, for instance, a story is an expression of attitude, interest, judgement, belief, etc. Deliberate departures from realism, as in the case of “weird” and fantasy fiction, are not exempt from this type of criticism, which is not tantamount to censure. On the contrary, because ideology in this broad sense is omnipresent, it does not make sense to attach any high-handed moral censure to its instances in literary works.

may reasonably hope to attain a comprehensive interpretation of the fictional material in hand, that is, a particular narrative text.

Before we turn to fiction we need to look closely at distances deployed at the birth of the earliest Gothic story, *The Castle of Otranto*. In order to do that, we need to go back to the roots of the ideology which informs Walpole's prefatory strategies of ushering his "Gothic story" into the world of enlightened Protestantism.

First, however, some final remarks on the structure of the book.

The Structure

To address some of the cultural tensions that animate the early Gothic, we shall examine how and which ghostly stories straddle the gap between "ancient" and "modern" worlds. We shall therefore look closely at the philosophic denunciation of the Catholic doctrine in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) in order to contextualise Horace Walpole's justificative or validating strategies, chiefly those he used in his preface to the first, anonymous edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The project behind this blueprint for future "Gothic stories" can be better understood, as I intend to show, when examined in the light of Hobbes's dismantling of the "Romish" doctrine, denounced for its perpetuation of ancient demonology and spiritualist metaphysics. My aim in Part I of this study is thus to posit Hobbes as a forefather of enlightened Protestantism and his theory as a significant component of the ideological environment in which – and to some extent *against* which – the genre of the Gothic emerged and developed. It will be remembered that Walpole justifies the publication of his "Gothic story" by advertising it as a translation of an Italian original kept by a Catholic family in the north of England. The issue of anti-realism, already tackled in this introduction by references to Walpole's rejection of "a strict adherence to common life" and his goal of tapping into the "dammed up" "resources of fancy," can be reinterpreted in the light of Hobbes's allegories of nefarious superstitions and misconceptions. To use a metaphor from *Leviathan*, we can say that supernatural fictions reanimate a superstition-ridden fairy-tale world, a world that the modern man ought to regard as dead and buried.

The approach proposed here is far from new and consists in relating the *techné* of storytelling to ideology. Specifically, my goal is to focus attention on the way in which fiction addresses issues related to morality and power, including the meaning of large-scale historical processes and cultural transformations.

Literary practice, both the production and reception of fiction, shows that storytelling is informed by such concerns, which means, among other things, that an author is required to provide a well-defined, preferably realistic, setting for his or her fictions, no matter how weird or fantastical. This is true of ghost stories, at least those in the M. R. James tradition: if the supernatural must appear, it should appear in mundane circumstances. In this respect, M. R. James's praise of Le Fanu is noteworthy: "Nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly."⁴⁹ Ghosts have to come alive and, M. R. James argues, must be "treated gently." Even though M. R. James himself refuses to regard the ghost story as a unique type of short story, there is no doubt that a "weird author"⁵⁰ needs to work out a method of handling ghosts; in other words, to fulfil its goal, defined by M. R. James in terms of "mak[ing] the reader feel pleasantly uncomfortable," ghostly storytelling requires the use of tricks of the trade. Peter Penzoldt has argued that, with a "truly weird" author, skill comes first while moral concerns are secondary and subordinated to *techné*.⁵¹ Yet in advising the use of a gentle hand in the treatment of fictional ghosts, M. R. James cautioned against morbidity. Neither he nor other practitioners of "weird fiction," on many of whom his advice was apparently wasted, wished to suspend moral concerns or expected their readers to do so. On the contrary, as Simon MacCulloch argues in a penetrating study of M. R. James's stories, the issue of an anthropomorphically arranged world ranks uppermost, especially in stories which feature cultured and scholarly protagonists. The typical movement in M. R. James is "from man-gets-treasure to treasure gets man," where curiosity is the *spiritus* that sets such narratives in motion. The critic detects here a reflection of M. R. James's own mental restlessness: "[H]is own proclivity for the strange and the danger he saw in it for his faith in conventional Christianity."⁵²

49 M. R. James, "Introduction" [1923], in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories* (Ware: Wordsworth's Editions, 2006), v.

50 The category "weird fiction" (relating primarily to H. P. Lovecraft) has been propagated in S. T. Joshi's studies of the genre. For a recent study of the British context, see James Machin's 2018 book *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939*.

51 Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965).

52 Simon MacCulloch, "The Toad in the Study: M. R. James, H. P. Lovecraft, and Forbidden Knowledge," in *Warnings to the Curious. A Sheaf of Criticism on M. R. James*, ed. S. T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007), 96 and 97.

The list of contents reflects this book's division into two major parts, but I hope to have shown that there are concerns which permeate the different sections and sustain a unity of the overall design. In Part I, I discuss the ideological issues raised by the supernatural in general, and by ghosts in particular. Here the trajectory is from Thomas Hobbes's debunking of "spiritual" metaphysics to examples of tentative admission of the ghostly content in early Gothic and Victorian fictions. Part II has been devoted solely to the ghost stories of Montague Rhodes James. While the concern in Part I is chiefly with how ideology influences narrative, Part II tracks a different movement. The impact of enlightened scepticism made Horace Walpole and post-*Otranto* Gothicists engage with ideological issues (which, among other strategies, forced them to use distancing devices); in that sense, narrative can be said to be subservient to ideology. In M. R. James, on the other hand, it is narrative which gets the upper hand and thus vindicates the supernatural, no matter how indirect and ostensibly reluctant this vindication may seem. First and foremost, this book in its entirety consists of renewed attempts at reading. I hope to demonstrate that reading closely and attentively is capable of revealing the many fascinating ways in which effects of distance serve an artistic rather than ideological purpose, that of telling a gripping story.